

Address by Elizabeth O. Lowrey, Principal and Director of Interior Architecture at Elkus Manfredi Architects, to the Massachusetts College of Art and Design class of 2019

“Be Brave; Be Grateful”

President Nelson, distinguished guests, and everyone here: I am so humbled and gratified to receive this honorary degree and to address you today. I never expected such an honor.

And to the members of the MassArt class of 2019: Congratulations on your amazing achievement! What a privilege it is to speak to a group of outstanding, driven, and accomplished graduates like yourselves.

When President Nelson asked me to say a few words to you today, my first thought was, “Oh my. What could I possibly say that might make any difference to these incredible artists and designers?” You see, I have three kids in college, and I have a hard enough time suggesting anything that resonates with them as it relates to their lives and careers. But in three weeks, I’ll be sitting where your parents are sitting now, watching my oldest daughter graduate. And in the middle of my tears, I’ll be thinking the same thing your parents are probably thinking at this very moment:

“What the hell is my kid going to do with that degree?”

So, I’ll begin with the bad news – I am not paying off your student loans today.

The good news is: Each of you is entering a world that needs exactly what you’ve just mastered. And I don’t mean only the worlds of art and design, but also in business and nonprofit organizations across every industry. When *Fortune Magazine* asked 100 CEOs to name the most important qualities they want in a new employee, their answers included: curiosity, a drive to create, a love of learning, respect, compassion, integrity, communication skills, and innovative thinking.

In other words, the skills you’ve already mastered at MassArt are exactly the skills valued by the world’s most influential business leaders.

I’ll bet you didn’t know you were attending business school!

While you focused on strengthening your technical skills, whether that be in sculpting, painting, sewing, computer software or curating, you were also developing many of the qualities that I’ve just listed, such as creativity, empathy, and curiosity. This unique skillset, complimented by your own colorful characteristics, will guide you as you begin to paint your visions of success.

At MassArt, you learned *design thinking* — which means solving problems by understanding human emotions, prototyping ideas, tolerating failure, and trying again and again until you get it right.

That's the definition of design thinking from the well-known art magazine, *The Harvard Business Review*.

If it sounds familiar to your creative process, that's no accident. In a world where innovation is the key to success, business thinkers have desperately searched for a way to make innovation part of every job. And they found it in the creative professions.

Finally, they noticed! It's about time!

Your value resides not just in what you make, but also in how you think. When I was sitting where you are, I thought I was a designer – but I grew into so much more – and you will too.

Like many of you, my path to the world of work was not a straight line. I grew up in a family of artists. Since I was six years old, I knew that I wanted to be an architect. I'd spend hours sketching fantasy homes and resorts. During the summers, my Dad taught at art schools like Haystack and Penland, where we kids would run through the studios, playing with clay, begging to blow glass, making vegetable dyes and generally being the teacher's mascots. My finest moment was when I dyed a white Samoyed dog bright blue with indigo dye. What can I say, I knew Yves Klein blue was cool even back then.

In school, I sought out classes that would let me practice, visualize, draw, and create. I remember the architectural drafting class where I fell in love with a whole new world of industrial design and engineering. Coming from a family of "fine artists," my decision to study something as "practical" as interior architecture was my rebellion!

Rebellion or not, studying interior design prepared me for both sides of the creative equation: fine art and practical design; creative inspiration and diligent planning; listening to others and also listening to the creative voice within. I learned what an impact the marriage of art and design can make.

MassArt also brings both sides of that creative equation together, and here's how I know why that powerful combination is so important: When we do our best work at Elkus Manfredi Architects, it's because we have artists, landscape architects, industrial designers and fiber artists at the table, and so many more. Together, that creative richness and diversity produce better solutions than an architect working alone. We develop the patience to listen to each other and to our clients. Everyone at the table, regardless of their expertise, forms an emotional connection to the work that ultimately drives their commitment toward success.

My first professional steps after graduation weren't easy, because I didn't have a roadmap. And your next steps probably won't be seamless either. But I can share a few things I've learned during my career that I wish I'd known earlier:

First, Be Brave

Bravery is not the absence of fear. Bravery is action taken in the teeth of fear. Everyone fears rejection, and we fear it most when we're putting ourselves or our work on the line. We risk rejection, but we do our best work anyway. We speak the truth as we see it.

Don't take no for an answer. Don't assume you're not needed in a biotech firm or a Kendall Square technology startup. Pick up the phone and call – reach out directly. My kids tell me “You have to go through a company's online portal to apply.” Okay, fine. That takes about five minutes. After that, spend twenty-five more minutes reaching out, on the phone or through LinkedIn or through networking. Most jobs are still found by referrals and connections, so talk to everyone and anyone that interests, intrigues, or inspires you.

I'll let you in on a secret: We established professionals want to hear from you, learn from you, be energized by you, get reconnected to the freshness and enthusiasm that inspired us to get into our work in the first place. If you risk rejection and reach out anyway, your bravery will certainly be rewarded. I promise!

I probably just guaranteed I'll get three hundred phone calls tomorrow. Oh well!

Next, be curious

I have a wall in my office that we call “the wall of ideas,” where people pin pictures that inspire and delight them, things that provoke curiosity. It's public, it's interactive, and it's participatory. My team and I often look at the collage of images for new inspiration, new ideas, and new connections.

Be curious about more than your craft: learn about history, psychology, science, business and economics. Create an inspiration wall of your own with pictures from the Hubble Space telescope and the Met Gala and 19th-century botanical engravings.

And most of all, be curious about people. At the moment in a conversation when you want to talk about yourself, wait and ask the other person, “is there more?” You already know about you. Find out more about them. Listen.

Third, create a tribe

Find a diverse community – and if you can't find one, make one. At Elkus Manfredi we have a diverse group of designers, but we also have project managers and planners and engineers and people who create complex financial models. Everyone has a seat at the table, and everyone's work is better as a result. Listen.

Fourth, find a mentor

Beyond your tribe, you need a mentor. A mentor is not necessarily your boss, but someone who understands the world you're working in and gets you a seat at the table. They might have a high IQ or a high EQ or both. Most of all they have the power to invite you to participate at the highest levels of your business. They give you access, which is the best way to learn how your business really works.

Fifth, make a plan

Architects make incredibly detailed plans. You know why? Because if we don't, the building might fall down. And one of the signs of a good plan is that it stays focused on the vision but flexible on the ways to achieve that vision.

Think of your career as your next design project. Plan it with three things: a vision, the discipline to design a path, and the willingness to bend that path as your vision becomes richer and wiser.

Lastly, be grateful

I've been incredibly lucky. I found a place to work that valued me and pushed me to expand my limits. I'm blessed to have done what I have and to have met the people that I've met and to be standing up here on this damn stage right now.

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently wrote a column about the difference between happiness and joy. I hope you all read it. He wrote, "Happiness comes from accomplishments" – and "Joy is the present that life gives you as you give away your gifts."

I know you feel happiness today, because you've accomplished so much. And I wish you a lifetime of joy that comes from giving away your incredible gifts. Gratitude will motivate you to give away your gifts, and in return you will have joy.

Before I close, why don't you start your next chapter by giving a heartfelt thanks right now to everyone who brought you to this day – your parents, teachers, professors, friends, mentors, and each other.

Finally, I've heard commencement speakers always say, "Go find your passion." But I think that's like telling someone to go fall in love. Besides, you already discovered your passion – that's why you came to MassArt. Somewhere, sometime, you discovered the work you were born to do. You lost track of time. You momentarily lost the self-obsession and mental noise that crowds our days and you gave yourself over to the work. You felt joy.

So, graduates of MassArt – having been fortunate enough to discover your passion, the question becomes: how will you channel this passion into making a meaningful life?

Answering that question is the work of a lifetime. And the real creative task of your one and only unique life is to answer that question not just once but over and over again.

How will you channel your passion into making a meaningful life? And how does that become your work, your career, your vocation?

The American theologian Frederick Buechner gave a little guidance when he said, “Vocation is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

From repairing our broken society, to healing our wounded environment, the world’s deep hunger is infinite. Your MassArt education has given you the skills to meet the world’s deep hunger.

I’ll leave you with that question. Where will your deep gladness meet the world’s deep hunger? Find that place once, or many times over a career, and you will know again and again the happiness and pride – and joy – that you feel today.

Congratulations Class of 2019!