I’m honored to be invited to come speak at this year’s Lavender Graduation. First off, I want to congratulate the fierce and sassy class of 2013: it’s all over in a couple of weeks. And I’ve been asked to provide some words of advice, inspiration, and encouragement.

A couple of years ago I made my debut as a Broadway producer. So I’m not really used to using my own words to inspire people, and I’m also not used to being the person on stage to deliver that message. Still, I do believe in the power of storytelling as a vehicle to change minds and inspire people, so I hope you’ll indulge me a little as I tell you some of the lessons I’ve learned from my life.

I’m often asked, “How did you become a producer?” After all, I did go to Harvey Mudd, and majored in math and computer science... When I started at Mudd, I knew that I was going to be a professor some day. Well, sometimes life unfolds in ways we don’t expect. The first piece of advice I would give you all is don’t be afraid to open your eyes and look at new opportunities. Sometimes the only way to find yourself is to go down a couple of wrong paths.

Thirteen and a half years ago, for the first time, I realized that I had a crush on a guy. Up until that point, I had always imagined myself growing up, getting married to a woman, living in a suburban house with a yard, having
kids and a dog and a cat, and working as a professor. In spite of the fact that there was some uncertainty in my vision of the future (I certainly wasn’t going to end up with a wife), I still knew I was going to be a professor some day.

I got into a couple of graduate schools that year. I was on my way to academia... That is, until the spring, when a sushi dinner with some classmates of mine ended up spawning an idea for a startup company.

I wasn’t entirely convinced that I wanted to help start the company. After all, that would only delay my becoming a professor. I visited the schools that I had been accepted to, to see where I was going to end up. When I mentioned to one of the professors that I was thinking of starting a company, and was trying to decide whether to do that or go to school, he said, “You got in here once. You can get in again. When else in your life are you going to be able to take a chance like this?”

It was probably the best advice I got my senior year. When else in my life was I not encumbered by a job, by a family depending on me, by being accustomed to a regular salary? So let me give the same advice to you all right now. Now is the time when you should allow the most uncertainty in your vision of your future. Don’t blind yourself to possibilities by making assumptions too soon.
So I founded a company with a couple other Mudders. The fact that it was 2000, that the dot-com bust was in the process of happening, and that we had no idea what we were doing probably gives you a hint about how that turned out. So also make sure that when you do chase a new opportunity, that you recognize if things aren’t turning out well. Fail early and fail often, and eventually you’ll find something that fits.

Of course, when I left the company at the end of the summer, it was too late to enroll in grad school, so I had to find a job. I ended up lucking out and getting a job as an engineer at Google. But I was only going to stay there for a year... After all, I couldn’t put off grad school forever, right? I was still gonna be a professor.

I actually stayed at Google for five and a half years. And at the end of that I was in the enviable position of not needing a salary for a while, so I could do whatever I wanted to do. The problem with this was I had no idea what I wanted to do.

I tried the startup thing again, and helped a friend raise some money to get the company going. The plan was that as soon as they had the money raised, I was going to be the first engineer. As the round of financing closed, we started talking about what I was going to be doing for the company, and I realized that I didn’t want to be an engineer any more.
It was a great opportunity, but my becoming an engineer at the company was more my friend’s vision for my life than my own.

This led to another few years of trying to figure out what I was going to be when I grew up. It was during this time that a friend of mine quit his job as a lawyer to write musicals full time... While I was in the process of applying to law school. We both thought the other was crazy. In retrospect, the change was exactly what we both needed.

Not getting into law school in 2008 left me free that fall, and I decided I was going to come out to California and help the No On Prop 8 campaign. While I had been gradually getting involved in political groups for a while, this was the first time I ever worked directly for a campaign. And on that campaign, I worked harder than I have in any other time of my life, which given the curriculum at Mudd and what we accomplished at Google is saying something.

So that was another lesson to me: when you really care about something, it doesn’t matter how much work it is. Figure out what your motivations are, and what you’re willing to make sacrifices for, and I can guarantee that you will look back on your accomplishments with pride, not how tough they were to accomplish.

It was through contacts in that political world that eventually led me to the theater. I was having a meeting with a political contact one day, and after
we’d finished talking business, I asked what other projects he was working on. When he mentioned that he was producing a play called “The Normal Heart,” I asked him about it.

He told me that it was about the onset of the HIV epidemic in New York City. Since I had just been lecturing some activists at a conference the month before on how nobody my age seems to know the story of what happened in the early ‘80s with the epidemic, I felt I would be a hypocrite not to get involved. So I replied, “That sounds like something I could put my name on.” A few weeks later I had officially signed on as a producer of the project.

The Normal Heart was an experience that I am immensely proud of. But I would never have gotten involved without a lot of other things falling into place:

* That friend who writes musicals introduced me to his contacts in the theater world.

* My involvements in politics taking me to a conference where I was passionate about telling the story, and how it needed to be told to the next generation who hadn’t lived through it.

* My personal circumstances that allowed me to get involved and be in a position to raise money for the production.

The experience was so rewarding that I decided to become a producer full time. And while it’s nice to receive recognition in the form of awards, the
thing that keeps me enthusiastic and going into the office every day is my belief that it is world-changing work. For the first time in my life I don’t know if I’m ever going to go to grad school. But who knows? Maybe I’ll do what my father did and get a PhD after I retire.

So the biggest piece of advice I have to give you is to find your world-changing work. Whether it’s something that changes your immediate surroundings and makes your friends and loved ones more secure, or it’s something that changes the world into a better place for everyone, find some way to motivate yourself on a truly fundamental level. As Oscar Wilde said, “Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.” Don’t listen to someone else’s answer for what’s “worth” doing: find your own answer. And in so doing, find who you want to be. Remember that friend I mentioned earlier who quit his job as a lawyer to write musicals? He’s got a musical that’s on its way to Broadway next year.

That was the big point I wanted to make, but I have another request of you. Stay in touch with the colleges. It might be simply staying in touch with other alumni, or participating in alumni events, or donating money to financially support the colleges, or something in between... But you never know what you’ll get in return.

I’ve got two examples in my life where things would be dramatically different if I hadn’t stayed in touch with the colleges.
First, back in 2000, when I left my first startup, I was still living in Claremont. While I was applying for a job I occasionally dropped by to catch up with my professors. On one of these visits, my research adviser was wrapping up a telephone conversation as I dropped in. When she hung up, she looked at me and said, “You’re looking for a job... That was my friend Martin. At Google. You should send him your resumé.”

Without that serendipitous visit, it never would have occurred to me to apply for a job at Google.

And second, through an alumni network event in New York, I met my fiancé, a Pitzer alumnus. We will be getting married next summer.

On that note, I would like to once again congratulate the class of 2013. Embrace the unexpected.