

Commencement Address
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UMSL College of Arts and Sciences I

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You always can tell what your thoughts would do in bringing you hate or love – because thoughts are things and their airy wings are swift as a carrier dove. They follow the law of the universe that everything recreates its kind, and they speed over the track to bring you back whatever went out from your mind.

Distinguished guests and faculty of the University of Missouri–St. Louis – let me take you on my journey at this university. May it illuminate some areas of your minds on how no matter how different we are on the outside, we are the same inwardly. After graduation of 1969 at Charles Sumner High School, I felt fortunate that I had master teachers who had drilled excellent study habits into my then juvenile skull. Without them, I may have succeeded at Forest Park Community College but not at UMSL. While testing the waters of higher education at community college, I applied for grants and loans to attend UMSL.

Having achieved both a grant and loan, I joined the student body in August 1971. I found myself confronted with academic work at a new level. Rumors circulated UMSL was the mini Harvard of the Midwest. Campus life was much more intense than at community college in nearly every way. I met the challenges of academic and social adjustments excitedly! UMSL professors took no prisoners. They expected focus and critical thinking on a level that was entirely new to me. I remember vividly, my freshman year, that I took a Black Studies course. My midterm grade – a D! I didn't know whether to be outraged or embarrassed. What about both? I thought I was answering the questions correctly on the midterm exam, but my history professor thought otherwise. I realized from sitting in consultation with him that I was giving my own point of view on things – forget what the lecture notes said or the required readings. My point of view was all that mattered. As I walked across campus later, I reflected, “Well, what do you know? I'm getting an education.”

My second home became the Thomas Jefferson Library. I uncovered some universal secrets hidden in plain view, “A person with no knowledge of themselves or their culture is like a tree with no roots; People don't plan to fail. They fail to plan.” To stay true to my goals while at UMSL, I had to employ purpose, patience, confidence and courage. Professors helped. Friends and family helped. But it was ultimately work I had to do for myself. The university years added a philosophical layer to my personality. I was learning about concepts and literary figures from history I had never heard of before. My studies were challenging but my extracurricular experiences were intense also. Within a year, I became chair of the black student union organization – the Association of Black Collegians. While passing through the cafeteria, I was stopped by an instructor who asked me to apply for the Metropolitan Leadership Program – a fellowship funded through the Danforth Foundation. A total of 300 students applied for 13 fellowships. The competition was held at St Louis University and lasted four days. We participants went from room to room sitting in interviews with college professors and Danforth Foundation officials. Each of the 13 winners would get a \$10,000 stipend over a two-year period while attending any college or university in the St Louis area. The fellowship was for the 1973–74 school years and included 2 summer internships in an agency that was related to our major areas of

study. At the time, I decided to major in journalism. One of my heroes was CBS anchor Walter Cronkite who, to me, personified the finest example of broadcast journalism in America.

My sights were set on the University of Missouri Columbia School of Journalism, but when I realized the fellowship had to be local, I revised my plan. If I won a fellowship, I would major in US history at UMSL and take journalism classes. On the afternoon of the 4th day of the competition I remember I had only a quarter in my pocket. Officials said they would contact us by special delivery registered mail late that Friday afternoon. After my last class at UMSL, I arrived home at noon and slumped onto the sofa.

As I fell into a light nap, I heard a knock at the door! It's show time! The mailman instructed me to sign for a registered letter. As he walked away, I sat on the front steps of my apartment. It was May, 1973. I held the letter, trying to divine its contents. Slowly opening the envelope, I unfolded the letter and began reading...

“Dear Mr. Norfolk, Congratulations! You have been chosen as a recipient of the 1973–1974 Metropolitan Leadership Program Fellowship from the Danforth Foundation!”

My internships followed my journalism study. The first summer was with Proud Magazine. The next internship was with the St. Louis Sentinel Newspaper owned by Howard B. Woods. The last internship was with the St. Louis American Newspaper where I earned my press pass and became a feature writer. My fondest memory was doing a feature story on attorney Frankie Muse Freeman from the US Commission on Civil Rights. My solace and comfort in my junior and senior years at UMSL was the powerful and spiritual music of the rock group Earth Wind & Fire. The study of metaphysics and political satire entered my worldview as I wandered lost in the wilderness of what to do after graduation. May 1976, in my senior year on campus, I was told by a friend that positions were opening up at the Gateway Arch for National Park Service Rangers. They were seeking to hire people to work in the newly-opened Museum of Westward Expansion. Because of my strong background and knowledge of US history honed and crafted at UMSL, the meeting with the chief Ranger must have been effective. After a one-hour interview, he asked, “Can you start work tomorrow?”

So, in 1976, I “stopped out of college” and began a 10-year career with the National Park Service with work as a standup comedian as a moonlighting gig. More life lessons were to follow – such as deeper research into the study of US History as well as psychology, philosophy, and the inner workings of the human brain and the mind to which it is connected. I found the greater journey is not outer space but the Inner Space of the subconscious mind. I studied the works of Carl Jung – synchronicity and archetypes. While an NPS Ranger, in May 1981, a group of visionaries decided to start a storytelling festival in St Louis that would celebrate the power of story. The venue they chose was the Gateway Arch Museum and Old Courthouse where I worked. The sponsoring organization of the storytelling festival – UMSL! I did not seek storytelling; it sought me.

It bothered me to no end that I had “stopped out of college,” so I spoke with one of my favorite history professors, Dr. Louis Gerteis, and did the necessary work and study to satisfy my requirements to obtain my bachelor's degree of general studies at UMSL in 2003. That brings us, friends and family, to May 2018. I leave you with an historical legacy and roadmap for the next few years – become a walking question mark. As in journalism, check multiple sources. When in doubt, go to the library. The famous British author, Neil Gaiman, once gave a keynote for the American Library Association and famously said: “Google can give you 100,000 answers, but a librarian can give you the correct one.”

Each generation living today has had distinct challenges and obstacles to face and surmount. A wise historian said the so-called greatest generation – people born in the 1920s – had to endure the Great Depression then World War II. Ordinary citizens fought and died in defense of freedom, ensuring the success of democracy in the world. The Boomer generation came along – 1946 to 1964 – and was confronted with the assassinations of John F Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, The Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and Watergate. Generation X showed up – 1965 to 1980 – highlighting the oncoming of latchkey kids. Those who came home to an empty house because both parents worked or were divorced. They were raised in the transition phase of “written-based knowledge” to “digital computer knowledge” by the time they hit middle or high school. With Gen. X, AIDS began to spread and was the first lethal infectious disease in the history of any culture on Earth which was not subjected to any quarantine. The core problems in schools were narcotics like heroin cocaine and crack. Also, credit card debt became rampant. Generation Y came along – 1980 to 2000 – the Millennials. They had to begin living with the thought of being shot in school. Everything became scheduled. Soccer moms became a prominent term. This generation was put under more enormous academic pressure than other periods of time. Preference was digital literacy as they grew up in a digital environment. The term “Old School,” regarding the Boomer Generation, was coined. They were nurtured by omnipresent parents and got all of their information and most of their socialization from the internet.

With that unlimited access to information, they tended to be very assertive with strong views. The research concludes with Generation Z – born after 2001. Researchers found, with the advent of computers and web-based learning, children are starting to leave behind toys at a younger age – Kids Growing Older Younger. As these children reached age 4 or 5 and old enough to play on computers, they have less interest in toys but desire cell phones and video games. Intuitive historians have written that the forces of tyranny and world dominance have not gone away. They are now international and much more subtle – taking advantage of our dependence on technology in cyberspace and the desire for credit convenience. They seek to centralize all technological growth into the hands of a few so their economic positions can be safeguarded and the future evolution of the world controlled.

Futuristic historians write that democracy must be guarded now with the next step in freedom’s evolution. We must use the power of our vision and expectations that flow out from us collectively as a constant field of thought emanating in Light, Life, and Love. This power is stronger than many people realize and must be mastered and put to use before we reach a tipping point. As Darth Vader put it, “Never underestimate the power of the Force!”

I leave you with a poem that mysteriously found me as I was preparing my keynote at a storytelling conference in Cambridge Massachusetts several years ago. Six humans trapped by happenstance in bleak, bitter cold – all possessed a stick of wood or so the story is told. Their dying fire in need of logs, the first man held his back – for of the faces around the fire, he noticed one was black. The next man sitting across the way saw one not of his church – he couldn’t bring himself to give his stick of birch. The next man sat in tattered clothes and gave his coat a hitch – why should his log be put to use to warm the idle rich? The rich man sat and thought of the wealth he had in store – and how to keep what he had earned from the lazy shiftless poor. The black man’s face bespoke revenge as the fire passed from his sight – for all he saw in his stick of wood was a chance to spite the white. The last of his forlorn group did naught except for gain – giving only to those who gave was how he played the game. Their logs held tight in death’s still hands was proof of human sin – they didn’t die from the cold without; they died from The Cold Within!