Marianopolis College Commencement Address June 13, 2013
By Dr. Beatrice Wang ’83

Good evening. Sister Josephine Badali; members of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame and the Marianopolis College Board of Governors; Class of 2013 and their families and friends; Marianopolis faculty, staff and administrators. It is an honour to be with you here tonight. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at your graduation ceremonies. It is a pleasure coming back to my alma mater, although my time at Marianopolis was in a different building and in a different century.

I dithered a fair bit, trying to decide what I would say to you. My spouse said, “You need a theme.” “Where would I get one?” I asked. He responded, “Watch old Bill Clinton speeches.” There were quite a lot of questions after that on my part, on many levels, besides the fact that the only thing I have in common with Mr. Clinton is that we are both left-handed.

But, the spouse was right, and I finally settled on the theme of choice. This has been a central theme running through my academic career, my professional career and my life, and I have actively, and/or passively, searched it out at every junction.

It was never clear to me what I was going to do with my life. I had always excelled at school, so it was presumed that it would be some honorable profession, but there was always a small element of rebellion on my part to have my future predestined as such. I liked school, but I also loved to draw, write, and read, so I knew I wanted something creative in my career.

So, still unsure, but wanting to keep options open, I chose to enter Health Sciences at Marianopolis. My most treasured classes from that era, however, were my English classes, taught by Dr. Michael Kenneally, now Principal and Chair in Canadian Irish Studies at Concordia University. He taught three out of my four English classes. His classes were invaluable to me for teaching me how to write, and how to analyze writing. This is a skill that transcends all disciplines and has served me well, won me scholarships, fellowships and grants. It has also helped me enjoy more fully, reading other writers’ works, either for pleasure, or working as an editor or reviewer, of my peers’ efforts. I have not, as yet, written my Booker Mann prize-winning novel, but if I ever do, I will have to credit Dr. Kenneally.
My other memorable course from Marianopolis was a course titled The Psychology of the Artistic Experience, taught by Prof. Michael Climan. Doing a little web surfing, I was happily surprised to find out he is still teaching this course. It still is, as it was back then, one of the more popular courses in the curriculum. It was not because I like psychology, but that class opened my eyes to the melding of arts and science and how they were not polar opposites, as I had felt them to be. As most of you know, there is a semester ending project that each student has to create, to demonstrate one’s comprehension of the curriculum. My creation was (and this sorely dates me) the deconstruction of the Rubik’s Cube and reassembling it to form a rosary, the symbol of the new religion of my era, science, not faith.

Maybe it was also a sign to me that science alone was not enough to satisfy me. I graduated from Marianopolis, entered McGill University, initially majoring in Physiology, and after a month in, I went to see my advisor in tears, hating my classes. He was awfully kind, but did not have much to say, except that I did not need to major in Physiology. But he made me sit down and think, and he made me realize that I needed to keep my options open. I was not going to be in a situation whereby, if I did not get into this discipline, I have a Plan B. I was going to put myself in a situation where I would get into all my disciplines of choice, and then be the one to make the decision. To give myself choice, was to give myself control over where my future lay, even if I had no idea where my future was going. It was probably the most important thing I learned in university.

I decided then to enroll in a double major, in Physiology and Art History. It took an extra course load each term, and summer school, to be able to finish in the usual three years, and it was hard work, but because I loved what I was studying (and I felt a lot less resentment about being strictly science), I did well, and enjoyed learning. My plan was to apply to both medicine and architecture, and then decide on my fate. I ultimately chose medicine, but on the faulty logic that only medicine had late nights of work, and it was easier to handle that when I was younger. I could always switch over to architecture later if I did not enjoy medicine. I did not know at the time that architecture is almost worse in terms of pulling all-nighters.

At every juncture, there are career-changing decisions to be made, but as long as you put yourself in a position where you have a choice, you will never feel that you have burned all your bridges once a choice has been made. When it came time to choose a specialty, I had by default decided on pediatrics. I do not think I had any good reasons for it and honestly was not very excited about it. It was my very last elective in medical school, dermatology, where it suddenly hit me that this was what I wanted to do in life. It really turned out to be the culmination of basic science, the visual training learned in art history now used to make diagnoses, the artistic eye and hand required to surgically repair the skin cancers I cut out, as well as to recreate lost beauty. I think my
past studies also made the selection committee feel that I was an ideal candidate and I was able to make a switch in residencies the next year.

I had never heard of dermatology before I took the elective, certainly never heard about it in high school, CEGEP or undergraduate school (and only ever had mild acne). However, the strategy, whether deliberate or just out of stubbornness, to keep my options open and always trying to learn and study about subjects that interested me, not just ones I thought would lead to a successful career, brought me ultimately to my success in my career.

You are all brilliant students: you were smart enough to get into Marianopolis; you are also smart enough to get out. For some, you may have had a goal in life since you were five years old; the rest of us know we want to do well, but we are not sure how. What you all have given yourselves, by your intelligence, drive and hard work, is the gift of being able to make choices for your future. Choice can mean confusion, but it can also mean freedom and ultimately control over one’s destiny. There may be wrong choices made, but if you are prepared, they can be changed. And on that, I think, Bill Clinton would agree. I wish you all the best of luck and, most importantly, happiness in your future. Thank you.