Speeches at academic celebrations like this one are supposed to be inspirational. Many people turn to famous authors and poets for inspiration, but I primarily read chemistry journals and popular fiction, so that wasn’t getting me anywhere. I found what I was looking for as I was reading to my almost-2-year-old son before bed a few weeks ago. He wanted to read “Pierre: A Cautionary Tale in Five Chapters and a Prologue” by Maurice Sendak. If you haven’t read the story I want to warn you that this is a spoiler alert.

Pierre is a little boy whose response to everything is “I don’t care.” Not surprisingly his parents quickly grow tired of his indifference and they never take him anywhere. One afternoon while he’s home alone a hungry lion shows up. The lion asks Pierre if he wants to die, and Pierre says “I don’t care.” So the lion eats him. The good news is that apparently the lion doesn’t chew his food, and the doctor is able to shake Pierre out of the lion’s stomach. After that experience Pierre’s attitude changes. The book ends saying “The morale of Pierre is: Care!”

By receiving honors at today’s celebration, you have indicated to yourselves, your families, and the college community that you have the intellectual ability to be successful. Hopefully you’re as proud of yourselves as the rest of us are of you. But it turns out there’s a lot more to being successful in life than being bright. College (and a liberal arts college in particular) is supposed to prepare you for life: it creates a firm foundation upon which you can build, it allows you to contribute in a meaningful way to society, and it provides you with skills that are applicable to any and all jobs. At Gettysburg we also encourage you to care: care about your local
community, care about the global community, care about the environment, care about the direction the world is headed. Those are all incredibly important, but the type of caring I’m talking about is more selfish.

By succeeding here (which you clearly are) you’re setting yourselves up for successful futures by opening all kinds of doors. You may have success in your job and you may have financial success, but unless you care about what you’re doing, you’ll never be completely satisfied.

Here’s my perspective: because I teach organic chemistry I have all the premed students at Gettysburg College in my class. Historically organic chemistry has been viewed as a weed-out class for prospective doctors. In my experience when my class weeds people out, it does so not because the students can’t handle the material, but because they don’t have the passion they need to have to be successful physicians. Perhaps they wanted to be a doctor because doctors hold a high level of respect in our society. Perhaps they thought it was a good way to make a good salary. Perhaps they were good at science in high school and they thought strong science students became doctors. But those reasons don’t lead to caring about being a physician. For those students my class acted as the lion in Pierre’s story. It was the scary thing that made them realize how important it was to find a career that they honestly cared about. (It may have chewed a few of them up and spit them out, too, but that’s beside the point). Sure, it tossed them into limbo for a while, but when all of a sudden you have no direction, you re-evaluate your life in a way that often factors “caring” into the equation.
For another example of the importance of caring we’ll turn to your parents’ generation (and people a little older than your parents). Many baby boomers aren’t retiring; they’re starting second careers (sometimes called second acts). And they’re listening to their hearts as they’re doing it. They’re taking jobs working in the green energy or environmental industries, working in health care, education, and financial advising. They’re finding employment using more than just financial gain as an incentive. They’re doing something they care about and many of them are finding their new jobs more satisfying than their initial careers. For some baby boomers their first career ate them alive the same way the lion ate Pierre. Just like Pierre they learned how important it was to care.

Let’s talk about you. Some of you are driven by passion for a particular subject, some of you are driven by grades, and some of you have no idea what you’re being driven by. That’s OK for now, and that’s a big part of what college is all about. It’s a time to explore and discover what you care about. And for some people it’s a time to change what you care about. We encourage you to care about your global community and we are providing you with the knowledge and skills to have a positive impact on the world. But once you leave college, make sure you don’t leave behind the things you care about. Life after college can be hectic and stressful (as if it wasn’t bad enough already). Trying to juggle a career and a family and still do the things you enjoy is incredibly challenging. If you are doing a job you don’t care about, it’s going to become your lion and it’ll eat you alive. But if you get up every morning and do a job that you honestly care about, you’ll be surprised at how much easier it is to deal with everything else.
This all looks good on paper, but how do you get that job? How do you even decide what that job is? You take it one step at a time and learn about yourself as you go. After graduate school I got a job in the pharmaceutical industry. I thought I really cared about that kind of work. It was a great job and I enjoyed it, but I realized that I cared more about teaching and working with undergraduate students. So I decided to make a change and pursue a career I was passionate about. I haven’t looked back. I want every one of you to do something with your life you care about. In today’s world you can’t be too picky about your first job. But you can constantly re-evaluate what you care about and put yourself in a position to get closer to that perfect job. I’ll leave the details of how to do that up to you. You’re all smart (which is why you’re here today). You’ll figure it out. But don’t wait too long to pursue a career you care about. You may be surprised how quickly that lion can sneak up on you.

Thank you and congratulations on the awards you’ll be receiving today.