**Commencement Address
 Saturday, May 13, 2023
 Ceremony IV: College of Nursing, UMSL/WU Joint Engineering Program, School of Social Work**

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Good evening!  Thank you Dean Johnson for the kind introduction and for affording me the opportunity to speak with you all as part of the spring commencement for the Schools of Engineering, Nursing and Social Work! What an exciting evening this is! Congratulations to each of you, your families, your support systems and everyone who participated in and/or helped to make today a reality!

If you take anything from our time together this evening, I hope it is a better understanding of the gifts you bring to the world and the need for you to embed them here by celebrating your journey, finding and amplifying your voice and bringing your genuine self to every situation.

First, on celebration: I urge you to ***celebrate your journey to now***. I compare celebration of your journey to Sankofa, the West African concept symbolized by a mythical bird that flies forward while looking backwards, with an egg in its mouth, where the egg symbolizes the future.  Sankofa represents learning from the past and bringing that knowledge into the present in order to make positive progress through the use of that knowledge.  But if we block out the journey and merely focus on the accomplishment, we may be missing the best part.

But far too often we do not want to think about our journey in any detail once we arrive at our destination because while there may be joy, abundance, smoothness and order in it, there may also be struggle, pain, health challenges, financial stress, and far too much clutter in it as well. However, celebrating and sharing your journey may inspire another or give someone strength to know that the road does not have to be smooth to safely arrive at your destination.  Perhaps sharing with someone that it took you 5 and a half years to graduate from Rolla as a full time student (raising my hand here), may inspire another to keep going when they hit a bump in the road. Our connection to, and understanding of, our past is key to moving us forward. Celebrate your “come from,” it will encourage others.

Another way to bring the gifts of you to, and embed them in, the world arises out of your ability to ***find and amplify your voice***.

I borrowed this phrase from poetry, one of my loves. In poetry, as is true for other art forms, it is okay to be inspired by the writings of those who came before you, but in developing your own, it is important not to mimic their styles, but to continue studying and writing until you are able to find your own style (voice) and share it.

The same is true of many, if not all, of life’s endeavors. I encourage you to pay close attention to and/or study the attributes of (a) people in your fields of nursing, social work and engineering who you admire, (b) leaders you admire and (c) those who are charting a path you’d like to follow. But as you adapt the attributes and model those people, think about how what you learn from others may be made more effective when applied in the context of the uniqueness of your personality, your strengths and weaknesses, and the way you are able to create in order to emerge with a style that is distinctively yours, one that reflects your voice, and causes others to listen when you amplify it. In other words, “come in your own way,” your own amazing and beautiful way.

Many of you have been doing the work to find your voice for years (even though you may not have characterized it as such), but what I am asking today is that you put more intentionality behind it. Your voice is power!

Another way to be sure to bring the gifts of you to, and embed them in, community is to ***focus on being your genuine self***. Being your genuine self may seem obvious, but it really isn’t. There is an art to being genuine in every situation, especially in the workplace because we are taught that we must act a certain way, dress a certain way, think a certain way from the moment we even think about going to work. I am not suggesting that we ignore basic workplace norms, rather, I mean allow the true you, the gift of you, to shine through in all you do.

When I was a new lawyer, I felt compelled to wear a suit, carry a brief case, where conservative shoes, laugh a certain way and the like. Because if you were going to be a lawyer, you have to look and act like one, right? No. When I freed myself of the suit (I didn’t even need one, I was not a courtroom lawyer), and tossed the briefcase (I never had anything in it), wore the shoes I liked (sassy-high-heeled) and laughed my natural boisterous laugh, I felt free. And once liberated, I showed up as I was, and the joy I experienced was multiplied (in my career and personally). I was a more effective lawyer and my workload seemed lighter. I believe you will feel it too!

Some of you may be thinking, I am always my genuine self. That may be true, but there is at least one way to test it. Ask your peers, or someone who reports to you, or that you report to describe you. Then ask a family member and/or personal friend or two to describe you. The description should be the same. Of course, a friend or family member may have more detail. But if the descriptions are appreciably different, you are not showing up as your genuine self in one of the environments. For example, if at work you are described as quiet, and hesitant to offer ideas or opinions, but in your personal life, you are described as outgoing and quick to share ideas and opinions, you are not showing up authentically in one of those spaces. Some refer to this difference in how we show up as wearing a mask. Wearing different masks depending on the occasion may lead to physical and mental fatigue, while being yourself is effortless.

I would like to close with who am I beyond the bio. I am a daughter, sister, friend, poet, engineer, lawyer, community lover, mother, poet, entrepreneur, and child of God to name of few. Each of these things are instrumental to me becoming me, with stories surrounding them all. You might notice that poet was used twice in

my off-bio list. That is because poetry is the artform that has pulled me up, out and through, in countless situations. It was my journaling before journalling was the “it” thing.

Why did I share my list? Because I wanted you to know how varied it is. Far too often we are told to pick a lane and stay in it. I am here to say, do not be afraid to pick multiple lanes, change lanes and/or mix them up. Trust me if I can mix being an engineer, poet and lawyer (things that do not “match” or “go together”), you can mix your loves and have them all work in your favor to feed your whole self and not just a part.

Thank you again for the honor of sharing this evening with you. As I close, I leave you with my wishes.  As you begin new careers and/or elevate existing ones, may you embrace and be motivated by your past and allow it to fortify and propel you into the future.  As you step into, continue and/or expand your existing leadership roles, those you plan to assume and those that will come your way, may you draw upon the strength of those who came before you, because if they had not been, you would not be.  May you find and amplify your genuine voice to inspire hope and possibility in all you meet.

Wishing you perpetual peace, immeasurable joy, and infinite love!

Thank you.