Congratulations to everyone, first off. Everyone in this room is here because they distinguished themselves for being not just gifted, but thoughtful and hardworking. Of course you all know that, but I think this begs the question – what made us put in the effort and time to be Honors students the University will recognize?

Why are we the students who work hard and distinguish ourselves? Everyone does something for a reason – whether it’s thrill-seeking, or devotion to a cause, hedonism or altruism. So maybe we Honors students have a greater sense of responsibility, more curiosity, or more love for the fields we’re studying. Maybe we just have that much more wisdom than all the other students at Iowa. These are fine possibilities. But instead, I’d like to offer up a common theme I’ve noticed among my peers.

The most powerful motivator I’ve seen in my friends is fear. Whether it’s fear for our loved ones, or fear of not fulfilling our greatest potential, or fear of discomfort and shame, people make very big decisions because they’re scared.

Part of the reason I’m an Honors student is that, like many people, I have a very strong fear of failure.

With time and competition from others always at our backs, it’s easy to be locked into the idea that we have to grow up right now, or else. That our decisions here are making or breaking the careers and lives we lead as adults. One of the least wise things a student could do right now is invest his time and heart into something that might be unproductive, or unimpressive, or irrelevant, because that would be childish.

We’re on the crux of starting our adult lives, so there is a misconception that everything we’ve done is in preparation for this singular jump-off point. Mae West said “You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.”

I want you to know that you live as many times as you want to.

Let’s think about this. Our bodies are constantly replacing cells – some live only a few days, while the bones of your body take more around seven to ten years to fully replace. No matter when you were born, the average age of your body is maybe sixteen years old. Just like the question of Theseus’s ship, where its timbers and sails and crew are gradually replaced until none of the original components remain, we can ask whether or not we are still the same people we were years ago.

Has anyone here read Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell? He tells us that it takes 10,000 hours of time invested into something to completely master it. Even if you only spend a few hours in a day pursuing something, you can master something in less than seven years. If I’m 18 years old now, and I live to the average American woman’s lifespan of 82 years, I have nine lives to create, perform, lead, travel, design, explore, or study across the world.
The exciting corollary of that is that you have nine opportunities to redefine yourself, nine chances where another part of you will grow up from childhood and become part of your adult person. And many of you know where you’re going; you won’t need nine chances at life to pick out what you’ll do.

Fear is a survival instinct. It keeps us safe and definitely prudent. And yet, despite everything we’ve accomplished up until now, we don’t have any less fear of what could go wrong. If anything there’s more pressure to aim higher and stand out, avoid risks and distractions, and stick to a thoroughly advised path.

The problem with using your nine lives is that you can’t be afraid to die. Death for some of us may be just growing up into our next self. It may be leaving what we’ve loved for a very long time in order to pursue a new career, ability, philosophy, or place to live. If you never let yourself die, you likely will never really live.

You live as many times as you want to. So Iowa, be motivated by your talents, your beliefs, and the people who support you. Live all of your lives to the fullest. When fear is no longer the limiting factor on that, you are your own person.

Elaine is a Computer Engineering student gearing up to apply to medical school. In addition to old-school video games, she loves her violin however much it rejects her attempts to play it beautifully. Having spent a summer in China learning Mandarin in high school, she plans to study abroad again in either Spanish or Chinese. She has done research in Internal Medicine and currently works as a teaching assistant for the College of Engineering.