

Address to the Trinity College Graduating Class of 2024
By Danny Meyer '80, P'20

President Berger-Sweeney, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished members of the faculty, proud parents, and remarkable members of the Class of 2024: Congratulations to each one of you for completing one of life's great journeys at this extraordinary liberal arts college. It's my great honor to celebrate this proud moment with you! Your commitment, hard work, and perseverance has paid off, and I'm confident that you are *more* than ready to write the next amazing chapters in the story of YOU!

Back when I was graduating 'neath these same elms, our speaker expressed his confidence that at last we were ready to enter the "real world." With all due respect, Class of 2024, you don't need *me* to tell you that you've *already* been living in the real world. Your years have coincided with abundant adversity, and *you* are the generation our world needs more than ever to thoughtfully engage in solving some really tough problems. Your experiences while at Trinity have shown you that active listening, engaging in courageous dialogue, and assuming the best intentions of others is almost always the best way forward. Please employ those skills generously. They will stand you—and the world—in good stead.

As you listen to my stories today, I want you to focus on three through-line messages:

First, whenever you set off for a ***certain*** destination, be aware that the only *real* certainty is that you will encounter all kinds of surprising twists and turns along the way. The good news is that those surprises can work in your favor. So long as you are willing to challenge your own preconceived assumptions and be open to new possibilities, you will put yourself in a position to open unexpected doors, any *one* of which might just change the course of your life.

Second, as you make big choices, while it may be tempting to do the thing others *expect you* to do, I challenge you to listen carefully to your gut. To follow *your* passion and heart, and to pursue what you really love. The best decisions I've made in my life have almost always stemmed from listening to my gut, which is *at least* as smart as my other brain and has *always* guided me as a reliable compass.

And third: just like the decision you made to *enroll* in this school, consider that *all* of the important choices you'll be making from today onward are opportunities for active acts of *enrollment*. And each act of enrollment—whether taking a job, investing in a friendship, signing an apartment lease, committing to a life partner, having a child, making an investment, or even just getting a puppy—should be viewed as an opportunity to commit, to go deeper, and to grow where you are planted.

Of course, it's crucial to set aspirational goals and go for what you want in life. But as someone who has never had a five-year plan, I've also found that it's *at least* as thrilling when a compelling idea unexpectedly comes knocking on my door and that I'm prepared to open it and walk in. I think it's true that good luck favors the prepared.

Your Trinity degree will open *many* doors for you. Rather than focusing only on the potential downsides of an opportunity, try hard to let yourself be open to the upsides. I hope you will consider the most important question I ask myself every day: "**What could possibly go *right*?**"

Each of the stories I'm going to share with you began with my being open to upside possibilities, listening to my gut, and enrolling in something I'd never quite planned for.

Let's start with this: I never expected to apply to Trinity in the first place. But thanks to a chance meeting in Rome between my father and Trinity's then-General Counsel Tom Lips, my dad and I decided to visit the campus. Tom was good enough to host a dinner for us, sold me on applying to Trinity, and even sent me home with a beautiful drawing of Trinity's Chapel, encouraging me to hang it in my freshman dorm room when I'd get to Trinity.

On a spring afternoon in mid-March 1976, as I neared the high school finish line in St. Louis with a hall-of-fame case of "senioritis," I anxiously awaited our daily visit from the mailman so that I could find out which of the *three* schools to which I had applied had accepted me. Yes, just three.

The postman pulled up to our mailbox, and I ran out to learn where I'd be spending the next four years of my life. There was a lot of mail that day, but it was easy to pick out the letters addressed to me: three razor-thin envelopes, each one containing just a single sheet of paper. Rejected from Princeton, rejected from Brown . . . and *wait listed* at Trinity. Accepted *nowhere*. Far from being my *safety* school, I would now need Trinity College to become my *savior* school.

I sat down to write the most important letter of my life to Trinity's dean of admissions, explaining why I knew that we were just right for each other. I committed to enrolling if Trinity would take me off the wait list.

Clearly, I wouldn't be here with you today had the admissions department not found a spot for me. Attending Trinity—a school I'd barely been aware of before applying—had been the furthest thing from my mind when I'd first set out to consider colleges. Well, it's not a stretch to say that the four years I spent here completely changed the course of my life—and in specific ways no other school could have. I'll explain.

As an off-the-wait-list freshman student, I had a lot to prove both to myself—and to Trinity. I had been a world-class underachiever in high school, and as a Trinity freshman, I vowed to rectify things by going on performance overdrive, enrolling in any opportunity that I could, and applying myself as never before.

I selected political science as my major, joined the college radio station as news director, and became the school's first freshman to enroll in the Legislative Internship Program for my spring semester. With that internship, I was given permission to have a car on campus—something freshmen were not entitled to have back then—and persuaded my parents to allow me to drive an old family station wagon from St. Louis to Hartford.

That car reliably got me back and forth from the State Capitol, but more importantly, I used it as a vehicle for discovery, feeding my curiosity and developing my passions. In that car, I explored the neighborhoods and restaurants of Hartford, visited my sister in Boston, and was enlisted as the designated driver for weekend road trips to other New England schools.

Every third or fourth weekend, I'd head to New York City to experience the electric jolt of the Big Apple: going to incredible restaurants, jazz clubs, Broadway shows, and art museums. I even drove that car from Hartford to Belmont Park, honing my horse-race handicapping skills so I could teach

a class on how to pick winners at the races for Trinity's "Free University." I never imagined that one day I'd open a restaurant in New York—nor that eventually I'd be serving food in art museums, theaters, a jazz club, and even in race tracks and ballparks—each of those interests nurtured while I was at Trinity.

During my junior year, I helped to organize Trinity's first international politics semester for the Rome Campus along with one of my beloved poli sci professors, Bert Gastmann. Dr. Gastmann said he would be open to teaching a semester-long curriculum for us in Rome, and the registrar promised he'd give it the green light if we could succeed at finding 10 other poli sci students to enroll. That part was easy. Who wouldn't want to spend a spring semester studying their favorite subjects in Rome?

My classmates and I studied Italian political history, took advanced Italian language classes, interned at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and did research at historic libraries throughout the city. I'd always select my go-to library based on its proximity to wherever I could find the best *caffè macchiato* or gelato. I got pretty good at speaking Italian and became expert at reading restaurant menus. I used every possible free moment to scour the city's trattorias and ate at as many of them as I could. I was *literally* listening to my gut and unwittingly gaining a culinary education that would serve me in a future career I'd never consciously considered.

Returning to Trinity for my senior year, I rejoined WRTC, this time as a jazz deejay with my own show called *Jazz Set with Dan Meyer*. I continued along the path of my political science major, and as many of you may now be doing, I started to imagine my postcollege future.

The day after graduation, I shifted into high gear trying to figure out what to do with the "rest of my life." Given my poli sci major and deep interest in learning about just about everything going on in the news, I returned home to the Midwest and took my first job, working pro bono in the political affairs department for the Chicago public TV station, WTTW. Next, I took a paying job as the Cook County field coordinator for Congressman John Anderson's independent presidential campaign. I'd been volunteering on political campaigns since I was 10 years old, and thanks to my Trinity degree, this time I'd actually be paid, earning a *whopping \$214 per week*.

For those of you history buffs, John Anderson earned 6.6 percent of the popular vote—which was decent for a third-party candidate—but he was still trounced by both Ronald Reagan and the incumbent, Jimmy Carter.

The 1980 presidential race offered me a valuable learning experience, not just in politics but also in leadership. Before that job, I'd never been anyone's boss, and since 100 percent of the campaign workers who reported to me were volunteers, I had to learn the importance of leading and motivating people with a higher purpose than pure monetary compensation. I hope *you'll* be fortunate enough to find work whose *purpose* is as rewarding as the paycheck.

Exhausted from the campaign, I decided to take a break from politics and spend a year of my life in New York City, just to experience what it was like to live there. After that, I'd move back home to the Midwest. At this point, I was not focusing on any specific career path. In fact, I was open to taking practically *any* respectable job to help pay my New York City rent for one year.

I interviewed for a job that had absolutely nothing to do with politics, journalism, or law. But it was a job. I'd be a special projects manager for a company that sold electronic tags to prevent shoplifting. I'd be paid \$16,500 a year, barely enough to afford the one-bedroom walk-up apartment I was sharing with a classmate from Trinity. My boss assigned me to train under one of the company's top salesmen responsible for the entire New York territory. I tagged along on sales calls every day and began to learn how to sell, turning an intuitive gift for pleasing people into an intentional strategy.

Within just two months of joining the company, the man who'd been training me was lured away by our chief competitor and despite having practically no sales experience, I was offered his job, responsible for the entire New York region. I thought for a moment about what it would be like to tell my parents that I'd be parlaying my Trinity education into selling a product to catch shoplifters. But I was the boss of my own life now, and so I listened to my gut and went for it. After all, *what could possibly go right?*

I quickly learned that sales was an important skill to have, and just as swiftly, discovered that I was good at it. I loved working for myself out of my own apartment office and enjoyed the perk of having a company car with a fully paid garage space, something *none* of my friends had in Manhattan. I'd hop around town in my powder blue Volkswagen Rabbit to make sales calls in some of New York's sketchier neighborhoods, the ones where shoplifting was most rampant. I scheduled my sales appointments to be convenient to whichever local restaurants I'd scoped out for my lunch break. I also found out that I was highly motivated by earning commissions. Almost overnight, the young guy in the powder blue Rabbit had become the company's top salesperson.

A job I'd never imagined having or wanting had come knocking on my door, and I'd *never* expected to be earning \$125,000 a year in sales commissions. That was a hell of a lot of money back then, and it was ample incentive to keep living in New York beyond the one year I'd planned. I invested a lion's share of my commissions into the company's public stock, which, at the time, grew from around \$3 to \$13 per share. To this day, I regret taking only one economics class while at Trinity, but *despite* that, I was now getting some pretty solid financial schooling.

As much fun as I was having making enough money to enjoy and explore New York City, I was just 25 and already knew that sales would not be the last job on my résumé. I decided it was time to get serious about my future. Many of my friends seemed to have already chosen their permanent vocations: reinsurance, banking, and accounting were all big back then. None of those appealed to me, and increasingly I became anxious about missing my own career boat. So, I turned my attention back to the things my diploma and internal "self-talk" had told me I was *supposed* to pursue: journalism and law. I summoned the courage to resign from my sales job and embarked on a tour of graduate schools.

I enjoyed visiting a handful of campuses, but the most memorable part of those trips was the opportunity to experience local restaurants, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area and Chicago. I had lost interest in pursuing a career in journalism, but with a continuing interest in politics, I decided I should apply to law school. What else was my poli sci degree for anyway?

The night before taking my LSAT, my aunt and uncle invited me to join them for dinner at Elio's, my favorite Upper East Side Italian restaurant. I knew I would need to make it an especially early

Friday night. Seeing that I was in an uncharacteristically anxious mood, my uncle asked me whether something was wrong.

“I need to take my LSAT first thing tomorrow morning,” I said.

“Well, *of course* you do,” he countered. “You want to be a lawyer, don’t you?” I looked away. “Actually,” I said, “I don’t think I do.”

My uncle was incredulous. “Do you have *any* idea how long you’re going to be *dead*?”

“No,” I responded.

“Well, *I* have no idea, either. But I’ll tell you one thing: You’re going to be dead a *hell* of a lot longer than you’re going to be alive. Why in the *world* would you waste precious time pursuing something you have no *passion* for?”

“Because I’m not sure what else I should do,” I said, growing more meek by the moment.

“Danny. You’ve got to be kidding me,” said my uncle. For your entire life, all I’ve heard you talk about is how much you love food and restaurants!”

I asked, “So are you suggesting I just eat in restaurants for the rest of my life?”

“*Of course* not. You should *open* one!”

This possibility was something that had never even *remotely* occurred to me. Hadn’t I spent the last several years preparing for a *real* career in a *real* field? One that my family would approve of? What would *they* say if I were to tell them I’d scrapped my interests in journalism and law and was now trading it all in to go into the *restaurant business*?

Back in the 1980s, *no one* did that. Restaurants were not considered anywhere close to being a valid career choice for someone privileged enough to have earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Trinity College.

I tossed and turned in bed that night, and early the next morning, I took the LSAT. But my mind was distracted. By pointing to a passion of mine that was in plain sight—right under my nose—my uncle had seriously activated an itch in me, whose existence I’d been repressing to the point of being in deep denial.

The next day, I called a former roommate and fraternity brother from Trinity. Like many of my friends at the time, he was putting his econ major to use, working at a bank training program on Wall Street. I said, “I think I want to open a restaurant. Want to join me? I’ll be the food guy, and you could be the money guy.” I invited him to take a restaurant management course with me, calling upon my sales skills: “Just take this class with me,” I urged. “Maybe you’ll like it!”

I took the initiative to enroll the two of us. My friend joined me for the first two of 12 classes, but I could see that his heart was not at all in it. After the second class, he let me know that he’d be

dropping out. I was disappointed but knew that this was *my* passion, not his. He generously arranged for me to get a job interview with the one restaurant client his bank worked with.

After a two-minute interview during which the restaurateur simply looked me up and down from head to toe, paused, and then concluded: “*You’ll do,*” I found myself with a new job offer. For \$250 a week, I would be the restaurant’s assistant lunch manager, taking reservations, typing the daily specials, checking in the servers, and greeting lunch guests.

I needed to scratch my restaurant itch and fortunately had saved more than enough money from my sales commissions to be able to afford to take the job. I asked myself, “*What could possibly go right?*” and accepted the offer.

This would be the only way to find out whether or not life in the restaurant business might be for me. If I liked it, I’d keep working until I had learned enough to open a restaurant of my own. If I hated it, I could always get another job and return to simply eating in restaurants. It turns out that an itch may be one of the gut’s most effective ways of expressing itself.

Minutes after beginning my first morning of work in this job I’d never anticipated, which I’d only gotten via an introduction from a friend whom I’d met at a school I’d never imagined attending and nearly hadn’t even gotten into, *something* went *very* right.

Just as I was heading down the stairs to the restaurant’s basement to answer the reservations phone, running up those stairs was a beautiful woman, carrying a tray of butter-filled ramekins to the kitchen. Our eyes met with a brief momentary glance, and that was that. Day one and I already sensed I was going to like this job!

But on my second day of work, she was *gone*. Doing some discreet but determined detective work, I learned that the woman with whom I’d exchanged that brief smile on the staircase was an actress named Audrey and that she had just been cast to play Sarah Brown, the lead role in *Guys and Dolls*, for a 10-week run at a dinner theater in Indiana. Well *that* was fun while it lasted.

I fell in love with restaurant work and life, and after seven months, it was clear to me that I wanted to open a restaurant of my own. To bolster my experience and preparation, I made plans to study professional cooking in Italy and France.

Audrey had now returned to the restaurant, and there was one more thing I had to take care of. On my final day of work at the restaurant, I gathered the courage to ask her out. Despite my telling Audrey that it was now *my* turn to be away for a few months, it was a promising first date. We saw a Broadway play, dined and drank at three different restaurants, and didn’t run out of things to talk about, well into the morning.

A few weeks later, I was off to Europe. I spent a month by myself in Italy, eating my way through Rome, Bologna, and Sardinia. I took classes from a cookbook author in Milan, putting the Italian language skills I’d learned at Trinity to daily use. I had taken some French at Trinity as well, and France was next, where I enrolled as a kitchen *stagiaire* at two restaurants in Bordeaux.

My dream was to create a restaurant that, if only it existed, would be my favorite restaurant in the world. Less than one year later, at 27 years old, I opened Union Square Cafe. *What could possibly go right?* Well, it turns out, a lot.

This may sound odd, but I'm *still* trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up. I've now been in the hospitality business for around 40 years and have always found all kinds of ways to shake things up, reimagine my career, and keep it fresh. Sometimes I do that by conceiving a new restaurant to open, and there have been a lot of them.

I've written cookbooks, a business book, launched a hospitality consulting business, and even started an investment fund with another of my Trinity roommates. I've served on all kinds of outside boards—some for-profit, some philanthropic, and notably, some wonderful years here as a Trinity College trustee. I always have and always will strive to follow my passions, keep growing, learning, and asking, "*What could possibly go right?*"

Crucially, at almost every step of the way, I've managed to avoid a trap I'd once set for myself: pursuing things to please *others* and taking the expected path a voice tells me I *should* do while ignoring what my gut and heart tell me I *want* to do. There was a time that I was nearly immobilized trying to make the *perfect next choice* for what I imagined *others* expected of me, when all I needed to have done was to make the next *good* choice for **me**. I really hope you'll consider that.

I'll skip to the punchline. Audrey and I have now been married for almost 36 years. She has a thriving acting and singing career, and we are blessed to have four wonderful children, each one of whom is avidly pursuing *their* own respective passions. Hallie is making ice cream, Charles is making music, Peyton will be a doctor, and one of them, Gretchen, a Bantam and Trinitone, who graduated with a psychology degree on this very lawn with the Class of 2020, is now a teacher, getting her master's in social work and early childhood special education. We are blessed to have a son-in-law and a granddaughter whom we adore. We go to Italy at least once each year, and we even have an Italian truffle dog named Macchiato.

I did not, and *could* not, have planned for any of this. Not Trinity College, not this family, not New York, not a career in hospitality, not Shake Shack, not the honor of speaking with you today. None of it.

With the benefit of time and hindsight, I'm pretty sure that the most consequential day in my life was the day Trinity wait listed me. Followed by the day I was accepted here and committed to enrolling. That first day ignited a lifetime of fire in my belly to prove to myself that I could measure up. And the second day set up nearly every single unexpected blessing of my life, beginning with my family, and, of course, my career. So much that is great in my life today owes its origins to things that happened for me because I enrolled here. I'm confident that there are abundant abstract pieces of your lives, many connected to your four years here, that will also fit together in ways you cannot possibly know today.

Congratulations again to the Class of '24 for the amazing achievement each one of you is celebrating today. You have so much to feel proud of. And as you embark on your next journey, I encourage you to follow your dreams, always listen to your gut and to your heart, stay true to your values, work

hard, be kind to people, address conflict head-on by engaging in constructive dialogue, be an active citizen and vote, and, above all, always stay wide open to the unexpected possibilities that present themselves when you ask yourself, "*What could possibly go right?*"