Park University Kansas City Area
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Commencement Keynote Address

Reggie Robinson, J.D.
Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs
University of Kansas

Good morning! Thank you for that introduction. Congratulations to the Park University Class of 2019!

It's a great pleasure to be with you here this morning and I'm particularly grateful for this opportunity to join our graduates as you earn your degrees from Park University. You have much to celebrate and I'm honored to be included in that celebration.

It is wonderful for me to see all of the parents, family members and friends who are here with you today. I am confident that our graduates realize how much — how indispensably — those family members and friends have contributed to the success that we celebrate today.

So, thank you all for the support and encouragement that you have provided for these graduates. None of us achieves anything of true significance on our own, and I thank all of you for all you have done to support the Class of 2019 as each of them has made their way to this very important Commencement Day.

Gazing upon you as you prepare to receive your degrees this morning, I am filled with gratitude and hope. I'm grateful for each of you and, and I'm deeply thankful for how, in ways that are particular to each of you individually, you represent the

best of what our collective the future will be. And I'm hopeful as I think about the impressive contributions you will make.

But, of course, hope is an interesting thing. I can be hopeful about what you will carry into the future. Your parents, family and friends can be and are hopeful about all of that as well. And the professors who have taught you can and do burn with the excitement of that hope.

And, certainly, you, each of you, can be hopeful about what you will carry to the future and all of the great things you will do when you get there.

But as we all know, it takes more than hope to deliver on promise. To make the kind of difference I know that you want to make in the world, hope is certainly an indispensable ingredient. But no matter what path you choose, hope will be a necessary, but not sufficient commodity — you will need it, but it will not be nearly enough on its own.

Of course, to make the difference you want to make in the world — the difference we need for you to make in the world — will require knowledge, skill and hard work. That's what it takes to make hope real.

I have no doubt that your time at this institution has prepared you for much of what it will take for you to achieve your goals and to make real the hope that you will make a positive difference. Park University has prepared you to do much of that work, and to do it well. Park University has provided the tools you need.

During your time at Park University, you have acquired a treasure trove of valuable knowledge and information that you will need as you move into your futures.

During your time at Park University, you have enhanced your capacity to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing. You have honed your ability to confront and solve difficult and complicated problems, and you have bolstered your ability to analyze thoroughly and to think critically.

And, perhaps, most importantly, during your time at Park University, you have learned how to learn — an increasingly essential capacity in a world that generates information and new knowledge at a break-neck pace.

What you know now will not be enough to carry you successfully over the decades to come. You must know how to learn even more as time passes. Park University has provided you with the tools to do that.

In short, you have acquired much and developed significantly during your time at this University. Thanks to your faculty. Thanks to the University leaders who work hard to steer the institution and who are committed to providing your professors with the tools they need to enrich your educational experience. Thanks to the staff that supports the entire enterprise, and thanks to your peers from whom you have learned each and every day. Thanks to all of those folks, you have acquired much during your time here, and you are poised for success as you leave this place and seek to make your mark in the world.

What I want to tell you briefly today, however, is that you will need even more. Or, to put it another way, we will need more from you if we are to effectively address many of the daunting challenges that confront us as a society.

Among those difficult challenges is the apparent deterioration of our civic discourse. So much of our social interaction — so much of our civic engagement — seems course, rough, uncivil and mean. It seems that in many ways, our social fabric is fraying.

The fact is that as you move away from Park University and into the next phases of your lives, a challenge that looms for all of us in this big, complicated, increasingly diverse country of ours is: How do we talk to each other? How do we take steps to come together or at least engage each other respectfully despite all that can separate us from each other?

What I want to suggest to you is that the bridge that each of us can build to carry us across the divisions that separate us is empathy.

Let me start with a story. Quick flashback: I'm in Lake Forest, Illinois, and I see a notice for a lost dog; I felt really sad. What I realized is that if that dog owner would have been standing right in front of me in that very moment, I would have been able to convey a sense of support well beyond what likely would have been the case only a few years earlier.

If I would have seen the very same "lost dog" notice years before, I would have felt a very small twinge for that dog owner, thought to myself, "how sad. I hope they find that dog." But that would have been it.

Why the difference? About a year before my trip to Lake Forest, Moxie joined our family. Moxie is our dog, a very cute terrier/beagle mix. And that made all the difference.

Sympathy is a feeling of understanding, a sense of compassion for someone else's situation.

Empathy is something deeper. Empathy is something that connects us more fully to others. When you empathize, you can truly understand what someone is going through.

Empathy is the capacity to understand what another is experiencing from within the other person's frame of reference.

Before Moxie, I would have been sympathetic to that Lake Forest lost dog owner. In fact, I had been sympathetic to many friends who lost dogs or had to put them to sleep. After Moxie, I was empathetic — I was feeling a sense of empathy for someone I didn't even know!

And that before and after contrast actually bothered me for quite a while. It bothered me because I think we should expect more of ourselves than the easy and passive empathy that comes from common characteristics or experiences.

I think we should all be more actively engaged in the conscious and purposeful pursuit of empathy. What I mean is that I shouldn't have to own a dog to empathize with a dog owner. I shouldn't have to be Jewish to empathize with Holocaust survivors. I shouldn't have to be a refugee to empathize with the plight of Syrian refugees. I shouldn't have to be a West Virginia coal miner to empathize with the challenge that responses to climate change pose for that coal miner's way of life.

There's a line from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* that captures the kind of intentional and conscious empathy that I'm talking about:

"You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view — until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

I encourage you to work consciously to develop your capacity for empathy — to consciously and intentionally seize opportunities to climb inside the skin of others and walk around in it for a while.

You'll be a better leader. You'll be a better friend. You will be a better colleague. The quality of your service will be enriched. And climbing inside that skin will provide you with a profoundly enhanced understanding of those you lead, those you befriend and those you serve.

If you embrace the form of conscious empathy I'm describing, you will also be better able to engage in and lead the difficult conversations that we need to undertake if we are ever to move effectively across the divisions that separate us from each other.

A capacity for empathy relies not only on a willingness to step into the shoes of another, but also the ability to step away from yourself. It requires us to step outside of the frame that typically sets the way you see the world. It requires that we remove the glasses that confine and narrow the scope, breadth and depth of how we see the world around us.

And that notion of stepping away from yourself, more particularly, stepping away from the comfortable patterns of your day to day existence, captures a related thought I wanted to share with you today.

And I've got a story to pass along here as well. The story I want to share briefly with you today. This story is not my story, but a children's story entitled "Good Night Opus" and it's written by Berkeley Breathed, who writes the "Bloom County" comic strip that many of you may have read. Let me read a little bit from it for you.

"Which book, dear Opus, may I read you tonight?" asked Grandma with love at the start of that night.

"Why my favorite," I said, "the one with the rhymes, the same one you've read me two hundred nine times."

Now the book that Opus is talking about was *Goodnight Moon*. Anyone know that story?

Then she sat and said, "Hush," and her voice filled the room. "Goodnight," she said softly, "goodnight to the moon. And goodnight to the lamp and the little toy boat. Goodnight to the mittens all hanging and soaked. Goodnight to the floor, goodnight to the walls. Goodnight to the rug and the door and the halls. Goodnight tiny mouse and goodnight blue moonshine. Goodnight," Grandma read, for the two hundred tenth time.

"Now I can't really say how this happened next: After two hundred ten times, I departed the text."

Opus goes on a wonderful frolic to a range of wonderful and magical places well beyond where he's been while listening to his Grandma read *Goodnight Moon*.

He went on a journey during which his eyes were opened to an entirely new way of looking at his world. At the end of his journey, Opus says:

I found my way home and collapsed on the floor, not long before Grandma showed up at the door. I told her all of what happened that night – that I stepped out for once and followed my sight. And sometimes it's good that we look for a way to depart from our text and get carried away.

Now, *Goodnight Moon* is a great story. But even a wonderful story gets old after a while. I challenge you to lead Good Night Opus lives of curiosity, adventure and empathy — lives marked by the courage to break out of comfortable habits to explore new connections and uncomfortable opportunities.

Chose the path that reflects a recognition that we are all enriched by choices that give us an opportunity to focus on a purpose beyond ourselves. Chose the path that connects you to others because we are indeed all in this together.

And in the words of "Good Night Opus," I urge you every now and then, at least, to depart from the text and to pursue experiences and connections that lie outside of your comfort zones. Don't let yourselves get stuck in the rut of what's comfortable.

Conscious empathy is about expanding and embracing our connections with others in more human and meaningful ways. It's a kind of empathy that requires us to reach beyond what's comfortable, to a deeper connection to those we know, and beyond the "usual suspects" of our day-to-day lives.

"You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view — until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

As you move onto the next phase of your lives, I encourage you to depart from the text and to seek the kind of connection that comes only when we're willing to step into the shoes of another.

Goodnight Moon, Goodnight Opus, Good morning to all of you. Thank you for letting me join in this wonderful celebration. Congratulations Class of 2019 and best wishes to you all.