“Supersonic Idiots and Sophisticated Sleuths”
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Congratulations to all of you Emergent Scholars on your academic accomplishments. Just as impressive as your talent, work ethic, and responsibility is your ability to handle change. The pace of new experiences, new information, and new demands in college is much greater than what you faced only two years ago in high school. Welcome to the future. Things will only get more exciting.

There are fascinating ways in which the world is changing as we speak. A vast new ‘internet of things’ is emerging. Some techno-gurus call it the ‘internet of everything.’ In 2007, there were ten million sensors connected to the internet. There are now hundreds of millions. The number is growing so fast that it is almost impossible to estimate how many there are right now. One guess is that there will be 100 trillion sensors connected to the internet by 2030.

Meanwhile, robots are taking on the work that many humans used to do. In Cupertino, California—anyone, why is it significant that the city is Cupertino?—there’s a hotel with a robot that delivers items to guests in their rooms. It doesn’t knock on your door. When it reaches your room, it calls your room phone. When you open the door, the robot unlocks a compartment, and you can reach in and get your item. Your robotic bellhop has a built-in screen that asks you how it did. If you hit “good,” he—whoops—it chirps “Whee!” and jiggles back and forth on its wheels. Cool, right? Plus, you don’t have to tip robots; at least, not yet. Meanwhile, Google is making driverless cars. They use Toyota Priuses—which is what my wife and I drive. Unlike my wife’s current driver, this kind of Prius may not be afraid to stop and ask for directions. Or perhaps, he—whoops, it—will know everything and will never have to stop and ask for directions.

In the face of these advances, it is still interesting to understand what computers can do and not do, and realize how complex and multi-layered the human mind is. Even someone who is not terribly intelligent or educated possesses a mind that is nimbler in some ways than even the most advanced computer program. Artificial intelligence, for example, still has its limits. IBM, Google, startup companies and major research universities have been spending billions of dollars on developing artificial intelligence software, software that can recognize things as the human mind does. The results have been mixed.
Four computer programs looked at this man and described what they saw as:

- Cardigan
- Portrait
- Mark Zuckerberg
- Person

Cardigan? Really, Mark Zuckerberg wouldn’t get caught dead in a cardigan. Actually, how many of you even know what a cardigan is? Who used to wear cardigans on TV? That’s right, Mr. Rogers.
The same four programs looked at this and reported that they saw:

- Computer keyboard
- Technology
- Console
- An object

Computer keyboard isn’t too far off. But “Console”? None of them said it was a .... laptop.
And, the programs looked at this, blinked a few times, and identified it as:

- Alp
- Landscape
- Nature
- Scene

“Scene”? That’s pretty lame.

Despite these limits, we do know that many tasks that you and your friends do now might easily be taken over by computer programs, driverless cars, robotic bellhops, or the internet of everything. But, you will still face questions that no computer can ever answer. As my computer scientist brother once put it: “Computers are supersonic idiots. If you ask them to do something smart, they’ll do it very fast and very thoroughly. If you ask them to do something stupid, they’ll do it very fast and very thoroughly.” Computers are massively powerful tools that are used by human beings who have all of the same flaws as the humans who used typewriters, the telegraph, quill pens, or scratched marks on cave walls. Technology changes, humans, not so much. About a year ago, cybercriminals broke into more than 100,000 Internet-enabled appliances including refrigerators and sent out 750,000 spam emails to the appliances’ users. The Center for Strategic and International Studies estimates that digital crime currently costs the world $445 billion a year. The internet of things doesn’t protect us against that ancient phenomenon of humanity, the evil that resides in the heart and mind.
Humans are incredibly flawed, weak creatures, gifted with powers that sometimes the most powerful computers can’t match. You don’t want to be ruled by supersonic idiots. But you don’t want to be ruled by human beings who have no depth of character or compassion for others. We face breathtakingly new questions but we have to rely on those most ancient virtues to answer them—which values are to be protected and when? Privacy or the public’s right to know and communicate? Human dignity, or individual freedom? Who will own the internet of things? Is it right or wrong to list someone else’s internet address on the web and urge other people to blast emails at the person? There is no simple answer, but I can give you a complex one: you Emergent Scholars and your generation must become sophisticated sleuths. Computers will give you billions of megabytes of information. Be a sleuth, not a sucker for what you read. Read with a sophisticated mind, not an uncritical one. You must ask yourself what your values are, determine them thoughtfully, and keep those values as your guide as you consider critically everything that you read on the web. And, you must realize that every new technological advance can be used for good or evil. Investigate them. Every new advance needs checks on its capacity for harm and tests that protect its capacity for good.

Let me illustrate how the web - and the lack of sophisticated sleuthing - can distort the truth. A friend of mine, a fellow historian at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, where I used to work, noticed that her daughter came home from middle school with a new American history textbook. My friend, an expert on the Civil War, was curious about what the textbook had to say about the conflict. She was appalled and outraged to read that the textbook, which had been adopted and approved by the state educational authorities of Virginia, described General Stonewall Jackson’s Confederate forces at the Battle of Chancellorsville as having units of African American soldiers. This is simply false. The Confederacy never recruited, trained, or armed African American soldiers. In fact, you can go on-line and read the debates in the Confederate Congress where representatives discussed and rejected the idea. My friend did some sophisticated sleuthing and discovered that the textbook’s author had gotten the evidence for her claims from - you guessed it - what she read on the web. That’s right, she read pro-Confederate websites that wanted to downplay the role of race and slavery in the Civil War, and simply included their false claims in her textbook. (The textbook has been changed and withdrawn.) Truth is a very precious commodity. Protect it, or lose it. The web can be a powerful tool for enlightenment. The web can tell a million lies.

As a sophisticated sleuth, you will have to wrestle with timeless truths: asking the question, “How should one live?” is the most important lesson one can learn. You must use your sleuthing abilities to seek out the answer for how you wish to live from sources of ancient as well as modern wisdom, from those whom you have learned to trust, from teachers, advisors, writers, and mentors whom you’ve tested and come to appreciate. You emerging sophisticated sleuths must resist being overwhelmed by technology’s power even as you learn how to use that power for good, and not for evil. You must read what is on the web with critical eyes. What is the source for this information? Has this site, writer, spokesperson, or organization been trustworthy, unbiased, and objective in the past? Just as important, what you write must be responsible. Social media--texts, Twitter, Facebook--is not a free-fire zone.
What you write must bear scrutiny from other sophisticated sleuths. Technology can be our supersonic friend. Well-educated humans, sophisticated sleuths, must choose how to use it.

In your remaining years at the College, continue to learn all that you can. But remember that your larger goal is to learn how to adapt to the changes around you with sophisticated wisdom, to see what is truly making a positive impact on the world and helping those around you and what is not helping or is even destructive. Your task is to continue to be a part of that which will truly change the world for the better and, ideally, to change the world for the better.

You have achieved a great deal. You have much before you. Take advantage of every reasonable opportunity to stretch your talents and experience. Study Abroad, research with a faculty member, internships, service learning, leadership in organizations like clubs, teams, student senate, participation in Called to Lead - all of these will develop you as a person still more, and as an intellectual. The College has a particular interest in encouraging you to apply for prestigious external fellowships - Rotary, Fulbright, Boren, Truman, Gates, Marshall, Rhodes, etc. These awards can make an enormous difference in furthering your careers. Please talk to your faculty advisors or see Joel Janisewski, Director of the Prestigious Scholarships Program, for more information about applying for these awards.

Congratulations again. Continue to learn and grow, but also keep your eyes on the larger world that you will enter very soon. You have our best wishes as you learn, even more ably, to be sophisticated sleuths.