



Park University Kansas City Area May 2018 Commencement Keynote Address

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Thank you, President (Greg) Gunderson for that kind introduction and for the opportunity to participate in this graduation ceremony.

Graduates, I know it's early. It's a beautiful day, and you've put in so much work to make it to this moment. Well, probably not *this* moment (when you're listening to me). But a moment not too far from now, during which you'll symbolically move your tassel from one side to the other, congratulate your peers, hug those whom have supported you through your journey and celebrate.

You're probably looking at me like a line item on a program — one more thing to get through before you've officially made it through your commencement and you can start the next phase of your life. Or, at least head to lunch.

Well, I can't say I blame you. As a Park alumna, I have certainly been in your shoes. So, in the spirit of getting us to the moment that you're all anxiously awaiting, I'm going to follow the three B's of public speaking — Be Brilliant, Be Brief and Be Seated!

I don't know about brilliant. But I'm going to be brief and I'm going to be seated. I only ask that you be in this moment...with me...as I tell you a story about a journey toward purpose.

Travel back in time with me to June of 1968. It was a tumultuous period in our history: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. The country was embroiled in civil unrest. Riots had erupted in communities across the nation. Young college students were

protesting the war in Vietnam. And presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated. After watching the national events unfold, witnessing the riots in Kansas City, being teargassed at school while mourning Dr. King's death, a 14-year-old girl boarded a bus to attend Solidarity Day — the ceremonial conclusion of the Poor People's March on Washington, D.C.

Inspired by Dr. King's legacy and without family or friends, she courageously embarked on a journey with complete strangers to witness history in the making. When she arrived on the National Mall, she observed people from all walks of life from across the nation converge on Capitol Hill to make a statement about the change they wanted to see in our country. Many of them had sacrificed their time, money, comfort and well-being to try to make a difference...to try to improve the quality of life for the poor and disenfranchised.

She had never seen so many people of color in one place at the same time fighting for peace, justice and equality. I was that little girl. And that experience, while I didn't know it then, was a defining moment in my life that set me on course toward discovering my purpose. That experience, as well as several other pivotal experiences along my life's journey, ingrained deep within me a spirit of service and a spirit of activism.

So. What lessons are embedded in my story? What do I want you to remember? Two things:

First: Purpose is a journey — not a destination. When I got on that bus in 1968, I didn't have a clue what my future held. I didn't know then what I know now, but I was open. I was willing and I was inspired by what was happening around me. I was woke!

Like me, you will have many experiences in life. And most likely, multiple careers — each one shaping, guiding and preparing you for your next great thing along the pathway to purpose. As you embark upon the next leg of your purpose journey, pay attention to those inner voices. Take note of what sparks your passion. Lean into your gifts and talents. And when you come face-to-face with that epiphany — that moment of clarity about why you are here and how you want to share your gifts and talents with the world — embrace it! Claim it! Pursue it! Do it!

Purpose is a journey, not a destination. It can be elusive if you're not paying attention. So, stay woke!

Second: The late Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, once said: "Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." I didn't know very much about courage as a 14-year-old getting on that bus 50 years ago. In fact, I was a little bit afraid. But I did it.

Today, in my work at the helm of a civil rights and human services organization, I come face-to-face with fear on a regular basis. Every time I speak up about injustices, or confront the purveyors of racial hatred or challenge the status quo, I am afraid. My spirit is filled with anxiety in anticipation of potential backlash or collateral damage that often rains down on those who dare to take a stand. But I do it. I inwardly acknowledge my fears, compartmentalize them so that I can attain dominion over them to do what I must do.

Throughout your life, you will come face-to-face with dilemmas that will challenge you to find your courage. It could be conquering a fear that has long plagued your life like the fear of heights, water or flying. Or, it could be the paralyzing fear of failure that can get in the way of following your dreams. Or, it can be the reluctance to speak up in a meeting or to challenge the status quo.

Whatever it is, tap in to your inner strength to follow the teaching of Dr. Martin Luther King when he said that “we must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.”

You’ve heard a snippet of my history, now it is time for you to write your own.

Congratulations Class of 2018! Be courageous and stay woke!