

Coker College Fall Commencement 2018

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Thank you, President Wyatt, for the kind introduction. Graduates, faculty, staff, friends, it is a pleasure to be here. One of the wonders of any college, or school, graduation ceremony, is to just begin by pondering on the variety of paths taken, even in a small group as this one. Biology majors, business majors, one Art major, Criminology, Dance, Business, and on the modalities of your education at Coker, on campus on line, bridge programs, and the generational spans, traditional students, later life students, professionals searching for a different path. Many different life paths, each one its own story, each one a future yet to be made or already in the making. This is perhaps the most important thing we should celebrate about being here today, a wonderful, diverse parade of life stories. Seeking to make themselves, and their communities, better.

As I was preparing for these remarks, I did what any reasonable citizen of the 21st century would do, search the web for the best and the worst commencement speeches ever. The latter has been particularly informative. It is a gigantic iceberg of words and phrases that would take a team of big data scientists to approach, let alone understand in all its messy messiness. Suffice it to say that it would take me several commencement addresses just to introduce you to the vocabulary of bad commencement addresses, and I am not suggesting in any way, President Wyatt, that you invite me back, although by the end of my time, you would probably have a good idea about what to do. Smile.

I should also add, parenthetically, that the three best commencement addresses that I have watched or read, and I have been through many of them, have all been delivered by college dropouts. And my favorite is not who you may be guessing. Not Steve Jobs, sorry. Anyone who presumes that the largest measure of success in life is creating a kink in the universe is just a tad short of presumptuous. It is not Bill Gates, with all due respect. It is Matt Damon, who gave the MIT 2016 commencement address, reminiscing among other things about the time where he played Will Hunting in the movie Good Will Hunting, filmed at the MIT campus. If any of you remain gluttons for punishment after this address, I would

encourage you to watch it on YouTube. He is inspiring, funny, honest, and, I should add, a bit better looking than I am.

So let me start, based on my above scientific research, by saying what I am not here to talk about. I am not here to tell you that you should believe in yourselves because this is already something you have demonstrated by getting to this important moment. A healthy amount of self-doubt, though, is never a bad thing, as it puts things in perspective, it helps to center our purpose; it provides focus that most self-help recipes ignore. I am not here to tell you that you can do anything and everything you set your heart and mind to because at least some of the time, that will not happen. Life does get in the way, which is what life is, with its wonders and its curve balls. I am not here to tell you that you should never take no for an answer, because sometimes we just have to, so we can learn, grow up and move on. I am not here to tell you who, or what or how to believe in whatever you believe in, because that is not my place. I am not here to tell you that you should persist in everything you do, because this is something you have already done on the way to graduating from Coker. Instead, I would like us to reflection what this morning's end of a rite of passage means, through some of my personal story, experiences, and readings.

So I will start with my dad. Alejandro, that was his name, grew up as an only child. His younger brother died very young. My grandma was a seamstress and my grandpa a shoemaker. My dad had two best friends in high school, Alberto, who became my godfather, and Victor, who became uncle Victor. Dad was the only one who got into medical school. I was the first born of four boys (bless my mom who tried so hard to get a baby girl). It is not unusual for a first born to have a tumultuous relationship with their dad, and such was the case with me. We argued, we fought, we challenged each other. Most of the time, my anger and frustration was addressed with grace. In later life, perhaps later than I would have wished for, we became friends. But in spite of these challenges, our dad did, for me and my brothers, two things that stand out and I am grateful for, forever. This is where education comes in, and what this graduation is about.

First, he placed us in a parochial, bilingual catholic school, which just happened to be at the intersection of affluent and very poor sections of

Lima. As a result, I grew up, for 11 years, with blue eyed blond girls as well as Afro Peruvians, Chinese Peruvians, dark mestizos, Japanese Peruvians, Peruvian cholos, and children of middle eastern descent. My school mirrored the Peruvian melting pot of the 50s and 60s. This taught me tolerance and acceptance from early age, while also witnessing the child's and adolescent's coming to terms with racial and class stereotyping and prejudice. Santa Rosa school also gave me some of the best Spanish and English teachers I have ever had in my life. I slogged through Macbeth and was mesmerized by Pablo Neruda when I was 13. My liberal arts education started in high school. Thank you, dad.

Second, even though I knew my dad wished for me to become a doctor like him (that is the deal with first borns) he never, ever pushed his hope on me. He let me pursue my passion for things small, very small, the critters that you see thriving in a drop of pond water under a microscope. He let me become a biologist. To a large extent, I became who I am because of those two decisions my dad made for me. My father died just over 3 and a half years ago, a month short of 96, and I can't be sure he could tell who I was the last time I saw him. Maybe, just maybe, I hope he remembered why he named me Hector. But that would be a subject for my next commencement address. Smile.

I see 54 of you graduating and many more accompanying you. While your achievement is, in the end, yours, it is also the result of the support, the disagreements, the coming to terms, the tough love, the encouragement of those who are closest to you, direct family, extended family, and friends. That is the larger, diverse community who supported you in your journey and who will continue to be there for you, in all its imperfection and love. This is the second group that we celebrate here today.

The third group that we celebrate are the members of the Coker community who supported you in this journey. Everyone of us, without exception, sooner or later during our life, get challenged, inspired, handheld, spurred, coaxed and encouraged by one or more strangers. Some of them are teachers, others are counselors, yet others the administrators, all of who, at their best, have something that binds them all: they care for you. That care takes many incarnations. The teacher who pushes you to love Anne Karenina, or Jane Austen, in spite of their bulky

volume, for Karenina, and the relentless introductions of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett-like characters, for Austen. The advisor who gives you a “you are on the wrong path” wake up call at just the right time. The basketball coach who builds resilience in you that you can transfer to your chemistry classes. One of the most wonderful things about school, college and graduation is that one or more of these strangers will continue to inspire you for years to come, and in turn inspire you to become a friendly and caring stranger to others, what in academic and professional parlance we call a mentor. This unfortunately misunderstood and misused name has a distinguished and ancient pedigree. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the brave Odysseus leaves his homeland, Ithaca, his beloved wife Penelope and their son Telemachus, to pursue the tragic war (they all are) at Troy, and he makes the wisest decision of his ten years in the Trojan war and the additional ten years returning back home. He asks his servant, Mentor, to take care of his son. Mentor thus becomes the surrogate father and the teacher, guiding Telemachus through childhood and adolescence into manhood, and sets him off in search of his dad. Exceptional mentoring, of course, transcends all gender, cultural and status barriers.

This is the story that repeats itself over and over, when it comes to growing up, to learning how to become who we are, to discover whom we want to be. Which leads me to reflect on what, in this age of career-driven success and expectations, we tend to forget. Education, at its deepest and most sustainable, is not a transaction. It is an intricate and wondrous web of relationships, starting with the relationship we build with and within our evolving selves, moving through the friends we make, the losses life chooses for us, the mentors we choose to embrace and follow. It is at our peril, in this transactional age, that we risk forgetting what is most precious about the durable gift of education, how it enables us to affirm our common humanity and to engage in life-long transformation and reinvention. At our best, we are all chrysalids waiting to emerge from our cocoons and unwing into the unknown and the ineffable, into the pleasure and pain of a life worth living.

If we believe in this ideal of a life-long education, in its unending journey of self-discovery, we must also reflect on how it is that we get there. In the hyper self-centered society that we are in danger of becoming, the largely

unquestioned answer is that we arrive at who we are by force of will, by sheer brute and fine sculpting of our lives through the iteration of axing and chiseling, over and over, until we are satisfied with what we look at in the mirror. This view is in fact a mythology of achievement that has been culturally conditioned and reinforced through an exaggerated focus on the individual, forgetting the community that helps make the individual. I suggest to you, that for most of us mortals, that is not how we become who we are. Mary Catherine Bateson, in her wonderful profiling of five exceptional women, titled *Composing a Life*, suggests an alternative model, and I quote: “Our aesthetic sense, whether in works of art or in lives, has over focused on the stubborn struggle toward a single goal rather than on the fluid, the protean, the improvisatory. We see achievement as purposeful and monolithic, like the sculpting of a massive tree trunk that has first to be brought from the forest and then shaped by long labor to assert the artist’s vision, rather than something crafted from odds and ends, like a patchwork quilt, and lovingly used to warm different nights and bodies”.

Most of us, I suggest, are quilts, made through constant reshuffling, laborious redesign and adaptation, made from the inspiration and push and caring of a lot of people, many of who you have yet to meet. Your quilt will also be composed of Ideas you have yet to be exposed to, conversations you have yet to imagine, pain you have yet to suffer, joy you have yet to delight in, and hope you have yet to share with others. In short, your lives will be a tapestry of improvisations, human jazz creating a self over a lifetime. This is the wonder of what education enables, when approached with humility and courage, with joy and hunger for what is next, with awe, resolve and patience.

Graduates, to build your life quilt, you will need all this and much more, in this perplexing age. When it becomes acceptable to watch truth dissolve into misinformation at the click of a return key, when righteousness replaces human, and humane discourse, when dialogue becomes an endangered species, we should know we are in a bit of trouble. Not to mention the fire hose of information that keeps growing exponentially, the global climate disruptions that keep growing in frequency and magnitude, while we deny and dismiss, the widening gap between haves and have

not's, the privileged few and the underprivileged many. Graduates, you are to expect a very wild ride, indeed. And yet, you will still have, and hopefully nurture, the two things that cannot be ever be denied to you, because they are only for you to deny: the miracle of human imagination and the light of hope.

Which brings me to a closing reflection and to circle back to what and who we celebrate today, which is our entire community, centered on our graduates' individual stories. I can think of no better closing than a wonderful song by Billie Holliday, titled Crazy for Me. The last stanza starts as follows:

Like the wind that shakes the bough,
He moves me with a smile,
The difficult I'll do right now,
The impossible will take a little while".

While Billie Holiday was singing about her lover, she was also singing about life. Graduates, you have worked hard and long enough to have a measured confidence that the difficult, you will be able to do, right now. It is my hope that, as you continue to make your life long quilt your unrepeatable creation, you will persevere in taking on the impossible. And you will find, if you truly persist, that sometimes the impossible will take a little less time than you thought.

Good luck to you all and thank you for the privilege of speaking to you today.