



Oprah Winfrey

Commencement Speech at Tennessee State University

Delivered on 06/05/23, Nashville Tennessee

Friends, Faculty, Family and the Tennessee State University class of 2023! Who says you can't go home again – Cause I'm back. Dr Glenda Glover is the reason why I'm here because she is relentless – You actually, you don't know the meaning of no. And she's been here a decade and has been asking me for a decade. I've been to so many graduations since I have twenty daughters from my school in South Africa [who] have graduated in the United States and I've attended all of their graduations. And I say:

Dr Glover, I have so many graduations to go to.

And she said:

You must come.

And I'm so glad that I did because:

*I'm so glad I go to TSU
I'm so glad I go to TSU
I'm so glad I went to TSU
Singing Glory, Halleluia!
I went to TSU*



Yeah!

Thank you all for being here, family and friends, and for my family who all came out today, I didn't know I had that many family members. The whole Winfrey and Walker clan, thank you.

So I'm gonna start with a confession. I was supposed to graduate from TSU in 1975 but I somehow managed to come up one credit short. What can I say – the school taught me many things but keeping track of my credits was not one of them. And to be fair I did have a lot on my plate at the time – I was living at my father's house, I was commuting from East Nashville every day then I'd get home and I'd work in my father's store and on weekends I'd be reading news at WVOL.

So it was first semester, my sophomore year, I was majoring in Speech Communication and Drama, I'd wanted to be an actress but my father had proclaimed that:

No daughter of mine is going to be on somebody's casting couch.

And so I decided, all right, I will teach. But I was having some challenges particularly with my Scenic Design class. It was taught by Mr W Dury Cox who declared in front of the entire backstage crew where we had our class at the theater and this is a quote:

Winfrey cannot draw a straight line with a ruler.

So in his class one day I got a call, I got pulled out of Mr Cox's lecture to take a call from Chris Clark who was the lead anchor at WLAC TV Channel 5 at the time, it's



now WTVF. But he was the news director and lead anchor at Channel 5. And Chris had heard me on WVOL radio; don't ask me why Chris Clark was listening to a black radio station, Jesus led him to it I guess.

Anyway, he called me here at TSU and wanted to know if I was interested in being in television and I said:

No sir. TV? No, not really sir because my father says I have to finish school and school is just too important. And I doubt that my dad would even let me do it.

Something like that. So Chris told me to just give it some thought and get back to him. And when I returned to Mr Cox's class, I repeated what Chris Clark had said to me [in] that cold conversation. And I said to Mr Cox:

I don't think my father would even consider it.

Now, Mr Cox had a face like the lion from The Wizard of Oz, and a demeanor that nobody would ever call warm or fuzzy or comforting. And he looked at me as if I didn't have the brains that God gave lettuce and he said:

This is why you get an education, fool! So that CBS, Channel 5 will call you!. You and your father ought to know that!

He rolled his eyes and as he was walking away, he said:

I will tell him myself.

And he did.



So, second semester sophomore year here at TSU, I arranged for all of my classes to be finished by 2 PM and from 2:30 to 10:30 I worked at the television station. That left me just enough time to make it back for my father's Ironclad 11 o'clock curfew. So I am doing the evening news, finish at 10:30 and my dad is like:

Better be home by 11.

So by graduation, my career was in full swing and I didn't feel the need to pursue a diploma but for years and I mean long after I started the Oprah Winfrey Show, not a conversation with my father would pass without him asking:

When you gon get that degree?

So finally in 1988, Dr Jayme Williams, bless her she just passed away recently, allowed me to write a paper and submit some of the shows I had done so I got my degree from Tennessee State right about the same time I got my third Emmy. So it is true that between the studying and the multiple jobs and all that xommuting back and forth, it took a little longer for me but I can promise you that you're looking at a very proud graduate of the only state-funded historically black university in Tennessee! Home again!

And I will tell you that the last thing I did before getting into my burgundy Oldsmobile Cutlass and leaving Nashville was to speak at the Faith United Baptist Church Women's Day celebration – Bishop, you know Women's Day. And my sermon at the time revolved around a single thought and it's this:

I know not what the future holds but I Know who holds the future.



And I want to tell you I've been guided by the light of God's grace my entire life. People ask what's the secret to my success – It's because I lean into his Grace. Because life is always talking to us and this is what I do know – when You tap into what it's trying to tell you when you can get yourself quiet enough to listen, I mean really listen, you can begin to distill the still small voice which is always representing the truth of you from the noise of the world. And you can start to recognize when it comes your way. You can learn to make distinctions, to connect, to dig a little deeper you'll be able to find your own voice within the still small voice, you'll begin to know your own heart and figure out what matters most when you can listen to the still small voice. Every right move I've made has come from listening deeply and following that still small voice; aligning myself with its power, with the source of power. So that when I walk into a room just as cool as you please and the fellas either stand or fall down on their knees and they say that's a phenomenal woman.

And when I walk into that room I come as one but I stand as ten thousand. Because everybody that's ever come before me walks into that room with me. My great-great-grandfather, Constantine Winfrey, born an enslaved man and couldn't write or spell his name but ten years after the Emancipation proclamation had learned to read and had picked ten thousand bales of cotton in exchange for 80 acres of land and became the first person in my American lineage to own his own property.

I come as one I stand as ten thousand has been my mantra for power. Because for so many of my earlier years when I was the only, I was the only woman, I was the only person of color the one nobody expected to be in the room, at the table, on the anchor desk co-anchoring the news here in Nashville in 1975, walking into boardrooms in the 80s, negotiating deals to own my own show. Not just do the show but to make as much money from it as they were going to make off of me.



And at no time did I ever feel out of place or not enough or inadequate or an imposter. Do not let the world make an imposter syndrome out of you Why? 'cause I knew who I was. And more importantly I knew whose I was. I didn't know the future but I knew who was in charge of the future. And my job, just as your job, is to align with God's dream for you and my prayer was always:

Use me, use me, God. Show me how and who you need me to be.

Because, this is what I will tell you – God can dream a bigger dream for you than you could ever imagine for yourself. I am living testimony of aligning and living his dream.

But my job today is to help you to commence to the next part of your dream odyssey so let's talk about the right moves for that. I've been thinking a lot about how much of your lives have already been spent grappling with the extreme complex issues of our time. Because you're the generation that is forced to depend on bodycams to obtain justice. And even then, accountability, as we've seen again and again, can be so hard to come by. You've witnessed the storming of the Capital and the death of civility. You are acutely aware that voting rights are being gutted, women's rights are being dismantled, books are being banned, history is being rewritten, the Supreme Court is being corrupted, the debt ceiling is being held hostage, the climate is changing, the LGBTQ+ community is under attack, the cold war is back, the leaders are behaving like children, the children are being gunned down by military grade assault rifles.

We live on a planet where there is more than enough wrong to keep you busy trying to make things right for the rest of your natural life and, unfortunately, you're going to encounter people who will insist that it's not actually possible to make any real difference. But I believe Tennessee has a couple of Justins, just a



few miles from here, who would respectfully disagree. Representatives like Justin Jones and Justin J Pearson are using their lives to prove the cynics wrong and they're building on the legacy of giants, mentors of mine, like John Lewis whose fight for justice started right here in Nashville and who now speaks to us from eternity.

Well, this is what I know for sure:

There will never be anything in your life as fulfilling as making a difference in somebody else's.

Everybody here wants to see you take your integrity, your curiosity, your creativity, your guts and this newfound education of yours and use it to make a difference. Everybody always thinks you got to go do something big and grand. I'll tell you where you start:

You start by being good to at least one other person every single day.

Just start there. That's how you begin to change the world; by just being good to one other person. It doesn't matter if it's a member of your tribe or a stranger on the street, I'm here to tell you that a little act of compassion can be a lifesaver for somebody who receives it but also for you who offers it. Just extend yourself in love and kindness to somebody and as my dear friend Maya always said:

Love recognizes no barriers, it jumps hurdles, it leaps fences, it penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.

And when you step out in love, you become someone's hope. And I know that becoming hope in the world won't always be easy; there will be times when you



get to your wits end but there's another old proverb that says when you get to your wits end remember that's where God lives. I would add that when you get to your wits end, it's also a good idea to remember that you've been there before. Because we are among the toughest most resilient people the world has ever seen! And I'm just not talking about older generations – your generation has masked up and locked down for a pandemic that ravaged the world. You, my TSU friends, have trained for complicated times.

And I don't care how hard life after college gets and it's gonna get hard. We need you to dream big, we need audacious thinkers. Use my example:

I was one good TSU teacher, Mr Cox, and one timely phone call away from a career that would absolutely change my life.

That story is not just my own. What dream are you one or two steps away from?

We also need generosity of spirit, we need high standards and open minds, and untamed imagination. That's how you make a difference in the world – using who you are and what you stand for to make changes, big and small. And there will be times when making the next right decision will be scary. I'll tell you a secret that's how I've gotten through every challenge without being overwhelmed – by asking what is the next right move? You don't have to know all the right moves you just need to know the next one.

And it's okay to be scared. In fact, if You weren't scared I'd be scared for you. But let me repeat something that the most extraordinary, certainly one of the most extraordinary men I've ever known said:

May your choices reflect your hopes not your fears.



Let your choices reflect your hopes not your fears. To me, that's a nine word prayer and it came from a single individual who literally changed the world by putting his own fears aside for the people of his country, thank you Nelson Mandela.

Now you all have photos to bomb and diplomas to frame, heels to change out of – I don't know how you walk into them heels [...], neckties to hand to your next of kin. But I can't just tell you what desperate shape the universe is in and send you on your way so I'm going to leave you with this instead. The world is weaning itself off Russian fuel, electric cars are going mainstream across the globe, that hole we punched in the ozone layer is healing, Ukraine is still in there fighting for us all, Finland joined NATO, Covid is currently receding and there are human beings who very quietly donate their bone marrow to strangers.

And this to me signals that the United States of America may not be united but we are not a finished product. My point is – anything is possible, the wheels are still in spin. Saints walk among us and as Nelson Mandela so brilliantly demonstrated:

It's better to be hopeful than fearful if for no other reason than the fact that hope brings us one step closer to joy.

And I leave you with this. You have been prayed for and paid for. Not just tuition but paid for through the sacrifices, through the daily aggressions, through the discriminations, the locked doors, the back doors, the barriers broken down, through the humiliations, working two and three jobs just trying to make ends meet and getting you a little money so you can have something to spend in college. Every family member from generations back who helped make this day possible you owe them a rising. And your job is to come on up to the rising, to



meet the rising of your life and know that your crown has been paid for. Put it on your head and wear it.

Congratulations