

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | The College
CLASS DAY 2018
JUNE 8

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Thank you, thank you, thank you so much, Shae, for that wonderful introduction and for your work focusing on highlighting women. Good afternoon, everyone. I am delighted to be here and particularly delighted for you that the rain from this morning stopped.

So, my relationship with the University of Chicago goes back for longer than even I can remember. My mom received her Masters from the University of Chicago in 1950 and she went on to be a pioneer in the field of early childhood education. She's still teaching at the age of 89, no pressure. And I'm delighted that she's here with me today. Hi mom! My dad joined the faculty of the Medical Center in 1961. My daughter and I both attended the Lab School. We even had two of the same teachers, she got better grades than I did in both classes. My first summer job was being a clinical coordinator at the Medical Center and I attended the University of Chicago undergraduate for summer school between my first and second year of college trying to get a head start on my pre-med major and I took inorganic chemistry in a building right over there and I studied on the lawn right here. In fact, I studied endlessly. It did not end well. No doubt my poor grade contributed to the demise of my aspirations to be a doctor. But in full disclosure so did the anatomy class that my boyfriend who was in medical school insisted that I go to. Those cadavers, well, they just freaked me out. Sorry to all the pre-med students who are here.

But decades later I had the honor of chairing the Medical Center Board and being the Vice Chair of the University Board here. Much easier task for me than inorganic chemistry and dissecting bodies. Now finally I'm on the faculty of the law school where I often talk to law students about my decision 27 years ago to stop practicing law.

But in all seriousness, this extraordinary institution has contributed mightily to my life and to lives of those who I love the most, just as I am certain that it has for the graduates. No doubt your journeys

have been challenging, so let me begin by being among the first to congratulate the class of 2018 on your accomplishments. You made it. How about a round of applause for the class?

Of course, thank you also to Dean Boyer, the faculty, the staff, everyone who shepherded this tremendous class to where they are today. And an especially poignant thank you of course to the parents and families of graduates who sacrificed so mightily for them to achieve this greatness. How about you give your families a big round of applause as well?

So to the class, so far your journey may seem long. And you no doubt have already done remarkable things, but tomorrow begins the next chapter. Each of you graduates have a unique opportunity and you're going to pursue your own hopes and dreams. You've been taught by world-class professors and you will each use the skills you've developed in your own ways, and you're probably pretty eager to flex your muscles a little bit and show the world what you can do. And you should be eager because you've earned it. You may also be a little anxious that you aren't sure how best to use your incredible education, and that's okay because notwithstanding a little bravado, your classmates are probably anxious with you.

For all the remarkable diversity of your interests from which your class has drawn great strength, you also have one thing in common, the extraordinary privilege of sharing this excellent education from one of the top universities in the world. And with that common bond comes certain responsibilities of privilege, and I would like an opportunity to talk to you about those responsibilities that I certainly did not fully appreciate when I was your age.

First, it's important that you find your voice. So, when I finished college, all I really had was a ten-year plan. And just how many of you have ten year, had ten-year plans, or have ten-year plans? Show of hands? Five year plan, any plan? All right.

My ten-year plan went like this, I was going to go straight to law school because I couldn't think of anything else to do. I was going to return to Chicago, fall madly in love, have a child by the time I was 30, worrying about that biological clock, and be a partner in a law firm by 31, 32 at the latest, right? Sounds like a good plan? So I went right to law school. I married, figuratively, the boy next door. We'd

grown up together, my mother grew up with his mother, our fathers were friends, our grandparents were friends. What could go wrong? Plenty.

I had my daughter just shy of my 29th birthday, she was perfect and still is to this day. But by age 31, I was sitting in a gorgeous office in a skyscraper downtown Chicago and I would stare out the window at those beautiful sailboats, and I would close my door and cry. I was just miserable, I thought I must be leading somebody else's life; this couldn't possibly be mine. And even though my parents were very proud of me, I was the first lawyer in our family and everyone thought I had everything going for me, it was not my life. And so I took a leap of faith and I joined local government.

From my first day walking into my dingy little cubicle with a window facing an alley, I knew that I was where I belonged. So, to save you all from the tears of that beautiful office, I encourage you to listen to your quiet voice inside of you, don't waste your talents doing something that's not satisfying to you. If I hadn't taken that leap of faith, I don't think I would be standing in front of you today.

After you find your voice, your privilege gives you the responsibility to challenge the status quo. Do it by lifting up your powerful voices, either alone or in unison with others. Building a strong and fair democracy is not a spectators' sport. It depends on civic participation, you have to get involved and the good news is that there are lots of ways to do so. Perhaps for you it means activism, putting pressure from the outside.

A recent survey showed that 1 in 5 Americans have joined protest rallies within the last year, and I'm sure a number of those of you who are here today are among the ones who have. There has been an outpouring of activism that has already led to positive change and that is a reminder that our voices are important and a reflection of the power that we hold. We've seen its affect even with leaders who were disinclined to listen, and it has shown that everyone, citizen and non-citizen, in this country has a right to participate in civic engagement. Examples which are in the headlines, of course, are those amazing young students from Parkland. Aren't they the most incredible things? I'm so proud of them. Out of tragedy, they've galvanized millions around the country to participate in March For Our Lives. They have put pressure on states where governors have meetings from the NRA such as Florida and Vermont to pass legislation, helping to keep guns out of the wrong hands. And big stores, retailers such as Dick's Sporting Goods, have changed their policies on assault weapons and their market value

has gone up. Movements such as *Me Too* and *Times Up*, sexual assault and discrimination in the workplace are both ubiquitous and unacceptable. Yet they have been tolerated for far too long. Now brave survivors who have found the courage to speak up and are using their voices to tell gut-wrenching stories, not just to seek justice for themselves, but to hope to spare others their pain. And everyone is now listening and being forced to respond. Thankfully their sacrifices have mobilized *Me Too* and *Times Up* and many others are adding their voices, enabling far too many painful moments to turn into an inspirational movement.

The LGBTQ community has made enormous strides over the last decade. Often, we forget that when President Obama took office in 2009, same sex marriage was legal in two states. Just two states. By the time the Supreme Court ruled it to be the law of the land, that number had increased to 37, plus the District of Columbia. When President Obama spoke on that landmark day, he said and I quote, “progress on this journey towards equality often comes in small increments. Sometimes two steps forward and one step back propelled, by the persistent effort of dedicated citizens. And then sometimes there are days like today when the slow and steady effort is rewarded with justice that arrives like a thunderbolt.”

From Civil Rights to voting rights to women’s rights our history of our country is full of countless examples of where activism, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., “bends the arm arc of the moral universe towards justice.” And they all took a sustained effort of individuals and collective voices lifted up over time. In fact, there was nearly 50 years between the original petition for suffrage and the time women were granted the right to vote; many who signed that first petition didn’t live to see success. Our responsibility is simply to do the very best on our watch.

Institutions are coming under a great deal of fire lately from government to business to the media; even higher education is under attack. And we cannot afford to shun those institutions. Do not turn your back on the ones that you find lacking. Your privilege gives you the power to improve them in a range of ways and I implore you to do so because each of these institutions is vital to the fabric of society because they strengthen our democracy. You do not need to forget your ability to hold them accountable. Yes, you must do that, but please don’t abandon them. Make them better.

Let's take government for example. Our government is only as good as the citizens demand that it be. So, your most basic responsibility is to vote. In 2016, only 43% of eligible voters voted. Regardless of the outcome of the election, that should be unacceptable to us all. Voting matters. Your voices will not be represented in the democracy unless you vote. Yes, there maybe some who were trying to disenfranchise you. For example, Texas does not allow students to vote with their student ID, but it does allow you to vote if you have your license to carry a gun. But you can't let those attempts to disenfranchise you get in the way. Do not disenfranchise yourself. Not only will that cede your power to those who do not show up, it would abandon your responsibility to use the most fundamental responsibility of citizenship — voting. But voting isn't enough. Your government that is truly by the people, for the people, has to require you to engage with your elected officials. If you don't, you give them license to make decisions based on narrow, self-serving priorities of special interest groups that spend a lot of money lobbying.

They know the value of their voices, those who are lobbying, and they're thrilled when you under utilize yours, and cede your power to them.

There are many ways to lead. If you're passionate about government, if you vote and hold your representatives accountable, but you still know that there's more you can do, well how about running for office yourself? Anybody in this great vast area interested in running for office? Show of hands? Oh come on, you must run for office. I know, maybe some behind me. Okay good, thank you. I'm so glad to see that.

There are 500 women running for Congress in this election cycle. 500. Including, I hasten to add, the first Native American woman who just won her primary earlier this week.

I spent a lot of time working with members of Congress and I can certainly assure you that decisions would be made better if women had equal representation in that body.

Volunteer on campaigns. Work in the public sector. Stay local, federal government it doesn't matter. At some point during your career, I recommend you give it a try. Our democracy works best when a diversity of voices are heard in the halls of power and that includes all of yours. Affiliate yourself with institutions where the leaders share your values. Your reputation going forward will be inextricably

linked to those with whom you work. Not everyone has the opportunity to be selective, but those who are graduating here tomorrow have that privilege. Do your due diligence. Enough said.

It's a business imperative today in a global marketplace to have a diverse work force. From the boardroom to the entry-level floor, many of you will be leading in business sooner than you think. And it is important for you to lead by example and be good corporate citizens in addition because that's a part of your responsibility to society. So, when you're the CEO BlackRock who decides to send a letter to his fellow CEO encouraging companies to have a social purpose and long-range strategies, or the chairman of Starbucks that takes on implicit bias by shutting every Starbucks for an afternoon of training, or the CEO of Sales Force who publicly admits that he discovered a pay gap between men and women and he closes that gap three consecutive times when it popped up again. These are leadership positions in both the private and public sector that you are going to hold in the blink of an eye. And you have to use your voices to stand up for core values. You must commit to do this, not only when there is a chorus with you and it is easy, but when you're the first to speak up and it is hard.

Figure out ways to be a force for good in society, not just for yourself. In July of 2013, I accompanied the Obama Family on a tour of Robben Island Prison, where Nelson Mandela lived for 18 of the 26 years that he was incarcerated in South Africa. I remember us all standing in a tiny cell where this great man had lived for so long trying to imagine how he survived day after day after day. How did he keep his cruel incarceration from breaking his spirit? Channel all of that personal disappointment, physical and emotional pain and anger, what did he do with it? And how did he rise up to be an inspirational leader that unified and transformed one of the most divided countries on earth?

I attended his funeral, a few months later that drew numerous world leaders and people from every walks of life including former presidents from both parties in the United States. And next month I plan to return to South Africa when President Obama delivers a lecture commemorating the 100th Anniversary of President Mandela.

My favorite of many quotes from Mandela, which I will paraphrase was this, "No one is born hating one another because of the color of their skin or his background or religion. People must learn to hate

and if they learn to hate, they can be taught to love. For love comes more naturally than hate. Love comes more naturally than hate.”

My hope is that you will be willing to come out of your comfort zone, be intellectually and socially curious. Listen, open up honestly and civilly to those with whom you disagree. Get to know and understand and trust people who are different from you, different in race, gender, religion, background, sexual orientation or gender identity. And yes, even political party. Our nation is at its best when we embrace our rich diversity and view it as a strength. The ability to do so will enable you to tackle much of the unfinished business that lies ahead to perfect our union. Otherwise I fear we will continue to drift away from what is unfamiliar and different or other.

For we increasingly spend our waking hours watching only news sources that tell us what we want to hear, or on social media engaging with those with whom we agree, or using its convenient buffer of anonymity to lash out at those with whom we disagree. But do we even actually disagree? Have we tried to listen, be empathetic by putting ourselves in the shoes of one another?

All too often I fear the answer is no. So this amplifies the distance between us. In fact, social media is too often weaponized as an impersonal instrument of hurt, not only in grand and public ways, but often in seemingly mundane, but no less damaging. You all grew up with these transformational devices and as a parent, I know I can't get you to put them down. But please use them creatively and wisely and yes, kindly. Make them a powerful force to bring us together. To rally relief in the aftermath of natural or man-made disasters that have faded from the public eye. To share stories of what is good, and what is just, to which we should all aspire.

I believe the tone starts at the top. Because of your privilege, you have the ability to rapidly climb to the top of any career that you choose. I ask you to commit to make our institutions and our culture live up to our highest ideals. Insist the civility and decency matter. Bring us to a place where we all recognize our country's rich diversity as a strength and not a threat, where we are truly our brother's keeper and our sister's keeper, where we do not fear or discriminate against each other simply because of the color of our skin or our gender or any other way which we seem different.

In closing, you graduates are coming of age in an extraordinary moment in our nation's history. And even with all of our challenges, I believe there is no better time to be alive. And I'm optimistic because your journey is just beginning. May you be open to take paths with many exciting twists and turns, with chapters not yet imagined in your wildest dreams. And as I hope you discover as I did, that all your opportunities come with responsibilities both profound and mundane, and I hope you will embrace them as well.

You've already made your parents proud, right parents and family? Round of applause for our graduates? But I want you to challenge yourself to make your younger siblings proud, your children proud, and the teams that you create both at work and in play proud of you as well. Let them guide you towards your North Star. Find ways to enable those that are less fortunate to live better lives. Help create institutions that are worthy of those that they were created to serve, and open your hearts so that you're able to fully embrace the joy and the happiness of life. And be present, truly present in the lives of those you love and who love you. Use your gifts to continue to learn rigorously each day. It does not end with graduation. And not just about facts, although they are important, but also about people. And in the words of Bobby Kennedy who died 50 years ago this week, "create small actions that create ripples of hope." You are our ripples of hope. The change we all so desperately need is in your hands. And yes, you stand on the shoulders of many, including your family who have no doubt sacrificed mightily in order for you to be where you are today. But lead your life motivated by the responsibilities of knowing that the diploma that you receive tomorrow, if used well will enable the next generation to stand proudly on your shoulders. I'm rooting for you class of 2018 but more importantly your country is counting on you.

Thank you very much.