As you might expect from a research scientist, I’ve made a careful study of graduation talks. (Well, that’s not quite true, but we university professors are supposed to do careful studies.) In any case, I’ve observed that commencement talks usually take one of two forms. The first is what I call the “Mother knows best” talk. This is the kind of talk where the speaker reminds you to brush your teeth (and don’t forget to floss), always be nice to people, call home on Sundays, change your underwear on your wedding day and other equally laudable and unnecessary advice.

The second kind is what I call the “go get ‘em” talk. Here the speaker reminds you that you’ve received a marvelous education at this stellar institution, and that you’ve been given the tools for success -- so go make the world a better place! Those of you who are parents, or have parents -- especially parents who’ve paid for your education – have probably heard such talks in the past.

I won’t use either of these models. Rather, I’d like to point out some ways in which the education we have provided for you is incomplete -- and actually lacking in a major way.

You’ve learned a lot during your student days – or at least we hope you have. But beyond that, you have access to incredibly vast stores of information, which you can access instantaneously, from your homes or offices or on the road. What you don’t know you can find on the Web, right? What more could you possibly need, especially if you’re a Google power user?

Whether you work in business or engineering, you’ll constantly be bombarded by information from now on. All this information should enable us to create more meaningful lives; give us more leisure; deepen our friendships; enable us to pursue art, music and literature; further our insight; and enrich our spiritual lives. We take for granted that these things actually happen.

But they clearly don’t, do they? Professionals like you and me are more stressed than ever. We have less personal time, because information technology – which is by definition pervasive – pursues us everywhere. You can’t escape e-mail and cell phones and text messaging. You’ll find – if you haven’t already – that you’re perennially connected to work, whether at home or on the road or in a hotel or on a white sand beach in Bora Bora. But are we any happier as a result of all this information? Does it make our lives any more meaningful?

I’d like to suggest that there’s a fundamental disconnect between the technology we all use and love, and the things that make our lives worthwhile. The education you have received does not
help with bridging this disconnect. In other words, I believe one can have a life, and – hold onto your seat now – that it doesn’t need to revolve entirely around technology. I also believe one of your greatest challenges will be to bridge this disconnect. You’ll have to figure this out for yourselves because we didn’t do a good job of preparing you for this very real-world dilemma.

Let me begin with information. There’s an old Arab saying that a person who has great knowledge – but has no wisdom – is no better than a camel carrying a load of books. In a more contemporary setting, we could say that a person with Internet access but no wisdom is but a search engine. In essence, he or she is a camel – or a Prius – carrying a load of books. The problem is that we know a lot about a whole lot of things, but very little about ourselves.

Consider what the 20th century Indian philosopher Krishnamurti wrote about 50 years ago:

“What is the significance of life? What are we living and struggling for? If we are being educated merely to achieve distinction, to get a better job, to be more efficient, to have wider domination over others, then our lives will be shallow and empty. Though there is a higher and wider significance in life, of what value is our education if we never discover it?”

This is what I call the “Great Disconnect.” I’d like to outline four of its aspects for you. (As you know, we academics always create lists of three or more.)

The first part of the disconnect concerns our dialogue and interaction with other people. You’ve seen the symptoms as clearly as I have. The pressure and pervasiveness of information overload puts huge stresses on our relationships with friends and paramours and spouses and children and parents. People increasingly communicate with their families by e-mail. (In fact, I’ll bet at least one or two of you prefer communicating with your parents by email.)

Sure, that’s fine for information: the location of a cool wine bar, the arrival time of United flight 345, the need to take the scruffy shoes for repair. But e-mail doesn’t include the smile, the tone of voice, the gestures, the embrace, the body language, all of which carry much deeper meanings.

When I worked in the business world – which, contrary to rumor, some of us in academia actually do – I remember dropping in on co-workers multiple times a day to share ideas. These conversations carried a lot more than technical analysis of a problem. They built trust, they led to friendships, they spawned discussions of personal achievements or unloading of problems.

I don’t need to remind you how this has changed. How frequently do people now e-mail the person in the office next door, or on the other side of the study hall, rather than getting up and going to visit? I see people sending messages to the person sitting next to them in a meeting. Isn’t that true? Even further, do social networks like MySpace or Facebook really create deep personal relationships, or are they safe and impersonal substitutes for true interaction? How many genuine relationships does someone with a thousand MySpace “friends” really have?
Of course, information is important. We need signs to tell us whether to push or pull the door, which way to drive on a one-way street, and where the fire exits are. We need warning signs to tell us to slow down before the road snakes above a huge cliff; helpful signs to tell us where the bathrooms are; and maybe even encouraging signs to tell us we’re really welcome to Anytown, USA. Some people tend to ignore such information while others follow it in excruciating detail.

Some of you – especially if you’re of a certain age, like within 30 years of mine – may have heard of a Danish pianist and comedian named Victor Borge. In one of his early shows, Mr. Borge said that he’d been trained to always follow directions. “I was about to take a shower in a New York hotel room,” he said, when he noticed the sign: “Place shower curtain inside tub before turning on water.” “I always do what the instructions tell me,” he said sincerely. “It took me a long time to take the curtain off the little hooks, then I folded it neatly and put it inside the shower as instructed. But when I took my shower, there was water everywhere.”

And of course information can be communicated in different ways. Some years ago there was a power laser lab in the School of Engineering at USC. In this lab was the most effective sign I’ve ever seen on the possible danger of lasers. The sign read: “Do not look directly at laser beam with remaining eye.” So we understand the importance of information – but my message is that there is a disconnect between information transfer and interpersonal communication.

Clearly, this second part of this disconnect is much deeper than the lack of communication between people. Is there a relationship between information and wisdom? A wise person is not necessarily a walking encyclopedia -- that’s just the camel again, even if it’s Wikipedia. Rather, a wise person is one who sees connections between things, who has a sense of purpose, who understands someone else’s words as well as the nuanced meaning behind those words.

A wise person doesn’t just ask, “what,” “where,” and “how” – but “why?” and “what does that mean in a wider context?” There are certainly people we go to for advice on how to do something or where to find something (but only if we can’t find it on the Web, of course.) There are totally different people whom we ask about careers in business or engineering, or whether to accept a particular job offer, or why something un-nameable seems to be lacking in our lives.

Their advice is not only information, but something else. It has to do with the sense of direction in our own lives, with the significance of being in this body, in this place, here and now. I believe human beings need a sense of purpose for our lives to have meaning. Those of us who have no core mission can be very effective in our jobs, but will always feel empty somewhere in our stomachs. We’ll always be haunted by questions like, “Why am I doing this? Why do I live this way? What is really important?” Many people don’t start asking such questions until they’ve been through several marriages, have kids with various ex-spouses, and have been on the job for 20 or 30 or 40 years. I’m suggesting the time for you to ask these questions is now.

This leads me to the third and hardest part of the great disconnect. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the ultimate goal of life is to find enlightenment. That doesn’t necessarily mean
floating on a cloud of eternal bliss, even though people selling yoga t-shirts may have presented it to you that way. Rather, it has more to do with discovering a place in our own core that is at peace, that isn’t touched by the hustle and bustle of ordinary life, that gives our lives meaning and purpose.

I’m here to tell you that you can’t find enlightenment on the Internet. (I’ve looked, and – trust me on this – it isn’t there.) You can find wise people’s writings, but you won’t find your own wisdom. That wisdom comes from inner search and reflection on the challenges and meaning of your own life, as you actually live it – not from browsing the Web. Let me add that this wisdom isn’t what someone else tells you. It’s what you discover is uniquely true for yourself.

There’s a story of a man who set out to find the secret meaning of life. He heard about a holy city where he could find the answers to all his questions, and that the city was at the top of a particularly sheer, high mountain. After much searching, he located the peak and the trail upward. He started along the path, whistling to himself and saying, “This isn’t so hard. Why did those silly people think it was?” But the trail gradually got steeper and more overgrown, until eventually there was no trail, only rocks and brambles. The man ate berries and kept trudging.

Years later, he emerged on top, where he saw a city surrounded by an immense wall. At the gate, a fierce guardian brandished a sword. The man asked, “How many people have gone through this gate into the holy city?” The guardian replied, “No one has gone through this gate.” The man, who was by now old and tired, sat down by the trail in tears, thinking he had wasted his life. When he could, he approached the guardian again and asked, “Do you know why no one has gone through this gate?” The guardian replied, “Because this is your gate. You have only to ask, and I’ll open it for you.” You see, we each have to discover the gate by ourselves.

Finally, the fourth aspect of the disconnect is that information is, by definition, in the past. It refers to things that are already known and recorded. You, who are receiving degrees in the 21st century, are living in a time of unprecedented technological and social change, and the rate of change is increasing geometrically. To face this constant change requires knowing much more than how your professors did things – or even knowing as much as they do.

After all, much of what we faculty know is obsolete. (I realize I may never be invited to speak at another commencement now.) The problems you’ll face on the job and in the world will be far different from any you’ve encountered in homework assignments. What we hope you’ve gathered from your studies here isn’t just facts, or even the sum of facts called knowledge -- but the ability to distill the principles and attitudes you’ll need to face the unknown. I believe this attitude requires wisdom as well as knowledge. It requires a personal orientation toward life that accepts change, integrates fresh experiences, and keeps adapting in creative, fulfilling ways.

So, dear graduates, this is my message for you: *Don’t let the information age swallow you.* Remember there’s a disconnect between information and wisdom, and that this disconnect appears in human relationships, in finding purpose in our lives, in asking the deeper “why”
questions, and in facing the new and unknowable in our own, very individual ways. As you leave this stadium, don’t forget that you can’t find enlightenment on the Internet.

Good luck to you as you head out from academia. May you prosper both personally and professionally. And please, don’t forget that a person with much knowledge and no wisdom is no better than a camel carrying a load of books – even if the camel looks like a very shiny Prius.