

Matthias Brandt / Commencement Speech, University of Potsdam 2025

Dear graduates,
dear professors,
esteemed guests,

Let me start by saying: thank you for the invitation. And thank you for having me here today. For letting me share this day with you and contribute a few thoughts.

I promise it won't be too long, and I don't intend to explain life to you. The truth is, I simply couldn't.

I would like to congratulate you, dear graduates.

The fact that we are celebrating your graduation together today shows that you have persevered with your studies. You have asked questions, doubted, worked your way through and are now – let's pretend for a moment – “educated”. Whatever that may mean.

But at least you're one step ahead of me with that. I didn't get as far in my studies as you did. A very long time ago, I was a student of law. I think it was primarily because I was scared of my actual career aspirations – becoming an actor. I had an inkling of the inner turmoil I was about to experience.

Never mind all that, I studied law once. On paper, for several semesters, in reality: exactly three days. That's when I knew: It's not going to happen. The lecture hall was large, the paragraphs were small – and my idea of rushing up the steps of the courthouse as an advocate of justice with a flowing robe had vanished into thin air somewhere on the way between enrollment and the semester kick-off party.

After that, I was certain: It would be complicated and apparently take longer before I could answer the question "What do you do for a living?" in a self-assured way.

I was young, shy, a little strange – I wanted to be seen, but not looked at. I wanted to play, but without being perceived. A difficult mixture, as you can imagine. I'm afraid I've even remained a little faithful to it to this day. But well, at least I knew early on that I had to try to do it my own way. And I don't think that's the worst way to start, perhaps even the only way.

Perhaps, but I hope not (I really hope not), you expect a speech like this to contain a few clever, catchy sentences and life lessons. Some deep truths, recipes, strategies, motivating imperatives. Something along the lines of: "Believe in yourself." Or: "Be the best version of yourself." "Get out of your comfort zone." "Use your full potential." Or, my personal favorite, said with a grim smile: "See it through."

I can assure you of one thing: All my life I never understood why seeing something through holds any value in and of itself. Of course, I have also survived longer phases in which what I was doing seemed pointless to me and was no longer fun at all. Unfortunately, a job and your skills aren't just handed to you for free. However, it was never about seeing it through. I paused many things, took detours, got lost, took wrong turns, broke things off and started others without knowing what it was all leading to. And looking back, it wasn't all that bad most of the time. A lot of things suddenly made sense that I hadn't been able to recognize when I was in the middle of the mess.

There is a quote that has stayed with me for many years.

And if there is anything I would like to impart to you, it is this. You probably know it. It is by an author I greatly admire: Samuel Beckett, and goes like this:

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

You might say now: That's not particularly optimistic. But that is only true at a first, superficial glance. I believe that it is one of the most beautiful thoughts of all. Because it takes the shame out of failure. It means, you don't have to win. You are allowed to fall down. You are allowed to doubt. You are allowed to be wrong. There's just one thing you shouldn't do: give up.

This is actually about a deeply creative process. All artistic work, mine for example, only works in this way. The French philosopher Charles Pépin expresses the same sentiment in a different way: *"The fear of failure is the true enemy of creativity."*

Perhaps it's a good idea to think about the fact that we fail much more often than we succeed. That's just the way it is. That has always been the case. That's the way we humans are. And for that reason alone, it is idiotic not to accept this failure and integrate it into our lives and our work in a constructive way. Nevertheless, for some inexplicable reason, we are constantly being told that we should not go astray. Perhaps it is not the failure itself that is the problem, but rather our growing into a dysfunctional relationship with it because it makes no sense.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not trying to tell you some kind of life optimization nonsense along the lines of "crises are opportunities", and of course, I also prefer immediate success to anything else. I'm just telling you how I experience it and maybe some of you can relate to it. At some point, someone apparently came up with the absurd idea of wanting to virtually abolish what is perhaps the most important learning opportunity of all, namely failure – at least temporarily – and then calling it "efficiency". It didn't work then, of course, and it still doesn't work today, but we're still having to deal with this nonsense all the time.

The "fail better" that Beckett talks about, on the other hand, means something completely different. For us, it can mean that we don't fall silent after an unsuccessful job, but do it better next time. That we don't just leave forever after an argument, but stop, listen, explain ourselves. Or that we say to ourselves after the third, fourth or even tenth failed job application: I'll try again anyway. And please don't worry about how it looks on your CV – no employer who really has what it takes is interested in CVs.

What I want to say: There is no competence without prior incompetence. I even believe that this incompetence is an indication: Pay attention, things are becoming interesting. Perhaps we are at our most human, and therefore at our best, when we don't function perfectly and admit that we don't know something: I can't do it yet. But I'll keep searching. I think that's an adult attitude. To doubt with your head up. To be at a loss without being ashamed of it.

You are faced with a world that is becoming increasingly complicated and in which it is rarely about questions, but almost always about answers. Where everything has to be fast. Loud. Unambiguous. But feel free to linger a little longer on the questions. Refuse to answer if you are not yet sure. Don't make it too easy for others. Be inconvenient, in the best sense of the word. Doubt cleverly. Fail better.

The news is chaotic and scary right now. Wars, climate crisis, digital flooding, social injustice, unpredictable narcissists at the top of the most powerful states – my generation is handing over the world to you in a state that we can be anything but proud of. As far as I am concerned – I can really only speak for myself – I would like to take this opportunity to simply say to you as a representative of that generation: I'm sorry. We, my generation, should have done better. It was our responsibility. Really. But we were apparently too busy with ourselves and didn't think enough about the fact that there was someone else coming after us, namely all of you. That doesn't change anything now – but I think it should be said out loud anyway. If only because "Well, there's nothing we can do" is not a particularly good basis for cross-generational discussion.

But more importantly, we need you now. Not as new, conforming pseudo-optimists. We had plenty of them. We need you as friendly troublemakers who say: "*We will do better than you.* " The world now needs non-conformity and, very importantly, it also needs a sense of humor despite everything that is going wrong. Because sometimes, at least in my experience, a well-timed laugh is the most resistant thing there is.

If you are leaving this university today, then perhaps the most important thing is not necessarily a career plan, but curiosity, wit, and a talent for improvisation. Leave with a backpack full of questions, doubts, and ideals – and hopefully with a few good people at your side. And if you get stuck along the way – which, as I have already mentioned, will happen more than once – then please look around you. Perhaps there is someone sitting next to you who says: "I have no clue either – should we continue along our way together?" That's all you need. That is how the future begins.

Congratulations, dear graduates. With everything that comes next: Just wait and see what surprises lay ahead.

And shake up the world – in the very best sense. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you all the best.