

Commencement Address
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College of Nursing
School of Social Work
UMSL/Washington University Joint Undergraduate Engineering Program

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Thank you for that wonderful welcome – To Chancellor Tom George, Sharon Johnson, Joseph O’Sullivan – dear friend Dr. Susan Dean-Baar, to the UMSL alumni – the many parents and grandparents, siblings, and of course to the class of 2017, hello to all.

I thank you so much for inviting me to share in the commencement of your hard work and dedication. To share in the celebration of the passion you have displayed for education, and to share in YOUR moment as you make another mark in your journey line of life. I am significantly humbled and honored by this moment as I am proud to say it is a mark in my journey line as well. This particularly mark for me has forced reflection and thought as well as stress, a bit of nausea and more than a couple sleepless nights, something I believe you are all too familiar with!

I have made every attempt to find one piece, one story, one moment that has made a difference for me. After hours of pondering I continued to come up with the same piece, the same moment, the *same* story. I have chosen to talk to you today about courage and the art of bravery.

In the words of the great Nelson Mandela -

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

In my first year of nursing school on one of my first rotations I was scheduled to observe and assist with an art class at a court appointed center for young teens who were struggling to find their space in life. Upon entrance into the building we were escorted to an office where I first met Dr. Lawrence Jackson. A very tall thin man, dark black skin and dark thick hair and the most wonderful suit I have ever seen. He also smelled amazing and was incredibly intimidating. I was with a fellow student. We sat in his office and listened as he imparted the rules of the day, and sent us off. We were given instructions to return to his office at 3:00.

The day was a wonderful learning opportunity. I was exposed to children and the struggles they were facing in health, literacy, behavior health, economic, some with parents in their lives

and some without. I had the distinct privilege of spending quality time with children who were growing up different than I had and I found the day to be not only educational but validating of the path I had chosen to serve the community.

The entire day was incredible. I had the pleasure of meeting the most amazing educators and leaders who showed us in a very brief amount of time how it IS possible to change the world, you just have to believe you can do it. I witnessed their courage to take on the cumbersome system they had chosen to serve in, as well as the many challenges the students presented. At the end of the day, as instructed we went back to the office of Dr. Lawrence Jackson, and I remember saying that over and over as I was very nervous as I was young and new at this clinical thing, no one had instructed us on the proper manner in which to address such a man, ... just DR ???? ...Dr. Jackson???...Mr. Jackson? I decided my best bet was: Dr. Lawrence Jackson.

My fellow student and I sat in chairs directly in front of his desk and oddly I remember thinking his office is so small which made us geographically close together. He then said to us, "tell me - one at a time about your day". The student next to me started to methodically talk about where he had traveled and work he had assisted. Then my turn and I began to just talk about the children I had met and the amazing teachers I had the privilege to watch. I talked about the many things I had learned from the children as I just listened to all they wanted to share, and at times I delivered a hug or two.

After our day review, we both stood up and before we walked out Dr. Lawrence Jackson said "I have a very special gift for you if you can answer this question correctly. I would like to know, who do believe can help change the lives of these children, who can help them believe in themselves as they choose the path they will walk? Who do you believe is smart enough and strong enough and compassionate enough to make a difference in this world?"

Silence.....Hmmm I thought knowing what I wanted so say so desperately but not having the courage to do it I just mumbled a bit.

My fellow classmate quickly said George Bush – after all he was the president of the United States, he should be able to make a difference. That answer made me think even harder.

Again, I KNEW what I **wanted** to say and tried so hard to say it. A big gasp and then out of mouth came - Vernadine Mitchell. She was a leader at Christian Hospital and one of my mentors and someone I looked up to as I witnessed her strength and her ability to change the lives of others every day.

Dr. Lawrence Jackson looked completely disappointed in both of us and said "thank you for your time and assistance today." I did feel as if we had let him down opposite of the moment at the end of Willy Wonka when Charlie puts the everlasting gob stopper down and the elation

from Willy. There was no elation from Dr. Lawrence Jackson. We both stood up and began to walk out of the office. As my arm passed by his desk he reached his large strong hand out and grabbed my wrist. "What was your first answer? For one quick moment I believed you were going to say what I wanted to hear." I just looked at him and again and said nothing, he then stated "the answer is YOU. I so wanted to hear you stand up and say ME! I can change the world, I will make a difference!"

I smiled at him and could not bring myself to tell him that WAS the first thing that popped in my head. I wanted so badly to say me.

Then I heard him say – 5 seconds of courage Jennifer is all it takes to change your life and the lives of other. Now you go find **your brave!**

I can say that over the years I have struggled with finding my brave. It is not easy as at times- the risk seems so high. Am I wrong, can I do it, am I that smart? Am I that strong? What if people make fun of me? Or isolate me? All questions that come up when I am faced with a decision that requires a bit of courage, I always try to remember Dr. Lawrence Jackson. I take a slow 5 sec deep breath in...and I find **my brave!**

As I stand before you all of you ----- you have all succeeded in the areas of social work, engineering and nursing, you will all have moments in your future where you can show **your brave.**

Find your brave and embrace failure.

As Thomas Edison stated as he struggled to invent the light bulb, "I have not failed! I have found 10,000 ways not to do it."

It does take courage to be the only one in the room who believes that something will work or to be the only one who is willing to try and fail and then try again and again. It is certainly the path less traveled that represents the ability to truly create a new path. It is **the** only way change happens and it can be a bit lonely in this space as it is not comfortable to change, so those who have not found their brave will not want to be in this space with you. As stated by Chris Cebollero - experience comes from mistakes and mistakes come from lack of experience. You must experience the mistake to make the miracle.

Find your brave as you take risks in your future.

I recently had a conversation with a colleague who stated to me "I am not like you, Jennifer. I am very afraid to crawl out on a branch without knowing if it is going to break and you are so comfortable there." My response to her was success or failure is never based on the branch breaking. It is only in the assessment of the process or lack of assessment that can prove

success or failure. It is the process of climbing out on the branch, to taking a moment to actually see the world from a different perspective then you can measure success even if only for one quick second, prior to crashing to the ground you have learned something new, you must then now find strength to get back up, and do it again. It may even be possible that the branch was old and dead and by crashing to ground you gained perspective on the event and process, and forced change that now has allowed more branches to sprout in its place with new life and new hope!

Find your brave as you support and protect diversity:

We are all a piece of this large puzzle we live in, and when you witness unkind behavior, whether that be related to race or status, to gender or sexual orientation, to positions of power, to geographic location, we all must **stand up.** As we teach our children in school from a very early age that behaviors of bullying and aggression are not acceptable, we must not accept these behaviors from adults as adults; that those exhibiting these behaviors in many cases have not found their brave.

Find your brave as you make a difference in the world:

Believe that you can make a difference. **Believe** that each and every one of you are incredibly important – you will have the experience of walking into a room, maybe full of CEO's, maybe full of physicians, maybe full of professors and instantly you find yourself shrinking a bit. That is a perfect moment to find your brave - to take a deep breath and introduce yourself or ask to sit next to someone and begin a conversation, take that moment to be courageous.

You all have pushed through challenges and hurdles, you have gained knowledge and skill, you have been successful in pursuing your dreams, you are now prepared to walk this stage and celebrate that work!!!!

As I conclude tonight I would like to take a moment to say “well done you”.

I will leave you with the words of Harry S. Truman:

Men make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.

To the class of 2017 – my hope and blessing for you is that you all FIND YOUR BRAVE

Thank you.