

UMSL Commencement Address

**Dec. 20, 2014,
College of Arts and Sciences Ceremony**

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Thank you, Chancellor George, Provost Cope, Dean Yasbin, and the Faculty of the College of Arts & Sciences. And, congratulations to you, the Class of 2014.

I am humbled and honored to have been asked to speak to you today. And believe me, that is not a platitude. You are going to start shaping the world in which my daughter – who I care about more than anything else in the world – will live. So as a parent, as a father, I have a vested interest in what you will do and who you will be. This makes me very glad you chose to come to UMSL.

This is a tremendous institution, one I am proud to be associated with. But without students, a university is just a bunch of buildings. What gives UMSL its value is you: the next generation of our collective aspirations - the future.

But the future is shaped by the present. So a question, perhaps the question, you should be asking is, “what now?”

There are a number of traditional ways of answering that question. Graduate school, start my career, take a trip. Your parents are probably hoping the answer is not, “move back in.”

You could choose any of these options. But that’s not how I think you should frame the question. If you do, you’ll simply be following the same well-worn path. But it’s very tempting, isn’t it, especially when the path promises success. We are blessed to live in a country that is prosperous, that is more dominant on the global stage than any nation in the history of the world. And we’ve accomplished this through inculcating a set of particular values: strong work ethic, competition, ambition, education, a focus on measurements and metrics. The results of these values speak for themselves. They have produced the one and only superpower nation in the world.

But in case you hadn’t noticed, the world is a mess. Globally, the established international order is being challenged, and the post-WWII concept of peace and security through shared prosperity is being called into serious question. Domestically, we are riven by issues like inequality, privacy, and immigration. And of course locally, we are still wading through the aftermath of Ferguson, trying to make sense of what happened and what we must do if any real change is to come out of it.

I don't know what the answers are to these challenges. But I can promise you this: they will not magically disappear on their own. They will not "work themselves out." If we have learned anything from Ferguson, it's that problems that are ignored evolve into crisis. We must also understand that none of these challenges can be overcome simply by allocating resources or through erudition. UMSL has a phenomenal criminology program, but you won't resolve Ferguson just through policing. Inequality won't be solved just by raising the minimum wage. We cannot think or buy our way out of these problems, because they all contain an inescapable component of human degradation, whether it be classifying immigrants as a plague or blacks as thugs.

And that is why my central message today, my plea, really, is that when you ask yourselves "what now," you think first not about what you want to do, but who you want to be. If you're not constantly making that the central question of your life, you will allow yourself to be defined by the tasks you accomplish and the goals you meet. That's what the world will want from you. But what the world needs from you is compassion.

When we don't have compassion, it becomes all too easy to believe, if only subconsciously, that some lives are more valuable than others. How could we come to any other conclusion if we allow our self-worth to be directly connected with the things we achieve and the things we own?

Let me be clear. I am not telling you that you shouldn't strive to do well in your work or to be ambitious. Your time at UMSL has provided you the tools to be successful in the world, and has given you the basis to make significant contributions in whatever field of endeavor you pursue. You should take advantage of the enormous gift that is education, and do well.

But, if your highest aspiration is to get a job, if your loftiest goal is to make good money, you're selling all of us short. We need you to be more.

This is a message that was always drilled into me by my parents. They were Cuban refugees who fled to the United States when the Castro regime took power. My mother escaped religious persecution and my father was being hunted down after his family fought back against the communists that had thrown them off their land. They came to this county with nothing, but made a life for themselves, and for me. My father, to this day, reminds me that as someone who benefitted from opportunities that were given to me, I have an obligation to do everything in my power to create opportunities for others. And my mother, she preached servant leadership long before that concept ever came into vogue. She deeply believes that we are defined by our willingness to give as much priority to the needs of others as we give to our own. When I was where you are right now and about to graduate, in my case from Loyola New Orleans, I was grappling with my own "what now" moment, thinking about where I was headed and what I would do, and she told me not to lose sight of the important questions. "What you'll do could be any number of things," she told me. "The real question is who will you be? Who will you care about? Who will you help?"

I've subsequently come to understand that figuring out the answer to those questions is the only path to finding true meaning in our lives. And I think it starts with recognizing the commonalities in our shared humanity. We all have won the "life lottery." Against all odds, somehow you and I have come into being. I was recently watching a YouTube video by the astrophysicist Neil deGrass Tyson. He was describing the known universe and its age, and he said, "The universe is 13.8 *billion* years old. And here you are, right now. This is your moment."

This is your moment. And we need you to grasp it. You all came to UMSL for many different reasons but I'm asking you to leave with one purpose: to be compassionate; to care about others; to have a stake beyond yourself in this world that we all share.

Edgar Allen, the founder of Easter Seals, said, "Your life and mine are valued not by what we take...but by what we give." Make this your mantra, and you will bring honor to yourself and your alma mater, and you will be successful in the most meaningful of ways. Thank you, and good luck to the Class of 2014.