A few weeks ago I missed a faculty meeting. I try to make all of them unless I have an unavoidable conflict, but I had just come back from an out of town conference, I was exhausted and was convinced that I did not have to be on campus that day. I felt really bad about it. At that faculty meeting my colleagues decided that I should deliver these closing remarks. I am not sure if they intended it as a gift or a lesson, but it sure is an honor, a privilege and also a responsibility to be standing here today and say a few words before sending you out into the world.

So congratulations to all graduates, and their families, and my colleagues, for this hard-won achievement. College graduation is a big deal, it entails sacrifices, work and determination and today you should definitely celebrate this milestone in your life, which is an ending but also a new beginning.

The sentiment that I hoped to convey with my little story in the beginning is that we are not perfect, I am not perfect and I am just going to assume that you are not perfect either, but good things and unexpected opportunities can come also from our mistakes or missteps.

While here in our department at SDSU we believe that we have prepared you adequately for your next adventure out there in the real world, we also know that what matters most is not just the content of what you have learned, but the tools that you have been given to continue to make sense, question, challenge, change and improve what is already there and then make some more in your names.

You have acquired an international perspective and global interests not only about European countries, but really about the rest of the globe as well, given the history of colonialism, diaspora, migration, and globalization to and from Europe. Many of you have learned two or three languages. More than anything I believe that in European Studies we strive to transmit to you our passion for what we teach and wish for you to keep a curious mind as life long learners.

Some of you will continue with graduate school and we are proud of you. Some will teach and work abroad, and we are proud of you. Some will work here, and we are proud of you. To those of you who have known what they wanted to do for a long time, go for it. To those who still do not know, keep exploring. It is OK not to know yet. You will get there eventually, or you will get closer.
Some of us are missing pieces, as Shel Silverstein tells us, some have already become Big Os, but every Big O was a missing piece at some point that just needed to “lift... pull... flop,” bump and bounce before eventually rolling on their own.

This is why I’d like these remarks to be more of an overture than a closure. Because as this cycle comes to a close, another begins and you should be open to anything, the predictable, but also the unexpected and unforeseen, the unimaginable that suddenly becomes a little more believable and attainable. Dare to dream. Dare to defy. Dare to take risks.

In the Divina Commedia, Dante Alighieri has Ulysses tell his sailors, in a canto that influenced Melville’s Moby Dick, “You were not made to be beasts, but to follow virtue and knowledge.” The sailors are so intrigued by their leader’s invocation that are willing to follow him outside the boundaries of the known world and even though their boat is sunk by God for daring to go where no man was allowed to before, this is one of the best argument in favor of knowledge, the power it has, the fear it provokes. Never stop learning and never stop asking questions. Never stop telling others how good that can be, even when it may be dangerous.

After all, of the three kingdoms Dante writes about in the Commedia – Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso – he puts Ulysses and his sailors in the Inferno, in hell, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Dante’s poetry is at its best when he writes about hell, because often he is most sympathetic with those that he is forced to put there because they dared to question rules and defy them. Also, hell is more fun and entertaining than heaven.

Am I saying that you should all go to hell on the day of your graduation?

Hardly. I am saying rather that you should celebrate your achievements all the more because you fought for them and struggled through them. Because before there were successes there were maybe failure and strife, which make this day all the more important.

Again congratulations to all of you. And remember, you were made for virtue and knowledge!

Grazie!