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# Wisdom of Leaders and Guidance for Graduates

By [SAM DILLON](#)

[President Obama](#)' s [speech to cadets](#) at [West Point](#) last month marked the ninth consecutive commencement with the nation at war, and he traced the focus of the fighting from Afghanistan to Iraq and back to where it started.

"Cadets, there will be difficult days ahead," Mr. Obama said. "We will adapt, we will persist, and I have no doubt that together with our Afghan and international partners, we will succeed."

Cadets cheered, but commencement speeches each spring produce a tapestry of opinion, and other speakers questioned our Afghanistan strategy. [Jeffrey Sachs](#), the economist, [told Grinnell College graduates](#) that Afghanistan' s national income is about \$10 billion per year.

"Yet, America will spend \$100 billion this year," Mr. Sachs said, "in a futile and misguided effort to restore order through a military approach. We could raise that country' s income tenfold, but instead we will leave it in even deeper rubble."

A few campus speakers invoked the Gulf of Mexico [oil spill](#), others urged graduates to look past the toughest job market in decades. "Don' t worry about the first job," Professor Sol Gittleman cheerfully [told graduates](#) at [Tufts](#). "The one you' ll have in three years hasn' t even been invented yet!"

And as in every year, speeches were laden with advice. "Work like hell," [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) said [at Emory](#).

"Keep being you," [Michelle Obama](#) said [at George Washington](#).

"Shoot to kill," [Glenn Beck](#) said [at Liberty University](#).

*Here are excerpts from campus speeches, some condensed slightly. To comment, go to [The Choice](#) blog.*

### [John Grisham](#)

Author

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### [Video](#)

In the past few years, the publishing industry has been scandalized by a handful of writers who wrote very compelling stories of their real-life adventures. These were good stories, they were well written, the voices were clear and seemingly authentic. They sold for big money, they were marketed aggressively, they were reviewed favorably, and then they were exposed for being what they really were — frauds, fabrications, lies.

The real-life adventures never happened. The books were pulled from the shelves. The publishers were embarrassed. Lawsuits were filed to retrieve the advances. And the writers' voices have been forever silenced.

In life, finding a voice is speaking and living the truth. Each of you is an original. Each of you has a distinctive voice. When you find it, your story will be told. You will be heard.

### [Amartya Sen](#)

Nobel laureate in economics

St. Michael's College

### [Audio](#)

A well-functioning market economy can make a huge contribution to the growth of incomes and living standards. In the absence of sensible regulations, the market can also yield a complete disaster. What we have to work for now is to seek an appropriate combination of activities of the market and of the state.

Despite all that Adam Smith did to explicate the contributions of well-functioning markets, he was also deeply concerned about the incidence of poverty, illiteracy, relative deprivation that might remain despite a well-functioning market economy. He wanted public services and not just markets.

### **Freeman A. Hrabowski III**

President, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Harvey Mudd College

### [Audio and video](#)

His name was Rev. [Martin Luther King](#). ... He said he wanted the children to march in the streets in Birmingham, and unfortunately that meant they would go to jail. And the first day there were guns and dogs and fire hoses

and by the second day I said to my parents, “I’ ve got to go; I’ ve got to go and help out.” And they said, “No way.”

I said: “Wait a minute. You made me go and sit in church all that time, and now you’ re going to tell me I can’ t do what he said? — You folks are hypocrites.” Now at that time you really didn’ t talk back to your parents, believe me. So my daddy said, “Boy, go to your room.”

But early the next morning they came in and told me, “If you want to do this we will support you.” Now at that point, students, this is about courage. All of a sudden I got really afraid. ... But it was too late to turn around. We marched and we were thrown in the paddy wagon. I spent a horrible week in jail. But what the experience taught me was several things. Number one: I don’ t have time to be a victim. Number two: Even children can think critically and make decisions that can affect their lives. And number three: America is a great country. Who would have thought years later that I would be president of a predominantly white university?

### **Gail Collins**

New York Times columnist

Mount Holyoke College

[Text](#)

You’ re going to write the next chapter. I can’ t wait to see what happens. The women who went before you won legal equality for our sex. They opened a thousand doors. But here’ s what they didn’ t do. They didn’ t end violence against women. They tried, but today celebrities who beat up their girlfriends, who sexually harass powerless women in bars, are still treated less severely than celebrities who mistreat animals. So we’ re going to have to pass that battle on to you. They didn’ t achieve full rights for gay couples. This is the one area, people, where you can be on a picket line and be totally confident that the winds of history are at your back. And they didn’ t figure out how to find a proper balance for work and family.

### **Meryl Streep**

Actress

Barnard College

[Video](#)

I am or I was an expert in kissing on stage and on screen. How did I prepare for this? Well most of my preparation took place in my suburban high school or rather, behind my suburban high school in New Jersey. One is obliged to do a great deal of kissing in my line of work. Air kissing, ass-kissing, kissing up and of course actual kissing — much like hookers, actors have

to do it with people we may not like or even know. We may have to do it with friends, which, believe it or not, is particularly awkward — for people of my generation, it’ s awkward. My other areas of faux expertise, river rafting, miming the effects of radiation poisoning, knowing which shoes go with which bag, coffee plantation, Turkish, Polish, German, French, Italian — that’ s Iowa-Italian from “The Bridges of Madison County” — a bit of the Bronx, Aramaic, Yiddish, Irish clog dancing, cooking, singing, riding horses, knitting, playing the violin and simulating steamy sexual encounters.

[Lionel Richie](#)

Songwriter

Tuskegee University

[Video](#)

For your future and your lives, dare the impossible.

Let me tell you how I overcame the word “impossible.” When I told my parents about dropping out of school and joining the Commodores, that we were going to be the black Beatles and we were going to take over the world, my father said to me, “That’ s impossible.” Of course, he said a few other words I can’ t use at the commencement exercise this morning, but he was clear that that was impossible. But know that in your life that “impossible” will come up, and it is your job to dare the impossible.

If the book’ s been written, the money’ s already been made. Dare to write your own book. Dare the impossible. There will be people who will talk about where they’ ve been, what they’ ve done. I want you to listen, take it all in, and be as cordial as you possibly can. And then I want you to tell them where you’ re going.

**Mike Moncrief**

Mayor, Fort Worth, Tex.

Texas Christian University

Never be afraid to try something new. Remember: Noah had never built an ark, but it was a large group of professionals that built the Titanic.

[Rachel Maddow](#)

Television host

Smith College

[Video](#)

It is important to remember Prohibition because enacting it was a disaster for our nation, but it was a personal triumph for Carry Nation.

I would like to offer the hypothesis on this beautiful graduation day that personal triumphs are overrated. Someone at Yum! Brands this year achieved their personal triumph of getting KFC to remove the bun from a cheese and bacon sandwich and replace that bun with pieces of fried chicken. The Double Down sandwich designer' s personal triumph. ...

Someone invented the payday loan. ...

All these people dreamed their dreams. Some dreams are bad dreams.

Gunning not just for personal triumph for yourself but for durable achievement to be proud of for life is the difference between winning things and leadership. ... It' s agreeing that you are part of something, taking as your baseline that you will not seek to reach your own goals by stepping on the neck of your community.

[Steven Chu](#)

Secretary of Energy  
Washington University

[Text](#)

In order to meet the energy and environmental challenges we face, we will need nothing less than a second industrial revolution. The first Industrial Revolution supplanted human and animal power with machines powered by fossil fuel. Today, we use the power of two horses to dry our hair. We go to the local market under the pull of hundreds of horses, and fly across our continent with a hundred thousand horses. A second industrial revolution is needed to provide the world' s energy needs in an environmentally sustainable way. America has the opportunity to lead in this new industrial revolution and build the foundation of our future prosperity. Alternatively, we can hope that the price of oil will return to \$30 a barrel and that [climate change](#) is not a serious threat. If we are wrong, we will be importing the new energy technologies developed by Europe and Asia.

**Glenn Beck**

Television host  
Liberty University  
Video

Learn, laugh, love. Sleep hard, but sleep less. Pray on your knees.

To whom much is given much is required. You have been given the world and beyond. ... Never want anything too much. You will pay too high of a price one way or another. Labels are meaningless, but Louis Vuitton shoes are

really the best. Someone you meet today is afraid or suffering. Find them. Find them every day and comfort them. Shoot to kill. Always tithe.

**Admiral [Michael Mullen](#)**

Chairman, [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#)

Florida A & M

[Text](#)

In 2005, when I was the head of the Navy, I went to a conference in New Orleans on diversity — ethnic diversity, gender diversity — and I walked in with my immediate staff, which was all white male. A young officer from the Coast Guard sent me a note after that that said you have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. He wasn't happy with what my staff looked like. About 18 months later, in my home, I was having a farewell party for my immediate staff of about 15 to 20 officers and I stood back and looked, and I think I was the only white male in the group. Now that's a lesson about young people telling their seniors when they don't have it right.

**[Eric H. Holder Jr.](#)**

United States attorney general

Columbia Law School

[Video](#)

During my undergraduate years here in Morningside Heights, I was one of many students on this campus who felt strongly about, well, nearly everything. It was the '70s. During my senior year, several of us took one of our concerns — that black students needed a designated space to gather on campus — to the dean's office. This being Columbia, we proceeded to occupy that office. The target of that sit-in was Dean Henry Coleman. He heard us out, led us toward common ground and, eventually, to a compromise. But I'm not sure he was very happy about, shall we say, his forced captivity. In the ultimate display ofchutzpah, however, I still asked Dean Coleman to recommend me for admission into this law school. And, lo and behold, he agreed.

**Michelle Obama**

First lady

George Washington University

[Video and text](#)

Imagine a child whose first memory of an American is a student who helps him see again. Imagine a community whose first experience with America is a group of youth on winter break standing side by side with them building homes. Imagine a country shattered by a catastrophic earthquake that they

see wave after wave of rescuers and doctors and relief workers all wearing the stars and stripes on their sleeve.

Imagine how powerful that is. Imagine what impact thousands of stories like that today can have a decade from now.

### [Patti Smith](#)

Singer

Pratt Institute

### [Video](#)

My greatest urge is to speak to you of dental care. My generation had a rough go dentally. Our dentists were the Army dentists who came back from World War II and believed that the dental office was a battleground. You have a better chance at dental health. And I say this because you want at night to be pacing the floor because your fuse is burning inside of you, because you want to do your work, because you want to finish that canvas, because you want to help your fellow man. You don't want to be pacing because you need a damn root canal. So, floss. Use salt and baking soda. Take care of your damn teeth.

### [Sonia Sotomayor](#)

[Supreme Court](#) justice

Saint Lawrence University

### [Audio](#)

My sense of reality disappeared in May of last year when I first met with the president in the Oval Office. We spent over an hour together in conversation. A few days later, the president, with the vice president standing by, announced that he had selected me as his first nominee to the [United States Supreme Court](#). I can not begin to describe what that moment was like. But just as memorable for me is the fact that in the moments before the cameras began to roll, the president had been speaking with my nephews about soccer, while the vice president talked with my brother about golf. In the weeks and months that followed, I began my work as the newest justice, met with presidents, ambassadors, dignitaries and judges from around the world, and even threw out a first pitch at a Yankees-Red Sox game in the new [Yankee Stadium](#). Can you guess who won? None of these things had seemed possible to me when, in 1976, I took my first step as a college graduate, and entered law school.

### [John McCain](#)

United States senator

Ohio Wesleyan University

### [Video and text](#)

You might think that I' m now going to advise you not to be afraid to fail. I' m not. Be afraid. Speaking from considerable experience, failing stinks. Just don' t be undone by it. Failure is no more a permanent condition than is success.

Andrew Keh contributed reporting.