

Park University Kansas City Area Commencement Keynote Address

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[Thank you's]

I'm really impatient. You know that annoying guy behind you at the grocery store making sighing noises as you count out pennies? That's me. Or the jerk leaning on his horn at the ATM drive-through while you spend five minutes organizing your money in your wallet. Again, yours truly.

So, true to form, I thought the best way to begin today's festivities would be to give in to my impatience, and get on with it already. In the spirit of quickly dispensing with the dull, obligatory commencement speech fluff, then, I offer you the shortest, and perhaps worst, commencement speech in history. See if you can count the clichés:

Class of 2011, my hope for you is that you spread your wings and follow your passions. Indeed, since the world is your oyster, go forth and trust your instinct as you make the world a better place. You are the future, and today is the first day of the rest of your life, so follow your dreams. Remember that commencement means beginning, so one door is closing and another opening. Education is a journey, not a destination. So, go forth, climb up on the shoulders of others and seize the day as you look back on college as the best time of your life.

I counted 17.

Now, like all clichés, there's some wisdom in those tired, old statements. I particularly like the one about making the world a better place myself. But what these clichés leave out is any consideration at all of what you are all thinking right now.

OK, you might be thinking about the after graduation party. But what you've really been thinking about, I suspect, is what now?

I don't just mean what job you will do. What I mean is more than that. Not just finding a job and a career, but discovering how you can be a difference-maker. For me, and for many others, the difference we make can be summed up on one word — peace. Promoting peace in our communities is not only a calling I recommend, it is, in my experience, the path to a kind of fulfillment that I struggle putting words to.

Class of 2011, where will you find peace, and how will you incite peace?

I can almost hear you grumbling...yeah, yeah, peace is okay, but I'm all about making money. Accumulating wealth is fine, of course, especially when you make generous donations to your alma mater. What I hope my colleagues and I have accomplished as professors, other than delivering course contents and outcomes, is to give you desire and the tools to incite peace.

Inciting peace is a process. Some, like my Ugandan friend Betty, figured out how to do this at a young age. I'll tell you more about Betty in a minute. For others, like me, it took much longer.

I've always known I wanted to report, and write. During the 20-plus years after I sat in the audience at my commencement, I practiced my craft, and did a little teaching as well. But I was rudderless — like a movie with a bunch of scattered scenes, but no real plot. I was looking for something to make it all meaningful, to tie it all together.

I found that meaning, and my desire to incite peace, in an unlikely place — the small eastern European country of Georgia. I was teaching on a Fulbright Scholarship in neighboring Azerbaijan in 2007 when the U.S Embassy contacted me, asked if I knew anything about peace journalism and if I would be interested in teaching a peace journalism seminar in Georgia. Of course, I said, I am practically an expert on peace journalism. When I got off the phone with the embassy, I Googled “peace journalism” and discovered it is when reporters and editors make choices that make peace possible. This means not using inflammatory language, giving peacemakers a voice and showing citizens that there are always viable non-violent alternative responses during a conflict. I liked the sound of this.

Before I knew it, I found myself in far-western Georgia teaching peace journalism. Half of my students were from Georgia, and the other half from a breakaway republic of Abkhazia, which claims independence from Georgia. It was like being in a room with the Hatfield's and McCoy's, with Israelis and Palestinians, or with tea partiers and environmental activists. I thought they would kill each other, and then possibly kill me. This would have definitely put a damper on the seminar.

Instead, these wonderful Georgian and Abkhazian journalists showed me how to make peace happen. At the end of the seminar, the journalists — through no prodding by me — decided to come together to form a press club that they called the bridge. The bridge's goal was to encourage peace in both communities through responsible reporting.

In just one week in isolated western Georgia, I had found my calling — encouraging others to make their communities — their world, a more peaceful place.

In the years since 2007, I've been lucky enough to be able to combine my vocation — communications professor — with my need to help others see the value, the logic, of peace.

The good news for you, class of 2011, is that you don't have to wait like me until you've got one foot into geezerhood to discover the benefits of inciting peace. For example, take my friend Betty Mujungu, who I mentioned a little earlier. 25-year-old Betty is a reporter at a small radio station in Fort Portal, Uganda, where I spent the previous academic year teaching peace journalism on a state department grant. Betty attended one of my 30 peace journalism seminars. At this seminar, we talked about giving a voice to the voiceless in our communities, and empowering our citizens to seek development and peace instead of violence and conflict. I had no idea how thoroughly Betty would take my advice.

Betty's story — about how one person can make a positive difference, pardon the cliché — is testimony to the power of peace journalism.

After I learned what Betty had done as a journalist and as a peace activist, I went to Fort Portal to report this amazing tale. Here is that story.

[Six minute audio clip about Betty/kids]

The epilogue is mostly good news. The kids are all fine, still living with Betty and Edith. Money is a constant worry. Betty struggles to put food on the table, and to deal with occasional medical bills. Five of the six kids go to school and are doing well in their classes. Annet is still determined to be a doctor.

As I've talked to Betty over the last few months, I notice a young woman who has completely changed. This is because, I think, she has discovered how she can incite peace by helping those who can't help themselves. Like me, she's lucky enough to have a vocation — radio reporter — than can help her fulfill her mission of inciting peace.

I've told Betty that she's my hero, and I mean that sincerely.

So, let me get to the point. I'm here today to tell you that you are Betty Mujungu...or maybe that you can channel your inner Betty...and find a purpose in life — peace — that both embraces and transcends your chosen career.

I know what you're thinking... Well, I'm an English major, or an accounting major, or an economics, political science or biology major. What can I do? What does peace have to do with my field?

The answer isn't as hard as you think. Regardless of your discipline, each of you can utilize the wonderful liberal arts education that you take away from Park University to help promote societal development and foster cooperation and reconciliation.

You're an accounting major? You can be a peace accountant. Public relations major? Peace public relations. For example, I have a former student, Laura, who is using her PR know-how to launch a newsletter for Kansas City's homeless community. Why couldn't you be a peace economist or a peace political scientist? Heaven knows society needs as many advocates as we can get who are promoting civil, productive political discourse.

My esteemed colleague, criminal justice professor emeritus Dr Carol Getty, often talks of peace criminal justice... of fighting against lengthy, ineffective drug sentences, for example, or ending racial disparities in sentencing. She may even write a book about this. Nursing major? The opportunities as a peace nurse to help broken communities heal are nearly limitless. I've seen Park's peace nurses in action in a poverty-stricken area of Brazil. Pre law major? I know of a Park grad in law school who is using his legal expertise to help veterans find peace once they're out of the service. Javier, that's his name, is another one of my heroes.

What about peace business? I say, why not. Bill Gates got rich selling an annoying user U.N.-friendly product. But I don't think it's his money that makes him the world's richest man. Bill Gates is the world's richest man because of the opportunity he has to improve the world around him. Since 1994, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has spent over 25 billion dollars, mostly on global development and health. Bill Gates is another one of my heroes.

Are you, or will you be, enlisted in the military? The notion of a peace soldier isn't as far-fetched as it seems. I have an Israeli friend, a young man who I'll call David, who will soon be drafted into the Israeli defense forces. In fact, he just received his draft notice in October. Having discovered peace, he is determined to become a peace soldier. David said he will make it a point to be kind and even helpful to Palestinians when he's manning checkpoints, or doing searches or pat downs. He said he will be the first to call-out his fellow soldiers who treat anyone disrespectfully or step over the line of ethical behavior. David is also my hero.

While we're talking about peace soldiers... One of the world's top peacemaking organizations — People to People International — was actually founded by the 20th century's most celebrated military man. People to People, based in Kansas City, has a

motto — “Peace Through Understanding.” I’ve volunteered for People to People and have been amazed at their ability to bring people together, regardless of their nationality, race, religion or ethnicity. In 1961, the year I was born, General Dwight David Eisenhower launched People to People International.

So, whether you’re a soldier, educator or journalist, making a commitment to peace can make all the difference in the world, and make all the difference for the world as well.

If all this seems too difficult for you, I urge you to remember Betty Mujungu. Where would those six orphans be had she not made a commitment to inciting peace? Class of 2011, with your education, and your commitment, you can be the next Betty Mujungu.

Thank you.