Good morning, everyone! And Congratulations to all of my fellow graduating students!

Yesterday, *yesterday* afternoon, I sat preparing for my daughter’s book club meeting. She’s 10 years old, and 7 girls and their moms were expected shortly. I had cleaned up the living room, plopped down seven pillows in a circle on the rug, and made sure I had plenty of snacks. They had read Nancy Drew #38: *The Mystery of the Fire Dragon*, in which Nancy and her fellow sleuths journey to Hong Kong to find a kidnapped Chinese student from Columbia University and to bust a smuggling ring. I was busy typing up the discussion questions, and resisting the urge to build in a critique of Orientalism as per Edward Said.

You’ve got to pick your battles – that’s what moms often say, and in no way should this be interpreted as a sign of resignation. No, it’s strategic. Our goal right now is to inspire reading and fun and love of mystery. One of the activities planned was timed mystery writing in minutes, where each girl was given a paper with an exciting, provocative sentence at the top of the page about the escapades of Nancy, George and Bess in action and the girls had to write the next line of the story in two minutes, cover up the first line by folding the paper, and then pass it along to the next girl in the circle, so they could in-turn write the next line while only seeing the immediately preceding sentence and so on…until a story builds quickly and in rather unexpected ways. We ended up with 7 mysteries. The stories make no sense, of course, and that’s the point. Our girls laughed their heads off while reading the results. They loved it.

Anyway, as I was planning all this, I got a call from Dr. Rowley. She wanted to make sure that I knew I was on the program to speak today, and *stunned*, I said, *what?* She said, remember how I was asking you to send me your CV so I can introduce you at graduation, well that’s
because you are the designated doctoral speaker. I said, what?!! And, she said, “well when I got an email from Laura (she’s our department’s undergraduate advisor) this morning saying she was worried no one had informed you, I thought it was a joke.” And then I just didn’t know what to say. I thought I have two choices – either I don’t show up (and I considered that seriously), or I think of this as my newest and latest challenge – from devising 14 minute mysteries to having just minutes to write the reflective, culminating speech of my graduate career…offering pearls of wisdom to all of my fellow graduating students, waxing poetic about the real world we are about to enter, etc. etc. I can do this. I got through my graduate classes, my comprehensive exams, my interdisciplinary paper, teaching 3 years of classes, wrote a 250 page dissertation, defended it with words as my only armor, oops and did I neglect to mention raise two kids…I can do this. No problem. This was rather unexpected, so why wasn’t I laughing?

Truthfully, I thought, boy are they absent-minded. I thought I was distracted, because of course, you all know that absent-mindedness is the true mark of a PhD. We’re so busy sticking our noses in lofty books about knowledge and the world that we tend to forgot the small stuff. You gotta forgive us. It’s because we’re really smart, but we’ve got a few limitations. We’re not perfect. So, WMST, I forgive you.

As the 10 year olds explained to me yesterday afternoon, they liked to read mysteries because of the challenge of trying to solve them as they read along. It’s not about the end so much as the getting there. And, I thought, it’s true. Process is everything. It’s not what we achieved so much, it’s really about how we achieved it. It’s about our interaction with it. It’s about how we lived it.
So, while our resumes and CVs will likely tell one story about us, one that is directed to the so-called real world we’re supposedly about to enter (but we know we’ve been there all along), as we see all the efforts that brought us to this moment here, crystallize into one line, maybe just a few words, or even just three measly letters on our resumes and CVs, we know that isn’t the whole story. The invisible family, friends, neighbors, and partners, who stuck with the project, who left the life lines open for connection when we could make it to their events, but understood when we couldn’t; for those who had to represent us in our absence but never really quite understood what we were doing and somehow trusted it was worthwhile; for those who looked after our kids, who cooked us meals, who washed the clothes, who lent us money or took out loans for us, who massaged our tight shoulders, who listened to our emotional meltdowns, who traveled from New Jersey to finally spend an evening with us only to find that we still had one major thing to write; for those who may have put aside their own aspirations thinking it was temporary – just 4 years, okay? maaaybe 5-6; 7, just 7, I promise….Really?, putting aside their own aspirations indefinitely to help make this happen, they are, in fact, part of this process, the invisible getting no credit on our resumes and CVs. **They’re the ones that make up for the structural deficit in an outdated academic structure still designed in 2012 to ferret out single males in their 20s, rather than 30 something moms.** Keep in mind that when I was in my 20s, doctoral programs in WMST didn’t exist. Anywhere. So, to all of you, and I mean all of you who are here to honor us today, I think I can speak for all of my fellow graduating students, that we would like to recognize your contribution and honor you from the bottoms of my heart.

For in a system that somehow expects us to educate new generations of scholars, with teaching loads that swallow up our time, complete our own courses, term papers, and exams,
publish papers and present at conferences (mustn’t forget professional development), pursue the interests that keep us inspired and whole, and somehow maintain our own families and relationships – all at the same time, things break down. And, something has to give, which is why some of us don’t make it, or some of us who are here, have experienced losses very real. We’ve sometimes neglected our health; given up major sources of fulfillment (our art or our activism, indeed, in some cases our relationships). If I am honest, I am sure that many of us have experienced this system far from the enriching and enabling place we were told or imagined it should be ideally, and so I have to acknowledge not only the invisible, but what has been lost, what we’ve had to give up, sometimes even parts of ourselves.

When my cohort entered WMST in the fall of 2005, we were 7, a talented group, we were dancer, we were painter, we were poet, we were activist, and we had the illusion that we could remain all of those things and still get a PhD. We had a lot to learn. They say when you get a PhD you lose your sense of humor, but without that, we couldn’t have survived.

You know you’re a graduate student when…

…you look forward to summers because you can study more productively without the distraction of classes.

…you consider cooking and cleaning your home leisurely breaks from real work.

…you have accepted guilt as inherent feature of relaxation.

…you find yourself explaining to children that you’re "in 20th grade."

…you have every minute of the next four months planned out but have no idea what you are going to do for the rest of your life.

…when you read,
“Human reproductive IVF does not involve reordering the developmental biology of cells... The process is organized precisely to preserve the ontogenic and teleological potentials of the germinal cells.”
(Waldby and Cooper 2011, 15)

... you read that, and you understand exactly what it means.

...when you spend the night before graduation wondering if the speech that was just thrown upon you was just a bad joke or some final hoop in the process.

But, in addition to all of these trials, if I am honest, there were also rewards:

- An exciting research process, in which I could truly take on the role of investigator (take that – Nancy Drew!)
- Liberating think-spaces to ask questions and devise ways of finding answers
- And most of all an intellectual community, that I almost forgot I had, that now, only as I begin to leave the department, do I realize how much I have taken for granted - the faculty I called on day or night for comments and feedback, for writing letters of recommendation that needed a quick turn around; and my fellow graduate students whose friendship and support, not to mention smarts and humor kept me going all along.

My research took me to places I never expected to be:

- To the U.S. Department of Agriculture to talk to scientists who figured out a way to preselect the sex of cattle.
- To fertility clinics, where I had to dawn scrubs to observe egg retrievals and embryo transfers. (And all the while I thought how convenient to have a South Asian background – everyone seems to assume I am a medical student, and at the same time hoping that I wouldn’t give myself away by passing out.)

I faced a steep learning curve, of course. I started writing my dissertation in the middle, it was chapter 3, and when folks asked, “Which chapter are you on?” and I said, “3!” they responded,
“Wow, you’re really making progress!” and I kept up the farce as long as I could. And, when I finally finished the first 60 pages, 60 pages of raw data description, I handed it over proudly to my poor dissertation advisor, who read it, and said, in a very gentle way, “This is very interesting, but…what am I to take away from this?” And, I asked, “Am I supposed to come up with an argument?” When she replied, “yes,” I told her that I knew how to do that in 30 pages, but not 250. And so started the long and difficult process of reading, rereading, thinking, rethinking, writing, rewriting, bringing ideas together, separating them, defining, explaining, arguing until the work ultimately took a form. It became an insight on processes at work, a story about a story that can be rewritten, reflection on ways of doing, seeing, and being that can be reimagined. And while I thought that I had lost my identity as an activist, I found that I could reclaim it here by producing new ways of knowing and new ways of intervening.

So, to all students who have, like me, arrived at just another set of crossroads in the real world we have long inhabited, I say, pick your battles. Don’t resign yourself to an academic life of isolation, be strategic. For you never know what unexpected story line or what opportunity will be cast your way. Whatever it is, you have to be prepared to just roll with it, to improvise, to write the next line, and keep the story moving. So, to WMST not only do I forgive you, I thank you.

Don’t forget that in learning and teaching, in producing knowledge, we cannot forget to live and to fight for all that we value including weekends, community – our very sources of support, energy and inspiration. We cannot forget that in living, we engage with immediate and distant worlds that not only surround us but inform our process. We maintain a foothold in that which ultimately drives our curiosity, our desire to understand the world we live in and to imagine that another world is possible. I wish you all the very best of luck! Thank you!