Good afternoon family and friends, faculty, alumni and fellow graduates. When I was first informed that you had invited me to be your Valedictorian I felt incredibly honoured and a little nervous.

I feel pride at all the work I have done over the last two years but truly none of that is more meaningful to me than knowing that I have earned the approval, the respect and most importantly the friendship of such a phenomenal group of my peers. Over the past two years each of you has inspired me, moved me or opened my eyes in new ways.

You have been determined. Many of you were ambassadors for the University of Toronto, taking occupational therapy across the globe. You spent hours organizing finances, making long distance phone calls and filling out seemingly endless paperwork for the opportunity to work and learn as occupational therapy students across the world; from India to Thailand, Trinidad and Cameroon all the way to South Africa. Your perseverance and your commitment are inspiring.

You have reached out. You have become involved in communities across Toronto, bringing awareness to crucial issues for our generation; poverty, homelessness, mental illness and the alienation of those who are struggling. You have raised funds to keep vital community organizations alive. You have given of your time, your resources and your passion.

You have been courageous. Many of us have faced enormous challenges in the past two years both academic and personal in nature. You have been brave enough to say “I don’t know” or “I’m overwhelmed” and you have been compassionate enough to reach out a hand to help someone else through.

You have been creative; designing innovative devices to enable occupation, from cell phones for the visually impaired to modified underwear. Your imagination was boundless. You set up pseudo-occupational therapy companies and planned out how you would measure their effectiveness. My favorite company of course was that designed by Lisa Purdie and Amanda Dam. Aptly named “Purdie Dam Good OT Services”.

In the last two short years we each have overcome many obstacles and achieved many things. I know that I can speak for my colleagues when I say a special thank you to all of those who have supported us during this time.

Thank you to family, friends and our loved ones without whom many of us would never have come this far. Thank you for commiserating while we complained about just how much work we had on our plates. Thank you for celebrating our accomplishments with us today.

Thank you to our professors who inspired us with their words and challenged us in their silences. Thank you for spending hours with us in your offices deciphering the meaning of occupation and for having the vision to invite clients and consumers into the classroom to help us understand in a deeper way how occupation can be so meaningful.

Thank you especially to those clients who over the last two years, have come into our lives for brief moments only, but who have changed us forever.

I know that during this transitional time, many of us are feeling a great deal of insecurity about the new challenges ahead. Some have started working and are already being faced with the reality of shrinking budgets, growing caseloads and the sudden weight of full responsibility.

Many are doing the job of more than one therapist or struggling to refer clients for services that no longer exist. There may be times when you feel overwhelmed, that you don’t have enough knowledge, experience or time to give. Be assured the experience will come, but I know for a fact that each of us already has something much more important than this to offer.

There is a part of each one of us that is already an accomplished occupational therapist. I know because I saw it every day in that classroom. It is that part of you that felt outrage at discrimination experienced by clients. The part of you that felt discomfort at the thought of services being available only to those who could afford it. It is the part of you that always expected more; from yourselves, from each other and from your university. It is that part of you that welled up with tears as clients shared with us their triumphs and their struggles. The part that couldn’t contain a smile as you watched those around you achieve great things. It is that part of you that felt awe at the sheer capacity of other human beings to face the most awesome obstacles and yet to live and to die with honour, grace and love.
I hope that each of us will hold on to these parts of ourselves. That we will keep our hearts soft and our minds open. That we will listen, and really hear another person’s story. That we will fight to make changes where we can and always find joy in what we do.

There is a famous line written by Marcel Proust that some of you may know. Proust writes, “The real act of discovery lies not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.” My wish for each of us is that our journey of discovery never ends. That we not only enable occupation and facilitate change in others but that we allow ourselves to be changed by what we do.

It is sometimes tempting to believe that if we know a person’s diagnosis, their family history and their culture that we know who they are. My wish for us is that we never lose our thirst for discovery and our desire for a deeper understanding of the lived experience of others, that we see every client, every family and every context with new eyes.

Congratulations Class of 2006! It has been an honour to share the last two years with you, and a privilege to call you my friends.