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It's graduation time. Some see it as the end of an era but I prefer the term commencement. Whether it is kindergarten, high school or college, graduation signals a new beginning. A new chapter filled with opportunities and adventures. However, you don't need a diploma to start anew. All you need is the desire to reinvent and discover the next you. As you dive into that adventure, here are a few simple suggestions to make it the best it can be:

Be yourself. Be good at it. Be proud of your strengths and talents and built on them. Be aware of your weaknesses and find ways to improve or compensate. You don't have to be perfect to be wonderful. Embrace the whole you. There is nothing so captivating as confidence.

Be as smart as you can be. Daisy Buchanan was wrong; a beautiful little fool is not the best thing a girl can be in this world. Or a boy for that matter.

Be brave. Fear of failure, fear of success, fear of the unknown, heights or public speaking; whatever the variety, never let fear get the best of you. Defy it. Overcome it. It's hard to live a whole life if fear is holding you back.

Be a good person. Even one is one too many bullies so be kind to strangers, considerate to colleagues and loving and loyal to friends and family. What legacy will you leave behind? What could be better than people who were touched by you, care about you, love and admire you?

My brother was born funny. Not all of us are so lucky. You may never become a comic but you can appreciate wit in others and tell the occasional joke or clever story. Cultivate a sense of humor and laugh every day.

If you have an opportunity to travel or, better yet, live abroad; take it. If not, make the opportunity. Not everyone thinks the way you do or lives like you or wants to think and live like you. Getting up close and personal with other cultures will open your eyes, make you think, consider and reconsider your priorities.

It's okay to fail. Just make sure you spend some time to figure out what worked and what didn't. Failure is not proof of incompetence or a reason to retreat. It is an occasion to learn and grow.

Assume you'll get caught. If not this time, then the next time. Or the time after that. If it could land you in jail, get you fired or hurt you or someone else; it's probably a bad idea.

It's okay to fumble around a bit. Chances are more than good that you won't wake up one morning with all the answers. Expect to evolve and grow with new experiences, triumphs and mistakes. Embrace your changing world and changing self. You will have moments, days, even months of uncertainty as you figure out your goals and how best to reach them.

Wear red. My mother's favorite was bright red lipstick. Whether it was in style or out, she wore it every day with pride. I'm partial to shoes – shiny patent leather flats or sneakers are my two favorites. Life is too short (and some days too difficult) to live it without red shoes.

Good luck and bon appétit!




Coconut Cupcakes

Need a festive dessert idea for someone's (maybe your own) commencement celebration? These coconut cupcakes will make a delicious addition to the party table. Enjoy!

Makes about 18 regular cupcakes or 50 minis

1 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
 2 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1 1/2 cups sweetened, shredded coconut
 3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) butter, at room temperature
 1/2 cup granulated sugar
 1/2 cup brown sugar
 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
 3/4 cup coconut milk
 1 egg
 Garnish: more coconut, slivered almonds and chocolate chips



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line muffin tins with paper liners.

Put the flour, baking powder, nutmeg and salt in a bowl and whisk to combine. Add the coconut and whisk again.

Put the butter and sugar in a large bowl and beat on high speed with an electric mixer until fluffy. Add the vanilla and egg and beat on high speed until smooth. Reduce the speed to low and add the dry ingredients and coconut milk alternately in 2 batches, beginning and ending with the dry ingredients and mixing until just combined.

Fill the paper liners 2/3 full with batter. Bake at 350 degrees for 20-25 minutes for regular cupcakes and 12-15 minutes for minis or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Cool the cupcakes completely. Generously frost the cupcakes. If you like, toast the coconut and almonds. Garnish the frosted cupcakes with coconut, almonds and chocolate chips.

Cream Cheese Frosting

8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) butter, at room temperature
 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
 About 4 cups confectioners' sugar

Put the cream cheese and butter in a large bowl and beat with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth, add the vanilla extra and beat to combine.

Slowly add the confectioners' sugar and beat until well combined. Increase the mixer speed and continue beating for 2-3 minutes or until the frosting is light and fluffy.

