

Keynote Commencement Speech 2026

Dan Santat



I WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE HERE.

Let me explain.

When I was young I loved to draw. And I made art all the time.

I grew up making art, entering art in county fairs winning ribbons, I made art for my high school yearbook, I painted murals, and drew my own comics.

So when I finished high school I went to college and I got a degree in... Microbiology.

I should have started off by telling you that I actually have two degrees.

You see, my parents wanted me to become a doctor, and I was studying to become a dentist.

My father was a Psychiatrist, my mother was a nurse.

They wanted me to pursue a noble and lucrative profession.

They wanted to make sure I was financially secure.

When I look back on it - I get it. They wanted me to find something safe and dependable.

However, I was not a very good student of science.

If I became a dentist I would have killed hundreds of people. I'm sure of it.

Thankfully, it was my college roommates you encouraged me to apply to art school.

They knew deep inside that I loved making art.

But I was hardwired by my parents to believe that art was just a hobby.

That you couldn't actually make a living doing art

But my friends didn't suggest it to me in that way.

They looked at me and asked "Aren't you curious to know if you're good enough to get into art school?"

So after 4 and a half years of getting a degree that I never wanted,

I finally pursued what I was destined to do.

I went all over town and started finding drawing workshops.

I rushed frantically to make a portfolio in six months.

I applied to art school, I got in.

And on my graduation day when I received my bachelors of science in biology

My parents took me out to dinner to celebrate

My dad looked at me and asked "Are you ready to go to dental school to become a dentist?"

And I stared straight back and answered, "Uh, I got into art school."

And you could just see the level of hurt in his eyes.

And before he could protest I added, "I'm gonna do this whether you like it or not"

And he stopped eating. He looked me in the eyes and said

"I had a dream that you and I would both be doctors some day..."

"But ultimately I just want you to be happy..."

I chose being myself over a safe and steady life.

And now after 26 years I stand before you.

Receiving an honorary doctorate. Doctor Santat.

My parents would have been so so proud.

HERE'S WHERE I IMAGINED MY LIFE GOING (if I stuck to the original plan...)

I think the greatest disservice we do to our nation's youth is ask them to grind all through their adolescent years in hopes of getting into a good college.

Then once you get into that great college we ask you to pick a major that will decide what will inevitably be your entire future.

It's an overwhelming decision. One that could determine your entire future.

And the sad part is that most people probably never have enough time during their childhood to stop and think about what it is they're truly passionate about.

You spend so much of your younger years trying to get into college that you never actually took the time to figure out what you wanted to do when you finally got there.

You never got the chance to truly know yourself or what it was that you truly wanted out of life.

So you just pick something.

Most likely, something practical.

Maybe diving into something you have a mild interest in will unlock what might possibly be a deeper passion for something you didn't realize you truly loved.

Maybe it'll knock something loose. Maybe a few classes might bring you enlightenment

Before you know it you get your bachelors degree, then your masters, (possibly a PHD)

and you get so deep into this field of study that it would feel like time wasted if you didn't inevitably pursue it as a profession with the hope of getting a job.

A job you'll hopefully commit to for the next 45 years. You'll contribute to your 401K, and retire at 65.

A safe and noble profession. Low risk. Predictable. Respectable. Admirable.

But was it something you were passionate about?

Or was it simply good enough?

Slowly over time (say in about 20 years) You MIGHT grow a little weary.

The daily grind.

Doing the same routine over and over and over and over again.

Over time the repetitive days might start wearing a little thin like the sound of a dripping faucet

After many years retirement might start looking like the light at the end of a long tunnel.

The reward becomes NOT doing the thing you studied to do.

You see retirement as a REWARD for all the long years you devoted to a safe and secure life so that you could ultimately get off the hamster wheel of life and FINALLY spend your time doing what you REALLY wanted to do

And what was that thing you REALLY wanted to do?

Did you ever figure that out?

30-40 of the best years of your life devoted to something that was GOOD ENOUGH.

Was it what you truly wanted out of life?

Is this how you dreamed how your life would be like when you were a kid?

PEOPLE WILL TRY TO CONVINCING YOU THAT IT'S SILLY TO PURSUE YOUR PASSION.

Here in America, art is the first thing that gets cut when school budgets are slashed.

We no longer pay for music because we just assume we can get it online for free.

We consume things that's are created by artists but we don't feel obligated to reward those who make it

Today people don't even hesitate for one second to try a brand new AI program that can instantly turn your photo into cartoon art that simulates an image from a Studio Ghibli movie.

They justify it by calling it an homage to honor the artist, but what it really implies, is telling the artist that WHAT YOU DO IS NOT SPECIAL.

We now live in a world where people are now so eager to ask Chat GPT where they should go to lunch, or how to do their jobs, or help them find a date- people seem so eager and willing to give up their humanity.

We ask it to make art,

we ask it to make music,

and we are slowly zombifying ourselves from the very things that bring us joy.

Sadly we don't use this technology to cure diseases or end hunger. We do it to strip ourselves of what makes us human.

But this is exactly why we need art

All throughout history, when you study ancient civilizations it begins with the art.

When you go to a museum you study the paintings and sculptures, you examine mosaics, tapestries, terra cotta pottery, and the patina of the antique furniture to get a better understanding of civilizations that existed centuries ago.

It is all that is left.

It defines a culture.

It's the one aspect of history that lasts.

It is how we are remembered.

Today, there are countries who invest heavily in the arts because it is weaved into the identity of their culture.

Art is considered essential to them.

In Ireland, artists don't have to pay taxes if they make less than 50 thousand Euros a year, and just this year they began a program called the Basic Income for the Arts, which plans to pay 2,000 eligible artists and creative workers a weekly stipend of 350 Euros a week for three years.

In South Korea, (ARKO) The Arts Council of Korea was started in 2005

Its goal was dedicated to spreading the influence of the Korean arts around the world.

After 20 years of hard work and dedication K POP music has established a massive global following,

Korean Dramas are some of the most popular programs on streaming services,

and Parasite was the first foreign drama to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards.

BUT WHAT IS A COLLEGE DEGREE GOOD FOR?

When you talk to people about earning an art degree most folks might scoff.

People might laugh at you.

People will ask, what are you gonna do with an art degree?

But those same people are less critical of a Communications or Anthropology degree because it comes from an accredited university with clout. Both of which have an employment rate of under 12 percent.

Statistics show that only 27% of college graduates move on to do anything related to their college major.

7 out of 10 people in this country end up doing nothing related to what they studied.

So what was the point of college?

I think there's a misperception about the purpose of a higher education

The general opinion is that you go to college to prepare yourself for a new profession

The truth - is that college is here for you to find out who you really are as a person.

I have a microbiology degree that I don't even use but I would go through those 4.5 years all over again to

learn the valuable lesson that I was never meant to be a doctor

Now, here is what you and I have in common...

I bet you knew you loved art when you were really young.

I bet you spent most of your young lives making art.

I bet you got so focused when making art that time disappeared.

I bet making art doesn't feel like work and you would do it on your spare time anyway.

You would make art for free if money wasn't a factor.

It's the thing we do to pass the time. It is the thing we do when inspiration hits, and we need to express ourselves.

It is the thing doctors prescribe for therapy and comfort.

You didn't find your passion. This passion chose you. It was ingrained in your DNA.

And as far back as you can remember holding a crayon - you knew it felt right.

You are the lucky few.

You knew your entire lives what you wanted to do.

And now here you are. A college graduate. Earning a degree doing something that you love.

What makes you special is you knew this five years before I did

Could you see yourself doing it for 30-40 years?

And say you couldn't devote your entire life to it – say you were one of the 70% of people who don't do anything with their college degree- would you still do it to some capacity?

Would it bring you joy? Would it be your hobby? Would it fill your life with meaning?

Is it something you'd do even if you didn't get paid?

And when you retire what do you think you're gonna do with your time?

If you were making art your whole life did you ever feel like you were working?

You earned a degree in a field that you know without question was something you felt born to do.

You pursued your passion.

And that's something very few people in this world have the privilege of experiencing.

NOW HERE'S SOME ADVICE...

I wasn't anything special back in art school. Teachers didn't praise my work. At best I would say I was average.

I still can't draw horses, or hands, or cars, but I still manage

My first job was in video games. I worked on titles like Spider-Man, NHL Hockey, and the very first Call of Duty:Black Ops.

I liked playing video games but I didn't love making video games – the hours were long and I never got to see my family but it paid the bills.

There's no shame in getting a job while you make art.

The famous writer, CHARLES BUKOWSKI worked as a postal worker and a dishwasher, just so he could go home and find time to do write.

Money in the bank will actually make your work better, because if you're no longer concerned about making money with your art then you will no longer sit at your desk staring at your work and asking yourself "Can I sell this?"

Because that would be you compromising.

That would you being untrue to yourself.

Are you making art just for the the money?

Or are you doing it to make something that's truly beautiful?

I spent my first year out of art school redoing my entire portfolio. And I suggest you all do the same.

The best years you actually grow as an artist are the first years you leave art school.

You have a new set of skills, you rely on your own judgement, and you have nothing but time to get your pieces exactly the way you want them to be.

You're not going it for a grade.

You're doing it for yourself and after months of self exploration you will find your voice, and realize that your initial instincts were good this whole time,

but now they are even better with a solid set of foundation skills.

Your first step out of art school is that you need to find yourself.

Life is a series of baby steps.

After a year of making a new portfolio I landed my first two book deal with Scholastic.

A year after that my first book was published. Then a Hollywood agent saw my book, represented my work, and sent me out to pitch show ideas to animation studios.

Two years later I had my own animated series on the Disney Channel. I was working with stars like Miley Cyrus and Zac Effron

Five years out of art school.

I was working at one of the hottest game companies in America, I published my first picture book, and had my own cartoon series.

And it's wasn't because I was better than everyone else. I was average at best.

It was because I worked harder than everyone else.

I kept moving forward.

I truly believe that if anyone wants to make it as an artist it can be made possible if you just agree to continue educating yourself on your craft and keep making art every day.

It doesn't have to all be great, but the experience you gain each time you make something is going to be a lesson on being the best artist you can be.

It is a road less travelled so it will be hard, so I will impart some advice that have been given to me over the years that has proven most useful:

1. **DON'T BE A STYLE.** Roland Young, an advertising teacher of mine and a former creative director of Capitol Records once told me. Do not be a style. Styles evolve over time and will last you maybe 5-8 years at best. Instead, be a problem solver. Look at each project as a problem to solve and use your work to address the problem that needs to be solved. Be malleable so that people will look to you for your creative thinking rather than a slick look. Form follows function.
2. **INVEST IN YOURSELF.** I had a teacher named David Luce who once sat our illustration class down before our painting session and said, "I'm going to point to you and I want you to tell me what you want to do with your art degree" As he went around the room the students replied "background painter- character designer – storyboard artist – layout artist – concept artist – and so on" After he went around the room he paused for a moment and said, "I find it really odd that you spend all this money to get this a amazing art education and you want to use your talent to help build glory in the name of Disney, or Dreamworks, or Activision. Why not spend that time you spend on those companies and use that effort to invest in yourself?" When I was working in video games I was working long hard hours because the company I worked for was dangling my job over my head. The implication was that if I didn't do the job that I was easily replaceable. While there, I was also running my own cartoon show over at the Disney Channel fighting with executives who would give copious notes which were completely absurd. Notes like removing the color pink because it was detracting from the boys market between the ages of 8-12. Over time it was notes like those

that make you question if you even know what you're doing. You question your own judgement and you become filled with self doubt. The only solace I had were the late evenings I had by myself in my studio making picture books. Only answering to myself with an editor and art director gently nudging me in a direction that would only enhance my work for the better. Slowly over time once my children's book career took off, I won multiple book awards. I won the Randolph Caldecott Medal in 2015, The National Book Award in 2023. I've appeared in the New York Times Best Sellers List multiple time. I managed to build my own brand in children's publishing. The question isn't where will my next book project come from. The question becomes, when will Dan Santat's next book come out?

3. **DON'T DO IT FOR THE MONEY.** In 2006 I was at a rooftop party hosted by Disney at San Diego Comic Con. I was surrounded by various well dressed Disney execs while I stood around awkwardly in my spider man t-shirt and baggy cargo shorts sticking out like a sore thumb. Then walks in my hero and idol, STAN LEE. This was before all the Marvel movies were made. He took one look at me and said, "You look like the comic book loving type. What brings you to a party like this?" To say I was a little star struck would be an understatement. For a half hour I talked to him about working at a video game company that didn't respect my time and effort. I told him that I created a cartoon show that I don't feel was my own and was simply made as a vessel to help execs climb up a corporate ladder. I was a new home owner and a father of a new baby boy and money concerns were always on my mind. For a half hour Stan listened to me, blowing off execs who wanted to take a picture with him, "I'll be right with you" he said. "I'm talking with my friend." He empathized with how hard it was to make a living as an artist and he told me this. "Don't work for money. Do what you love and the money will find you. The work you're most passionate about will always be your best work and it will be the thing that everyone values most from you."

Now despite all my success in various creative industries I learned a few things.

I learned that after making video games for seven years I hate making video games.

The hours were awful and I never got to see my family.

After five years in animation I learned.... that I hate Disney executives

They're awful people.

But the one thing I realized with all my heart was that I truly love writing stories for kids.

Within my passion for art I had a deeper more specific passion.

And now, as of this year, I've been writing and illustrating children's books for 21 years.

And the most surprising feeling I've discovered is that I over all that time working –

I now feel far more secure working solely in my freelance career than I ever did working for a company.

No one is dangling my job over my head and no one is giving me ridiculous art notes about pink.

Like David Luce said, "I have invested in myself" and as a result life doesn't feel like a job anymore because I'm living my dream and that's more than I could ever ask for.

Each of you are special.

You each have your own voice, your own ideas, and your own unique perspective on the world.

I see your potential because I see myself in each and every one of you.

And now with your college art degree you all possess the tools to express those ideas to the best of your ability.

And now each of you are about to embark on your own journey.

This is your life.

How do you want to live it?