

Commencement Address
Saturday, December 17, 2022
Ceremony III:
College of Education, UMSL/WU Joint Engineering Program, School of Social Work
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Hello and thanks for that wonderful introduction.

The best part is that most of what you heard is true. There is no end to how creative a past you can have when you write your own Resume.

So often, speakers come to the podium and say “Good Morning” or “Good Afternoon,” and whether the response is muted or spirited, they engage in some play acting to get the audience to respond in a louder voice.

But we’re not going to play that little game today. Instead, I’m going to teach you a few words in the Zulu language.

Some years ago, I was invited by then National Park Service Director The Honorable Dr. Robert G. Stanton, to participate in the “World Parks Congress,” which was held in Durban, South Africa and hosted by **The International Union for the Conservation of Nature.**

Meetings in South Africa generally open with a greeting in the Zulu Language which is simply: “Sawubwana!”

Roughly translated into English, it means, “I see you,...You are important to me and I value you.”

It suggests acceptance and recognition.

In response, the audience generally says “Yebo!”

This response means “I am here for you!”

Say it with me,..."Yebo!"

So today, instead of making believe that I cannot hear you, I will state now that I see you,...

"Sawubwana!" --- "Yebo!"

The aforementioned International Union for the Conservation of Nature is a part of the United Nations, and plays a role in the implementation of several international conventions on nature, conservation and biodiversity.

I bring that conference up today not as a way to pad my resume further, but to share with you a valuable lesson learned on that trip.

It is the lesson that no matter where we live on this planet, no matter what language we speak or what cultures define us...we are more alike than we are different.

The stated mission of the Congress is to:

- Reach conservation goals;
- Respond to climate change;
- Improve physical and mental health and well-being;
- Support human life;
- Reconcile development challenges;
- Enhance diversity and quality of governance;
- Respect indigenous and traditional knowledge and culture, and;
- Inspire a new generation.

Although your fields of study may not directly relate to conservation or nature, these goals are represented far more than you might realize in the studies conducted in the College of Education, the School of Social Work and the School of Engineering.

In fact, these are valuable goals for all of humankind to keep in the forefront of our minds and visions as we go about our everyday lives.

I might suggest that regardless of the College you are graduating from today, your future has much in common with these goals.

All of us want to live in a world where conservation counts and climate change is averted.

We all want to live in a world where the mental and physical health and well-being of our fellow Human Beings is prioritized.

We all want a world that balances the quality of Human Life with the challenges of development.

We all want to live in a world that inspires each new generation to care about education, diversity, conservation, citizenship, democracy, and the planet.

The decisions we make, the buildings we construct, and the policies we execute should all respect indigenous and traditional knowledge and culture. They came before us. They have much to offer us.

These goals that we share with the IUCN are not just a roadmap for your professional careers, but are also a roadmap for your future, and for the future of the City, the State, the Nation and the World.

I challenge you to keep them in the forefront of your mind as you leave here today and move on to whatever is next in your lives.

I am reminded of the words of teacher, scientist and native Missourian George Washington Carver who said:

“No individual has any right to come into the world and go out of it without leaving behind him distinct and legitimate reasons for having passed through it.”

You are graduating today, having pushed yourselves hard. Each of you have struggled against new ideas, deadlines, tests, papers, readings, late nights spent studying, difficult courses and demanding professors.

Yet you have proven equal to the challenge.

Your determination to reach your goals is to be applauded and this commencement is to be celebrated as an achievement earned through months and years of sacrifice, hard work and dedication.

But we all know the word “Commencement” means “To Start or To Begin.”

The larger questions for you as graduates, are “Start What?” “Where do I go from here?,” and “How Can I make a difference?”

The College of Education, as well as the School of Social Work and the Joint Engineering Program have all worked hard to provide you with ways to answer those questions.

You will all answer those questions differently, having pursued different fields of study and bringing with you different values, different passions, and different backgrounds.

But it is my greatest hope that you will answer them utilizing the metrics of kindness, caring, and remembrance of those who came before you.

Enslaved African Joseph Cinque won his freedom in 1839, first by helping to lead a mutiny on the slave ship that would bring him to the United States.

He won his freedom a second time in a court case in Massachusetts where he was defended by attorney and former United States President John Quincy Adams.

In thinking about his situation, Cinque remembered the power and purpose of his ancestors:

“I will call into the past, far back to the beginning of time and beg them to come and help me at the judgement.

I will reach back and draw them into me and they must come.

For at this moment, I am the whole reason they have existed at all.”

As you all emerge from the other side of years of dedicated focus, you are all far more aware of how the past is actually prologue.

You have a better sense of how the past informs the present, and how the present acts as a Compass Needle to the future.

It is no accident that your programs, inventive and forward-looking as they are, are taking place in the city of Saint Louis.

Called by one historian, “The Broken Heart of America,” St. Louis has seen a plethora of historical, financial and emotional challenges.

From the New Madrid Flood to the “Dred Scott Decision” to the shooting of Michael Brown, the painful and historical realities that St. Louis is heir to are more important today than they have ever been.

The various courses of study at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, have been able to share a version of the United States that looks to the future, but which is deeply rooted in the past and in this place.

We are reminded by Historian David Blight, that we live in a time and place: "...when the country seems once again to be a house divided over how we interpret our foundational creeds."

As new graduates, you now have the skills needed to rebuild that house. To bring the country back together. To use your understanding of the past to create a brighter future for us all.

One of my enduring heroes, Frederick Douglass made a number of post-Civil War speeches, that were designed to cast aspersions on the divided and oppressive path that led us to the Civil War, but he also spoke of his hope that this nation would hold true to its universal values and come to the recognition that,

"A smile or a tear has no nationality."

He went on to say that:

"Joy and sorrow speak alike in all nations, and they, above all the confusion of tongues, proclaim the brotherhood of man."

Douglass was as much about the present and future as he ever was about the past. He wrote something that seems as if it was penned just for you on the occasion of your commencement.

"We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future.

"To all inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome.

"But now is the time, the important time.

"Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have done much of it well.

“You live and must die, **and you must do your work.**”

Your work when you leave here today is to take all that was bad in the past, and all that is awkward in the present, and help forge a future that involves and includes ALL St. Louisans, all Missourians, all Americans, and all Citizens of this world.

Positive change in St. Louis, in Missouri, in the United States, and in the World is not just one standard by which you can measure your careers, it is the only standard.

Remember all that you have learned here. Both what you learned in school, but also what you learned on the narrow streets and broad avenues of St. Louis.

Take that knowledge, those experiences, and perhaps, even that pain, and make a difference for others.

The best solutions often come from the places with the most difficult problems.

Not to discount all that you have learned in school, but not every problem can be solved with a mathematical equation.

Not every answer can be found in a textbook.

I challenge you to use your hearts as well as your minds to find the answers to the questions that matter.

Your degree is a beautiful piece of paper, but what it represents is the fact that you now have the skills necessary **to change the world.**

Since I began today by speaking about Africa, I will close with a proverb often identified as being from one of the many peoples of that Continent.

“If you want to go fast, go alone...if you want to go far...go together.”

As human beings...as Americans...as Citizens of the World, we all have far to go.

Let us go together.