

Commencement Address
Saturday, December 14, 2019, 10 a.m.
College of Education
College of Nursing
School of Social Work

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UMSL Graduates, it is my true privilege to be here with you on one of the most memorable days of your life. Congratulations!

Thank you, Dr. Dean-Baar, for the invitation and for your leadership in the profession of nursing – you have become a cherished partner. Thank you, Chancellor Sobolik, campus leaders, faculty and staff, and loving family members and friends for making this day possible for all of us.

WELCOME new nurses, teachers, and social workers, and huge kudos to those who have further advanced their scholarly journey. We need you and are blessed to have you. I am honored to be part of your celebration.

So, it is December 2019...you've waited for this day for a long time... the end of this part of your learning. Let me share a learning journey I took recently to prepare for this day. On December first, I lit the fireplace, put on inspirational music and read all the best commencement speeches from 2019. Some were just too good to keep to myself.

The most shocking and wonderful address was given by billionaire investor, Dr. Robert F. Smith, who pledged from the stage at Morehouse College, to pay off the loans of the entire graduating class, an estimated \$40 million! Sorry for setting you up for even a second... this one won't be that shocking or generous. Smith's challenge was, "don't sit around waiting to be invited to change the world. Act. Your time is now!" He helped launch them that day. Someone helps launch each of us. Be open to finding that person, your mentor.

Oprah is always a smash as a commencement speaker. What resonated most with me in her message to Colorado College grads was that the "most important thing is how you're touching other people's lives ... The truth being, you cannot fix everything ." But you can make a lot of things better by being "in service to life." By speaking up, showing up, standing up and sitting in.

She reminded those folks that, in service, we will volunteer, we will vote, we will shout out. Social Workers, Nurses and Educators, we need you to stand up and SHOUT OUT for what you know is right! No one is better prepared than you!

Actress, Glenn Close, reminded a crowd at The College of William & Mary to "spend less time looking into screens and more time looking into each other's eyes."

“Your perspective is unique. It’s important and it counts. Don’t waste too much time wondering what everyone else thinks of you.” Good thoughts. Hard to do. But try to look at and listen to people. It’s important to determine when really being present can make the difference between failure and success.

Sonia Sotomayor at Manhattan College last May told her listeners, “Education has a greater value than money. It is deeply important to our growth as people and as a community.” She stated, “I am often asked if I ever imagined as a child being on the highest court in the United States. ‘No,’ I say, ‘My family was poor. No lawyer or judges lived in my neighborhood. I knew nothing about the Supreme Court ... You cannot dream of becoming something you do not know about. You have to learn to dream big. Education exposes you to the possibilities the world has to offer.” I’ll bet Robert F. Smith dreamed big as a kid...which led to his opportunity to help an entire graduating class! You, UMSL Graduates, are well on your way to big dreams that are possible!

My personal favorite message came from Hamdi Ulukaya, CEO of Chobani (yogurt), who spoke at Penn’s Wharton School of Business. He told folks, “Put all of your passion into doing good things. In fact, there is no other field like it. In business class, you learned about ROI – return on investment. You should also know about ROK – return on kindness. With ROK, you can immediately see results.” Ulukaya went on to ask the new Wharton leaders to “be the type of person, be the leader that other people want to sacrifice for. Ask others for advice, no matter their jobs. And listen—really listen—to their answers.”

His address took me back to the leadership lesson of JFK and the janitor. Story goes – in 1961, when President Kennedy visited NASA, he met a janitor and asked him, “What do you do here?”

The janitor replied, “I’m helping put a man on the moon.” That guy really got it! He understood the vision and his part in it. He had purpose and obviously felt valued. The President was humble enough to have asked, he listened, then passed on what he learned from the janitor to being connected to a vision. By now you must be asking, “Does this lady have any leadership lessons of her own?” I do.

Reading these inspiring speeches made me sit and recall what I believe to be the most fundamental element of success: knowing, accepting, then learning to love yourself...with all of the flaws and unique gifts that make up the special individual you are. Unless you know how to be in a healthy relationship with yourself, regardless of what the rest of the world throws at you, you cannot be a good partner, team member or leader.

In relationship with self and others, the things I’ve found invaluable are knowledge, acceptance, forgiveness, honesty, patience and love. You might have heard, from a very old book, that “the greatest of these things is love.”

Succeeding was always fun and I have had a decent share of success, but failure is where I learned the most. As a kid, I wanted to be a wife, mother and nurse. As a young woman, I was surprised to end up a single parent when my husband left. So, I was thrown into my first real challenging leadership role – head of household. I had gone back to school at age 42, but dropped out due to finances and a total lack of self-esteem. Then kindness stepped in... strangers showed up to help.

One of my professors contacted me and said, “Trust me, you need this degree more than you know. Even if you can’t do it now, you must do it. And I will help you get there. Call when you’re ready.” Oddly, another professor who lived close by pushed a note into my mailbox saying she’d tutor me and help in any way she could if I chose to come back to the public health program. She said, “You are a strong woman and can do this.” These teachers really didn’t know me, but like many who devote their life to education, they lived and breathed acts of kindness.

I returned to grad school. There I learned that I could trust myself and others. Life showed me that being left by a spouse didn’t mean being alone, and I vowed to never again allow anyone else to control my sense of well-being. A saying goes, “Happiness is an inside job. Don’t assign anyone else that much power over your life.” It’s hung in my office for years.

In the spring of 1995, I wrote down my goals – to become financially independent and to always take care of me and my children. I told myself often that I wasn’t a failure because I was no longer a wife. In fact, I learned more about who I was during those “alone” years than I could have ever learned as half of a couple.

Well-educated, I was ready for a new life. I was the first in my family to earn a master’s degree...and that gave me more than expanded professional opportunity; it gave me back my confidence. It gave me a chance to “pay it forward” and do for others what those professors did for me. My ROK is to actively mentor over 20 people. I eventually tell them my story. I used to be embarrassed by some things being poor led me to do. Today I am grateful that being poor taught me what being rich was really about.

Back to commencement addresses for a moment, I came across Ronan Farrow, the New Yorker journalist who helped bring the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations to light. He told the class at Loyola Marymount University, “... no matter the career you choose, you will likely face a moment where you have absolutely no idea what to do. In that moment, be generous with yourself, and trust your inner voice.” Farrow said, “More than ever we need people to be guided by their own sense of principle—and not the whims of a culture that prizes ambition, sensationalism, celebrity, vulgarity, and doing whatever it takes to win.” He continued, “because if enough of you listen to that voice—if enough of you prove that this generation isn’t going to make the same mistakes as the one before—then doing the right thing won’t seem as rare, or as hard, or as special.”

I trust you, UMSL graduates, to be my voice when I am too old and tired to stand up and shout out at the world to do what’s right. I trust you to protect the things I value most and create the world that my six granddaughters deserve.

In any aspect of life, we never have just one chance to succeed. Every one of you must think of yourselves as leaders – if not already, then starting right now. Your degrees aren’t what will make you leaders, nor will your job titles or salaries – it’s your mindset. And it is timing.

My lesson about patience, and it’s connected to knowing yourself and accepting wherever you are in life, dates back to when I was a staff nurse at Barnes Hospital responsible for infection prevention. I was in school full time, raising kids alone and I was maxed out. A director offered me a management opportunity, thinking that, with a near-degree in Epidemiology, I’d be the right person for the job.

Although complimented, I was scared to death that, if I took the job at that time, I wouldn't have the bandwidth to succeed. Yet it was a step toward my goal of financial independence. I listened to that little voice in my head that said, "Trust me, this is not the time to become a manager" and turned the job down, certain I'd never have another chance to become a leader.

A year later, I was the first manager hired for the new BJC Health System. Today I have the privilege of caring for the well-being of over 18,000 patient care team members. Be patient. Trust your inner voice, it will take you where you need to go.

My final words to you on December 14th are about love. We never have just one love in life. As the song goes, "Love is all around us." It is the greatest gift we can give and receive. Love is an interesting word with many meanings, but universally it is a language we all know first and hope for most at the end of our lives.

In the workplace, we shy away from considering love as an organizational core value. Yet, it is at the core of who most of us are. I use that word often. I interview someone and ask myself, "Could I LOVE this person as a team member? Nursing, Education, Social Work...are all based on love. When someone can't afford their medication or a ride home from the hospital, I hurt. I'm in pain when I realize that a person whose first language is not English is frightened and doesn't understand what's happening. My heart fills with joy when I see a family around the bedside of a 90 year old, loving them up one last time.

In the end, it won't be about how many degrees you've earned, or how much money you've made. People will remember how well we loved. Social work, education, nursing. This is love. If love is one of your core values, if you're not afraid to use your heart when making professional decisions, you are my kind of team member. You are someone I'd work for, I'd sacrifice for, I'd follow anywhere.

Every Christmas, our family watches the same movie - Love, Actually. I still cry at the many ways the emotion is expressed in the movie. If you haven't seen it, put it on your list - make it a graduation gift to yourself.

After all the wonderful things I've considered, if I had just one wish for you on this graduation day, even more so than wishing you success, peace, good health and happiness, most of all, I wish you love. Congratulations, and thank you for sharing your joy with me today.