

Barack Obama, Commencement Speech (2006)

Good morning President Wilson, Chancellor Collins, the Board of Trustees, faculty, parents, family, friends, and the Class of 2006. Congratulations on your graduation, and thank you for allowing me the honor to be a part of it.

It's always great to be back in Boston. As some of you may have heard, I was here a few years ago to give the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic Convention.

It was an amazing experience for me. A humbling honor. A tremendous opportunity. And if you had come up to me a few years earlier and told me I'd be there, I would've politely told you that you were out of your mind.

Let me tell you what happened at the last convention I had been to.

It was the year 2000, and I had just gotten my rear-end handed to me in my very first race for Congress. Didn't even make it past the primary. I was a little depressed, and more than a little broke, but some friends suggested that I get my mind off it by going to Los Angeles, where that year's Democratic Convention was being held.

So I decided to go. And when my plane landed in LA, I got my luggage, walked on over to the Hertz counter, filled out all the forms to rent a car, gave my credit card to the nice woman behind the counter who, moments later, handed it back to me and said, "Mr. Obama, it seems we have a problem."

That's right, my credit card was denied.

After thirty more minutes of haggling, I finally made it to the convention, only to learn that I was thought of so highly by the Democratic Party that my credentials barely granted me access to the men's room - let alone backstage where all the action was. And so, being the VIP that I was, I spent the rest of the week as the guy in the room who nobody knew, but everyone knew didn't belong.

Needless to say, when they asked me to be the convention's keynote speaker just four years later, I made sure I was getting a car.

All joking aside, receiving that honor was a welcome change - and, as MasterCard could attest, more than a little unlikely.

But of course, America is an unlikely place - a country built on defiance of the odds; on a belief in the impossible. And I remind you of this because as you set out to live your own stories of success and achievement, it's now your turn to help keep it this way.

It's your turn to keep this daringly radical but unfailingly simple notion of America alive - that no matter where you're born or how much your parents have; no matter what you look like or what you believe in, you can still rise to become whatever you want; still go on to achieve great things; still pursue the happiness you hope for.

Today, this dream sounds common - perhaps even cliché - yet for most of human history it's been anything but. As a servant of Rome, a peasant in China, or a subject of King George, there were very few unlikely futures. No matter how hard you worked or struggled for something better, you knew you'd spend your life forced to build somebody else's empire; to sacrifice for someone else's cause.

But as the centuries passed, the people of the world grew restless. They were tired of tyranny and weary of their lot in life. And as they saw merchants start to sail across oceans and explorers set off in search of new worlds, they followed.

It was right here, in the waters around us, where the American experiment began. As the earliest settlers arrived on the shores of Boston and Salem and Plymouth, they dreamed of building a City upon a Hill. And the world watched, waiting to see if this improbable idea called America would succeed.

For over two hundred years, it has. Not because our dream has progressed perfectly. It hasn't. It has been scarred by our treatment of native peoples, betrayed by slavery, clouded by the subjugation of women, wounded by racism, shaken by war and depression.

Yet, the true test of our union is not whether it's perfect, but whether we work to perfect it. Whether we recognize our failings, identify our shortcomings, and then rise to meet the challenges of our time.

And so we've broadened the American family by winning civil rights and voting rights for women and then African Americans; by choosing to welcome waves of new immigrants to our shores.

We've pushed the boundaries of opportunity by providing free education for our children and health care for our seniors and our poor; and we've won bargaining rights and wage hikes and retirement security for our workers.

None of this progress happened on its own. Much of it seemed impossible at the time. But all of it came about because ordinary men and women had faith that here in America, our imperfect dream could be perfected.

Now, there may be some who doubt that much has changed - those who doubt that things are better today than they were yesterday. To them I say take a look at this class of 2006.

More than half of you represent the very first member of your family to ever attend college. In the most diverse university in all of New England, I look out at a sea of faces that are African-American and Hispanic-American and Asian-American and Arab-American. I see students that have come here from over 100 different countries, believing like those first settlers that they too could find a home in this City on a Hill - that they too could find success in this unlikeliest of places.

All of this has occurred in the midst of a city where No Irish Need Apply signs once hung from stores. All of this in a city where, just thirty years ago, buses of black students were pelted with rocks as they pulled into schools in South Boston; where the Red Sox were once the team who refused to sign the great Jackie Robinson.

But the problem isn't that we've made progress. The problem is that progress isn't good enough. There is more work to be done, more justice to be had, more barriers to break. And now it's your generation's turn to bring these changes about.

The last century was undoubtedly an American century. Our victory over fascism and communism liberated millions. At home, we built a shared prosperity that created the largest middle-class in history. Ours was a nation of liberators; of free people; of prosperous people - and the world took notice.

But today, just a few years into the twenty-first century, we already find ourselves in a different and precarious position. As revolutions in communications and technology have broken down barriers across the world, it has given more power to both our competitors and our enemies.

No longer can we assume that a high-school education in Boston is enough to compete for a job that could easily go to a college-educated student in Bangalore or Beijing. No more can we count on employers to provide health care and pensions and job training when their bottom-lines know no borders. Never again can we expect the oceans that surround America to keep us safe from attacks on our own soil.

So what does this mean for you? What role will you play in meeting these challenges?

I do not pretend to have the answers. Each of you will have to discover your own. But perhaps I can offer a few suggestions that may be useful along the way.

First, take risks. When I was on the brink of graduating from college, I had this crazy idea that I wanted to be a community organizer and work in low-income neighborhoods.

My mother and grandparents thought I should go to law school, and my friends were all busy applying for jobs on Wall Street. But I went ahead and wrote letters to every organization in the country that I thought was working to empower low-income people. And finally, this small group of churches on the south side of Chicago wrote back and offered me a job helping them deal with the consequences of steel plants that had closed and put thousands out of work.

The churches didn't have much money - so they offered me a grand sum of \$12,000 a year plus \$1,000 to buy a car. So I bought a beat up old car, packed up my belongings, got out a map, and started driving west to Chicago - a place I had never been and where I didn't know a living soul.

About halfway between New York City and Chicago, I stopped for the night in a small town in Pennsylvania whose name I no longer remember. I found a motel that looked cheap and clean, I pulled into the driveway, and went to the counter, where there was an old guy doing crossword puzzles.

I asked him for a room, and as he was filling out my information, he asked me where I was headed. I said I was going to Chicago, and I told him I was going there to work as a community organizer. And he looked at me and he said, "You know, you look like a nice clean-cut young man, and you've got a nice voice. So let me give you a piece of advice - forget this community organizing business. You can't change the world, and people won't appreciate you trying. What you should do is go into television broadcasting. I'm telling you, you've got a future."

I could've taken my mother's advice and I could've taken my grandparents advice. I could've taken the path my friends traveled. And I could've taken the words of wisdom from that old man in Pennsylvania. And, objectively speaking, I'm sure he was right. But I knew there was something in me that wanted to try for something bigger. So don't let people talk you into doing the safe thing. Listen to what's in you and decide what it is that you care so much about that you're willing to take a chance.

My second piece of advice is to stay global. As the world continues to change and we become more connected to each other, globalization will bring both benefits and disruptions to our lives. But either way, it's here, and it's not going away.

We can try to build walls around us, and we can look inward, and we can respond by being frightened and angry about those disruptions.

But that's not what we're about. We are a confident country, not a fearful one. We can meet these challenges. And that means every single one of us needs to learn more so we can compete more. It means we need an energy policy that will create new jobs in this country and end our dependence on oil from the Middle East. And it means we need to update our social contract to make sure that people have health care and pensions and training no matter where they work or how many times they switch jobs.

But it doesn't mean we should ever withdrawal. We are better than that.

My third piece of advice is to cultivate a sense of empathy - to put yourself in other people's shoes - to see the world from their eyes.

Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world - one that makes you understand that your obligations to others extend beyond people who look like you and act like you and live in your neighborhood.

I know that, especially on this campus, so many of you have been serving at homeless shelters and high schools and youth centers and job placement organizations all over the Boston area. And I hope this spirit of service lives on long after you leave here.

But as you continue on in life, it's not always easy. In the years to come, you will encounter all kinds of obstacles in the way of empathy. You will find people who, out of fear or need for power, try to divide us and deny what we have in common. You'll hear that the Americans who sleep in the streets and beg for food got there because they're all lazy or weak of spirit. That the immigrants who risk their lives to cross a desert have nothing to contribute to this country and no desire to embrace our ideals. That the inner-city children who are trapped in the nation's most dilapidated schools can't learn and won't learn and so we should just give up on them entirely. That the innocent people being slaughtered and expelled from their homes half a world away are somebody else's problem to take care of.

You'll hear all of this, and you'll have to choose. You'll have to decide where your obligations lie.

And let me tell you - the easiest thing in the world is to do nothing at all. To turn off the TV, put down the paper, and walk away from the stories about Iraq or Darfur or poverty or violence or joblessness or hopelessness. To go about your busy lives, wishing these problems away but expecting someone else to do it. To remain detached; to remain indifferent; to remain safe.

But I hope you don't do what's easy. I hope you do what's hard.

I often imagine the young Americans - teenagers and college kids not much older than you - from all over the country, watching the Civil Rights Movement unfold before them on their television sets. I imagine that they would've seen the marchers and heard the speeches, but they also probably saw the dogs and the fire hoses, or the footage of innocent people being beaten within an inch of their lives, or maybe they would've heard the news the day those four little girls died when someone threw a bomb into their church.

Instinctively, they knew that it was safer and smarter to stay at home; to watch the movement from afar. But somewhere in their hearts, they also understood that these people in Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi were their brothers and sisters; that what was happening was wrong; and that they had an obligation to make it right. And so when the buses pulled up for a Freedom Ride down South, they got on. And they rode. Thousands of them. And they changed the world.

We need you to do the same. As Robert F. Kennedy once told a crowd of South Africans no older than you, "The world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of

mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease."

Finally, my last piece of advice is to stay amazed - to remain in wonder at this unlikely place we call America. I think it's easy for some people to look at all the challenges we face; to look at poverty and war and racism and inequality and hatred and helplessness, and to get down on this country as a result - to think that there's something wrong with us - that there is little hope to make things better.

And if you ever feel like that yourselves, I ask you to remember all the amazing and unlikely things that have happened in this country. This country where a young man from Illinois who failed at so many of the business and political ventures he attempted still went on to become the president who freed a people and saved a union. This country where a young black minister from Georgia who had nothing but a dream in his heart went on to lead his people to the promised land of civil rights and voting rights. This country where hundreds of parents all over the world who never had the chance to further their education could still watch their children become the first in their family to earn a degree on a hopeful Boston day in June.

This is America. A place where millions of restless adventurers from all over the world, still weary of their lot in life - still hoping for something better - have longed to travel great distances and take great risks for a chance to arrive on our shores.

My father was one of them. Born and raised in Kenya before that nation was freed from the shackles of colonialism, he grew up herding his father's goats and, from time to time, attending local schools.

But he wanted more. He dreamed of coming to America so he could further his education, improve his skills, and then return to help lead the next generation of newly independent Kenyans.

I didn't know my father very well. My parents separated when I was very young. But before I went to law school, I traveled back to Kenya to learn his story and to meet my relatives there. And I went to a tiny village called Alego where my grandmother lives. And I visited my father's grave and my grandfather's grave. And I asked my grandmother if there was anything left from my father.

She opened a trunk and took out a stack of letters, which she handed to me. There were more than thirty of them, all handwritten by my father, all addressed to colleges and universities all across America. They were letters not so different than those I would write twenty-five years later, trying to find a job that would give meaning to my life.

And I read these letters, which were in the simple, sometimes awkward, voice of somebody desperate for a chance to come and live his unlikely dream.

It is because someone answered that dream that I stand before you today, hopeful for our collective future, excited for your individual prospects, and eager for you to keep the legacy of this country alive in the years to come.

You will be tested. You won't always succeed. But know that you have it within your power to try. That generations who have come before you faced these same fears and uncertainties in their own time. And that through our collective labor, and through God's providence, and our willingness to shoulder each other's burdens, America will continue on its journey towards that distant horizon, and a better day.

Thank you so much to the class of 2006, and congratulations on your graduation.