

Valedictorian Speech
Graduation 2k16

Trustees, President Pavoncello, Dean Merva, members of the Faculty, families, administration, staff, and you, my fellow graduates.

I have a confession to make. I've had some mixed feelings about the delivery of this speech. My initial response, of course, was delight. Glee. A very strong sense of pride and joy. John Cabot University has an extraordinary record of 44 years of commitment to liberal arts education - and I am honored to be standing here today to speak on behalf of such a wonderful and diverse class.

However, my later reaction was not so happy. I was very anxious about having to figure out something to say to our class at this particular time, not only in our lives, but also this time in history.

What could possibly and honestly be said in 2016 to an audience of people who are relieved and hopeful, but also concerned?

I was seeking advice from my sister last night and she said to me: Silvia, don't try to be too charming, too funny or too intellectual... just be yourself.

Well, first, may I say, our professors look beautiful in their robes, although it's a little embarrassing they all showed up in the same outfit.

I've always had this idea that if you're wearing a robe in the afternoon it means you've given up on life.

But that's not what I'm thinking now. I look at them and I see commitment. I see bravery. I see patience.

So we should tell them that the work they do is second to none, and there are no words to express the gratitude we owe them for planting the seeds of our education and shaping us into the people we have become.

In this regard, please allow me a personal thank you. Like most of us, I owe gratitude to many people in my life: my family, my friends, my fiancée. But one person in particular deserves a shout-out, and that's my mom. Thank you for being the toughest woman I know and teaching me how to be one.

I understand not everyone here has perfect families. In fact, most of us don't. And yet, our not-so-perfect families, of whatever kind, helped us get to this day. So, on behalf of the class of 2016, thank you.

I'd be a fool if I didn't take time to thank the staff, the trustees, the administration - for building, and relentlessly improving, the place many of us have come to consider a home.

Between those walls we learned English, Math, *most* of History - Professor Lanzone can be very distracting - but above all, we created the best community we could have asked for. None of this could have been possible without you.

[pause]

It is with this that I now speak to you, my fellow graduates. There are so many of us graduating today. I see all familiar faces, although I feel like some of you I barely know, and that's something I regret. I also regret knowing far, far too much about some of you... things you just don't forget. Anyway.

We made it. We survived the online registration system. We survived years of bad eating habits, bad drinking habits, and possibly even worse sleeping habits. We got through college, which is no easy task, and we got through it together.

Our families are extremely proud of us. You can't imagine the sense of pride and relief they are experiencing. I hear this would be the most appropriate time to ask for money.

We supported each other through thick and thin. We were there to save each other's life on several occasions.

We were also there to snap-chat each other's dignity away in different occasions. So I say, today we'll call it even.

I know many of us are worried about the future, but there's no need. The economy is booming. The job market is wide open. The planet is just fine...

On a serious note, while I understand that we are stepping in a world of uncertainty, I want to conclude with a few things that I know to be true.

I know that the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself. And if I were to give you a one-fits-all recipe for success and happiness today, I'd tell you to be selfless.

I would tell you to do all the other things, the ambitious things -- travel, get rich, innovate, lead, fall in love, make an lose fortunes... But, as you do, steer your life in the direction of kindness.

I would tell you that you can't live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to give back to you.

I would tell you that, while I understand feeling young, invincible, and bulletproof, you should never underestimate the power of other people's love, support, and prayer.

I'd tell you that we're no superhumans, but that harnessing willpower to kindness can, and does, do miracles.

Whatever path you choose, however many roads you travel, I also hope you choose to break the rules a little bit. Make some trouble out there where it's needed. 'Cause the world is not doing too well. The old rules are crumbling, and nobody knows what the new rules will be... so make up your own.

You will never have more energy, enthusiasm, hair, or brain cells than you have today. Take advantage of that. Fight mental slavery. Don't buy society's definition of success, because it's not working for anyone. It's not working for women, it's not working for men, and it's not working for polar bears. So be different.

Toni Morrison once said, "You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine what it feels to be human without domination over others, without reckless arrogance, without fear of others unlike you.

Although you will never fully know or successfully manipulate the characters who surface or disrupt your plot, being your own story means you can always choose the tone"

Today I ask you, please choose kindness. As many of you know, I am a teller of stories, and therefore an optimist, a believer in the ethical bond of the human heart, a believer in the power of empathy.

I wish you all to go into the world and do well. But, more importantly, I wish you all to go into the world and do **good**. It is always said, “the future is ours for the taking’. But I think it’s also ours for the giving. So make an effort to be extraordinary. Be a doer. If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door.

Success isn’t the result of spontaneous combustion. You must set yourself on fire. And when you do, when your flame is as alive as today, share your sparkle.

A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle. So if you’re going to have power, please empower somebody else. If you are free, free somebody else. If you’re having a good day, make someone else’s day just as good.

Take pride in how far you have come, have faith in how far you can go, and fight like hell to get there.

But while you’re busy aiming for the stars, don’t forget to enjoy the light along the way.

Class of 2016... We’re gonna be okay.

Thank you