

Commencement Address
Saturday, May 18, 2019
College of Nursing
University of Missouri–St. Louis/Washington University Joint Engineering Program
School of Social Work

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Thank you Dean Johnson, Chancellor George, and Provost Sobolik for allowing me to share the podium with you this evening.

To all the graduates under the sound of my voice, it is an honor and privilege to be asked to participate in your special day that marks an important moment in your life and in your career trajectory. Please confirm my understanding, audience. I hear that the most courageous, hard-working, overcoming group of social work, nursing and engineering students are here this evening? I also know that the most incredible, hard-working, deeply committed faculty, staff, family, friends, and supporters of your success are here as well, yes? Please, let's acknowledge the village.

As a preacher of the Pentecostal persuasion, I am comfortable with non-conformity to silent celebration. I believe that commencement is a joyous occasion deserving of noise of all kinds – claps, hoops, hollas, whistles, and snaps – joyful noise. Joyful noise because of all that it took for you and yours to be here...through the trials in your life, through the coursework and extra-curricular expectations, through the demands of each day, when there's more month than the money. Yet, despite it all, you pressed, you passed, you excelled, you stretched, and YOU MADE IT - to this building, to the seat you're sitting in right now.

You made it to commencement. Take in the moment. Fold your arms, pat your feet, nod your head as you look around. Take a deep breath. Exhale. Now give out generous high-fives all around you and say, "We earned this and we made it!"

I was asked for just a few moments to share our collective call to action. We are in a defining moment in history to activate and mobilize for good and for change that is not temporary. We *demand* change designed for lasting impact. And I'd like to share five points of encouragement for your bright future, based on what I've learned as I continue to grow up.

First, No matter how serious life gets, make place for celebrating and laughter.

Second, stay in a posture of gratitude. Third, reflect love and hope to everyone you serve in your career. Be the person that you needed to see during your most vulnerable times. And most importantly, be sure to reflect that same love and hope back to yourself. Allow for time to rest and reflect before the bell in the ring dings for another round of the fight.

Starting right now, you will no-longer show up in spaces as a question mark – but as an exclamation point! Say it with me, "starting right now, I will no longer show up in the world as a question mark. I'm showing up as an exclamation point."

Fourth, be the force of power and the gold standard of excellence that you were called to be in this community. Part of being an exclamation point is knowing your value. When you know what you're worth - you negotiate from a position of strength. When we know our value, we ask for the salary and benefits and opportunities we want and are qualified to possess. Remember, everything is a negotiation – not a done deal. Fifth, stay anchored in your north star.

My purpose statement is to do the will of Him that sent me and to finish His work; repairing breaches of injustice; and inspiring excellence, fierceness and hope. But I remember when I lost my fierceness. A series of questions confronted me while watching a documentary on the history of the Freedom Riders (450 people across racial, ethnic, economic and geographic lines founded by young college students challenging segregation simply by traveling side by side – not too different than the way you're sitting now - on buses and trains through the deep south in 1961.) Diane Nash, a then 21 year old Fisk University student leading this movement was urged by the representative of then US Attorney General Bobby Kennedy. He said, "Ms. Nash what are you thinking? You are signing up people to ride to their deaths. You have no idea what you're facing and what you're getting yourself in to."

The young student leader replied, "...All of us have said our final prayer, signed our last will and testaments, and made our last phone calls. We know exactly the risk that we're taking."

I sat in the comfortable, safe environment of my home and immediately became convicted. I prayed....God, if I was living then and receiving this call to come to disrupt harm done to my people, would I have gotten on the bus? And God, what injustice would be so great in my lifetime that I would get on the bus now? When you call me to the battlefield, when you call me in to service, give me the strength to go.

FOR WHAT CAUSE ARE YOU WILLING TO GET ON THE BUS?

Stay rooted and grounded in what anchors you...because the winds of change and challenge are inevitable. But so is your triumph.

As I close, I reflect on this quote I heard, "sometimes it seems that you choose your path. And there are times when history chooses you..."

Graduates, here's the call to action - history has chosen you. Your community requires the deployment of the skillsets you have mastered. History chooses you to get on the bus. YOU are who we've been waiting for in this defining moment. Let your light shine and keep shining until the work is done. Let's go. Thank you.