I would like to thank Robbie and Aminah for that introduction and for their service to Villanova's senior class and to acknowledge JJ Brown from student development for all of his work in organizing the Senior Toast and Last Lecture. I am proud to represent today the Villanova Arts faculty, who bring such energy and intellect to this campus and are among the finest teachers in the world. It is humbling, however, to share the stage with my fellow nominees Professors Pirsh, Capriotti, Dinehart, and Gardner. I will try my best to carry the torch for them. Finally, it is an unalloyed pleasure to have been chosen to speak by the Class of 2015, for whom I have great affection, so much so that its members represent, for me, a 'Golden Age' here at Villanova.

So what do you say to a Golden Age of graduates? I have been thinking alongside you for four years now, what can I help you think through now? If I were to ask someone from outside—such as a journalist—what is on your mind, they would assume they know the answer. It would probably be the same assumption as your parents, and, worse still, the friends of your parents. "What next?"—that's what they think is at the front of your brain. And by that, they mean your future job, your income, your debts. "What next?"—are you tired of that question yet? If not, in the next two weeks, you certainly will be. "What next?" they ask, as they size you up, give you a little shake, like they do to a cantaloupe in the grocery store. Some of them will give you a squeeze to see just how much GDP you have in you. Maybe a sniff too. Well, if you remember nothing else from this last lecture, please remember this: you are not a cantaloupe. I would invite you all to repeat after me: "I am not a cantaloupe." And as you march through graduation and march home afterwards, you can protect yourself by saying—maybe not out loud—"I am not a cantaloupe," whenever prodding questions are turning you into produce.

But I don't think this is what's on your mind. Most of you, at least in my experience, are not thinking about work and wages and toil. Or if you are, you are so paralyzed, stupefied, or aggrandized, that we cannot have a conversation. So what are you thinking about and what can we talk about together this final time? My thesis today is not only that you are thinking about your friends, but also that you are thinking about the nature of friendship, feeling it, perhaps for the first time, as a philosophical question. What makes me say this? Two things: Housing registration and Matt Sosland.

First, housing registration, witnessing housing registration here on campus has brought home to me over the years how friendships have defined your experience here at Villanova. They are relationships of your own choosing and making, unlike the choreographed social scenes of high school. They have been a source of meaning and joy and drama, plenty of drama. They are, in many ways, the first and most significant expression of your adulthood and have offered what St Augustine in *City of God* termed, in appropriately bittersweet language, the "consoling delights of friendship." This is all revealed to me every Spring when I ask about registration and anticipate an answer about your classes—and whether or not you've signed up for my classes. Instead, I hear about your future dorm and roommates and just how much of your wellbeing depends, not on your classes—not even my classes—but ending up with good people in a good place. Well, if you think about it, graduation is like a universal housing disaster that affects every single person on campus. No one, absolutely no one, will live with each other if your 'dorms' are scattered as far as Boston, DC, even South Bend, Indiana. Your friendships have been the ground of your being at Villanova, ground that you have cultivated and that has fed you. Now, facing life in June, somewhere outside the shadow of Tolentine, the certain sustaining power of these friendships is in doubt and uncertainty. What will you do without these people?

Second, Matt Sosland. Do any of you know Matt Sosland? No? He is my former college roommate. It would be creepy if the class of 2015 all knew my college roommate. The day I received word of this nomination, Matt was randomly in town on business, and we got together for breakfast. Let me sing a song of Sosland now. We have always shared a friendship based on mutual grumpiness. Now, Sosland is the middle-aged curmudgeon, the American Puddleglum, he was always meant to be. In a weird way, he's in his prime. So, over in Wayne, we talked about life now, about managing kid's screen time, about how Hebrew school for his kids and Catholic school for mine was keeping the worst of what smells like tween spirit at bay, and about how busy we are, always so busy, driving here for baseball, for hockey, for ballet lessons, for violin lessons, always so busy. Yes, as we talked over mediocre coffee, I realized just how much I missed Sosland's ability to see through nonsense, and to enjoy the simple goods of life as simply good. As we talked, it was if we were picking up a conversation we had just left off. We were back on campus in 1997 with Lischer, Pan, Mencin, and Sherman. We were all there, having never left Sharples dining hall, and the time and the space between counted for nothing.

So, two testimonies on the significance of friendship—your crisis about graduation, my rhapsody over my college roommate reunion. But what do they tell us? Let's turn to our friend Aristotle for some philosophic help. He argued that there are three forms of friendship: the useful, the pleasant, and the true or complete. The first two are good in their own ways, but limited, based on a common utility or enjoyment. Once their basis goes, so goes the friendship. True friendship incorporates these other two, but goes beyond it. It is built upon a common love of the good. A true friend is valued for his or her own sake. True friendships are the "most intense and best," but they are also rare and necessarily limited in number.

That sounds good, but what about this claim that friendships are limited in number? Does that still hold in our digital age, under the rule of Taylor Swift, who, in a recent count, had 52.8 million followers on Twitter, 22.1 million on Instagram, 74.4 on Facebook. When I looked beyond social media for more help in understanding friendship, I found that Aristotle wasn't alone in resisting the "more is better" hegemony of algorithmic acquaintances. C.S. Lewis earnestly asked who would want a great number of friends and argued, in his book *Four Loves*, that there are "limits" to "the enlargement of the circle of friendship." Perhaps more importantly, Taylor Swift herself has implicitly argued this too, predicting in an interview earlier this year that there were no intimate relationships on her horizon. "Who would sign up for this?" she asked of her exposed, whirlwind life and digital ubiquity. She asks it of another, but the question itself projects her own experience and frustrations.

So what are the implications of this philosophic understanding. First, let's note this: If true friends are rare in a lifetime, and if you have cultivated true friends at Villanova, then you are right to be anxious for them and invested in them. They are precious. You may have other true friends, but these particular friends—your Pan, your Lischer, your Sherman, your Sosland—they will not come again. They are dear and you should hold them dear.

But let's go deeper into the question: why should they be rare? Why must they be limited in number? For Aristotle, the answer, perhaps surprisingly, involves time. For him, there is slow accrual of intimacy and familiarity. And you can remember a time, when your closest comrade was once just somebody in your English class or your a cappella group. We do not have all the time in the world to tend to these friendships. We forget our finitude and mortality, that we make just one entrance and one exit, and grow our friendships amid what the *Everyman* play describes as "our lives and endings…How transitory we be all day."

This, however, is a claim about the quantity of time, but there is more in Aristotle, about the quality of our time. In moments that puncture the ordinary and the status quo, there are gestures of friendship that have to be recognized, received, and reciprocated. Aristotle is speaking about epiphanic moments, in which time functions differently and friendships are forged and flashed. Lewis is better on the way that true friendship depends on true time. Here is Lewis's recollection of a walking holiday that he took with J.R.R. Tolkien and other friends. If we were in class, what would you underline in this passage?

> Sometimes he wonders what he is doing there among his betters. He is lucky beyond desert to be in such company. Especially when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions; when four or five of us after a hard day's walking have come to our inn; when our slippers are on, our feet spread out towards the blaze and our drinks at our elbows; when the whole world, and something beyond the world, opens itself to our minds as we talk; and no one has any claim on or any responsibility for another, but all are freemen and equals as if we had first met an hour ago, while at the same time an Affection mellowed by the years enfold us. Life—natural life—has not better gift to give. Who could have deserved it?

Here's what I would underline:

- <u>bringing out all that is best</u>: We are our most complete selves when among our true friends, who elicit aspects of us otherwise inaccessible.
- <u>golden sessions</u>: There are memorable, radiant moments when friendship fully reveals itself.
- <u>something beyond the world</u>: Such moments and such people transcend place.
- <u>an hour ago…mellowed by the years</u>: Such sessions and such friendships also transcend time.
- <u>gift</u>: That these loves are, above all, gift, undeserved gift.

What can't be underlined, but what is just as significant is that this passage takes an older Lewis back to that past "now" again; he is reliving that moment, and his friends are all brought back to life, and there too. What this offers is an account of why we can step back immediately into the graceful banter and still peace of an old friendship. Lewis's claim here is that true friendships touch eternity, and thus become part of eternity, and thus remain accessible in eternity. Such friendships are forged through what someone wiser than me called the "sacrament of the moment"—golden sessions—that elevate friendship beyond any one instance, any one circumstance.

So this is what we're thinking about together, class of 2015: friendship, time, canteloupes.

For true friendship, you need to recognize and respond to those golden sessions, those gifts of time. I hope you leave Villanova having cultivated the ability to know such awe and such wonder. That you can stop and be still—for so much, not just friendship—depends on stopping and being still. Because even though you are not a cantaloupe, the world will constantly treat you like one. It will devour you and your time with anxious busy-ness and glittering distraction, and before you know it, you are just a leftover rind. So guard your time, redeem your time, and as my friend Sosland might have said, hold fast to your sabbaths. I would like to close with a few words from Wendell Berry. This is one of his Sabbath poems, composed during weekly Sunday walks in the woods:

Whatever happens,

those who have learned

to love one another

have made their way

to the lasting world

and will not leave,

whatever happens.

May God bless you and keep you, class of 2015, and may your friends abide with you in your comings and goings, your exits and entrances. And thank you for welcoming me on these last steps of your "hard day's walking."