

It's a pleasure to be with you this morning, but I must admit a bit of bittersweetness. You see, UMSL is my mother's alma mater, and almost 40 years ago, I was just a kid watching as she walked across a stage like this to accept her Master's in Education. I lost my mother, Betty Purnell, a 32-year veteran of the Saint Louis Public Schools, last month. Four days later, I lost my dad, Que Purnell—who hunted down the owner of the dry cleaner where my mother had forgotten to pick up her robe for that mid-80s ceremony. It was a harrowing morning, but we made it. And I've made it to standing before you this morning because of who they were and how they showed up in the world and how they helped build a world for my sister and brother and me. So, I'm in a somewhat reflective mood, but I don't plan to speak at length. Instead, I've made a list of the lessons I've learned in almost half a century of living. I hope the list helps you as you navigate this next phase of your own journeys because your community and your country need you now more than ever, to lead in your spheres of influence and contribute as strategically and as meaningfully as you can. Life is unutterably complex, but I hope what follows provides some signposts to guide the way.

First and foremost, **tend of your relationships**. There is hardly any human endeavor that does not depend upon relationships, and yet the only training many of us receive on how to have a good relationship happens as a function of the accident of birth into a particular family. And if you were lucky enough to be born into a warm and functional family unit, I applaud your good fortune. Even in that happy circumstance, though, relationships are work. Make the effort. Show up for people even when it doesn't benefit you in any way. Listen intently to understand how others view and experience the world. Endeavor to be the kind of person who enters a room and says, "There you are!" rather than "Here I am." Not only will you be more effective at any task, but science suggests you also will live longer, healthier, and happier as a result of strong and sustaining social connections. I can't tell you how many times a path has been opened or a conflict has been resolved because I knew and trusted someone and was known and trusted by them. Most things can be faced and figured out in the context of a healthy relationship.

The second lesson is related to the first, and it recognizes that conflict will inevitably come. You must **have the courage to have hard conversations**. I've learned this lesson the hard way more than once. Many people have lauded the work that I did along with colleagues at Washington University and Saint Louis University on a report called *For the Sake of All*. And indeed, it has had enduring impact over a decade after its release. But behind the scenes there was quite a bit of angst and not a little conflict among those colleagues. Instead of addressing it head-on, I made a series of decisions and took actions that avoided it, which only made matters worse. I caused more hurt feelings and ensuing acrimony than I likely would have if I had just said very plainly that things were not working as I had hoped. I got so caught up in producing a perfect product that I forgot my first rule about relationships, damaging several of them and my own credibility with certain individuals in the process. Remaining silent in the face of conflicts and disappointments will similarly come back to haunt you. I get it. It's scary for many of us to confront someone who has failed to live up to our expectations or who has even hurt or offended us. Do it anyway. Do it thoughtfully and in an attempt to repair what has been broken if you can, but don't expect things to blow over. They are much more likely to blow up. Talk about hard things as constructively as you can, and move forward. A conversation of minutes can save you years of residual pain.

The third lesson applies when the person who has failed to live up to expectations is you. And it's one of those simple injunctions that seems fit for kindergarten but trips up adults all the time: **When you mess up, sincerely say you're sorry, take corrective action, and do better going forward**. On a beautiful, happy May morning, that seems like easy enough advice to take, but trust me, it will not always be your first instinct in the thick of things. And you're not entirely to blame. There is a well-known phenomenon in psychology called the *self-serving bias*, and we all have it. We're more likely to attribute our accomplishments to our abilities and effort and place the blame for our failings on circumstances or factors outside of our control. Think about the last time you were late for something. Did you blame traffic, a slow-moving partner or kids, or did you acknowledge that you misjudged how much time it would take to get where you needed to be? We're quick to go on defense when we fail, but you must do your best to override the self-serving bias in your own life. Be quick to take responsibility for your actions, and don't stop at "I'm sorry." Apologies without

action are the emptiest of words. Tell the person you've failed how you're going to make the situation right and follow through. Then, commit to do better and ask others to hold you accountable. There are few better ways to tend to your relationships than to seek and give forgiveness.

My advice so far may sound pretty pedestrian and not at all like the "Go out and change the world" exhortations you're accustomed to hearing at a commencement. Believe it or not, being a trusted, honest, courageous person who is willing to take responsibility for your actions will make you both a good person and a good leader. It will also make you relatively rare among your peers. We are in serious need of good people and good leaders right now. You've spent a great deal of time and effort learning about your field of study, and you stand at the cutting edge of knowledge. Please do not shrink away from your expertise. Even when truth seems under constant assault, be assured that evidence matters, facts are useful, and it is possible, through common effort, to arrive at closer and closer approximations of truth. It is also still possible to determine what is good and bad, right and wrong. But please don't think that evidence and moral suasion are enough. My final lesson is one I used to share with my students all the time. **The equation for progress is What's right + What works.** You can be factually correct and occupy the moral high ground and fail to achieve anything at all. I like to say that the first person to have noted that fire is a powerful and fearsome thing was right, but the first person to fashion a torch to light the night was effective. You need the fire and the torch. And even more, you must know where you intend to go now that you have light to attend your way. At the most fundamental level, you must ask yourself what you are trying to achieve. That will suggest to you the several ways to get to your destination. Consult others who have journeyed that way before and find fellow travelers, with whom you are in relationship, to go along with you. This is called a strategy, and it is how our species has undertaken goal-directed behavior since we appeared on the planet. It is the only way we have ever changed the world.

I cannot tell you how warmly I wish you well on the road ahead. Make yours a rich and useful life of connection and integrity, and you will be able to look back, as my parents did, and wonder at how blessed and beautiful it was.