

Allow Hope but Also Fear
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Commencement Address
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I must start by saying that I feel a little bit like a pretender to the throne, standing here before you in this interesting robe. When I received the very gracious invitation from President Wilson-Oyelaran, I felt both very honored and also quite daunted. I wasn't sure I would be any good at dispensing the kind of pithy and ultimately feel-good wisdoms that are the trademarks of commencement speeches. And this really isn't the best of times for the usual clichéd wisdoms of commencement speeches.

I read somewhere that one of my favorite writers Kurt Vonnegut was once asked to give a commencement address. So he came up and said these words to the graduating class: 'Everything is going to become unbelievably worse and will never get better again.' And then he walked off the stage. Now I considered doing that but I thought it probably wouldn't be such a good idea.

I remember when I first came here to Kalamazoo, in the autumn of 2005 when you read my novel *Purple Hibiscus* as your common book. You were freshmen and you **were** fresh in many ways, green in the best possible sense, trusting and naïve, forward-looking and secure that the universe would remain as you imagined it. I also thought you were open-minded, eager to learn, full of possibility. I had a really wonderful time interacting with you. And I have to say thank you again for that.

And now here you are, amazing class of 2009, older by four years and hopefully wiser. You have probably done some drinking, some studying; you might have fallen in love or been heartbroken, you've made friendships that will last and some that will not, you've read books you might never have read, you've done internships and study abroad, and most of all, you've become much more privileged than you were when I met you four years ago.

It doesn't matter what your personal circumstance is. It doesn't matter that you may not find a job tomorrow but instead will have to go to grad school or move into your parent's basement, you are still very privileged.

Because by having graduated from Kalamazoo College, a safe place where you are made aware of your choices, where you have small class sizes and a wonderful library and every imaginable resource. A place where ideas rule but a place aware enough of the world's practicalities to immerse you in its experiential model of education. A place so aware of our global connection that you have such a high number of graduates going on to the peace corps. A place where you are taught to think independently. A place where you learn self-confidence without being aware that you are learning self-confidence. You are privileged. You are immensely privileged.

Four years ago when I first met you, I'm sure none of you ever imagined that you would be graduating in a rather inauspicious year. This is the year that the economic order of the world is coming apart at the seams, unemployment is the highest it has been in four decades. This is the year that the big banks of America took taxpayer money. This is the year that the major

companies that we thought invincible are filing for bankruptcy. This is the year that the news has become about economic apocalypse. This is the year that the world is re-thinking the very institutions central to its identity. And this is the year that you are graduating.

An American friend recently told me that because of the economic downturn, she had stopped eating out at restaurants. And I told her about my aunt in my hometown in eastern Nigeria who has had to close her tiny shop because of the economic downturn and who would probably starve if she didn't have family members to support her. Things are bad but "bad" is always relative. We live in a world of inequality, gross inequality, and while one person in one part of the world stops eating at restaurants because of the economic downturn, another confronts the possibility of not eating at all. And to remind you of this is to remind you of your privilege. Not only because it comes with responsibility but because it is important for you to keep things in perspective

I've noticed that people who give commencement addresses are usually people who are supposed to have it all figured out. I'm afraid I haven't. And so instead of giving you the secret formula to a perfect life – which I really wish I had because I certainly need it myself – I'd like to end with some random suggestions I have accumulated at the grand age of almost 32.

SUGGESTION 1-- Please think about what you want to value. I remember when I first came to the U.S., twelve years ago now, and I was struck by how often people talked about suing somebody. My friend once slipped and fell on the snow and the first thing she said when she got up, half joking, was who can I sue and get tons of money? Now I come from a country that has a justice system that does not always protect the individual so I appreciated this kind of protection, on the one hand, but on the other hand, it made me think about what was given value in this society. People would say: oh, there was medical practice and a loved one died but the family sued and got a lot of money. There was, I thought, too much value given to the idea of money as substitute for loss, for pain, for emotion. Now, money is of course very important and can change the world for the better, but now that you have that diploma, think about creating a society, an organization, a company that values the things that you want to value rather than the things that you are supposed to value.

SUGGESTION 2 -- Please read books. And I don't say this because I am a writer who needs to earn a living (well, that's not the ONLY reason!). But because books are still the best ways to truly come close to understanding complexity in our very complex world. When we read, as my friend the brilliant Irish writer Colum McCann put it: We become alive in bodies not our own. It seems to me that we live in a world where it has become increasingly important to try and live in bodies not our own, to embrace empathy, to constantly be reminded that we share, with everybody in every part of the world, a common and equal humanity.

SUGGESTION 3 -- Please remember that there is never a single story about anything. I once spoke at a university in Oklahoma (I didn't have as much fun there as I did at "K" by the way) and a well-meaning student had read *Purple Hibiscus* and said that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were like the abusive father character. I replied that I had just read a novel called *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and that it was a shame that all young Americans were serial murderers. Obviously I said this in a fit of irritation. But it would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel about a young American character, that he was

somehow representative of all Americans. This is not because I am a better person than that student, a very unlikely prospect, but because I had read Gaitskill and Faulkner and Roth and Tyler. Because I had many stories of America. Please try as much as you can to have many stories of the world.

SUGGESTION 4 -- Please think about how little you know. Leave room in your mind to revise opinions, to avoid smugness, because it is very easy to become smug when you've gone to a good college like "K" and have that gleaming diploma. I know from experience. Like you, I have been fortunate to have a good education and there are times when I feel the smugness creeping up as a result of it and I have to shove it back! I hope that your diploma will remind you of what you still don't know. After my second novel *Hoays*, which is about the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, was published, I decided to go back to graduate school to study African history. I was often asked why I had, because I had written a novel that was taught as African history. And I remember thinking that I went back to school because I woke up each morning realizing how little I knew and how much I wanted to know.

SUGGESTION 5 -- Please make room for hope and for fear. Here's a story about fiction. I've often imagined that fiction and faith are very alike – faith in God, faith in humanism, faith in the power of good. To write fiction is to jump into this journey not knowing where it will end but wanting to go on the journey anyway. To write fiction is to start a long walk knowing you will trip and fall down many times but still keen to take the walk. I cannot tell you how many times, in the course of writing my second novel *Hoays*, which was a deeply emotional book for me, I felt filled with terror, with uncertainty, with fear. I would climb into bed and eat lots of ice cream. But I knew, because I had made this choice to write fiction, that after all the ice cream bingeing, after all the dark and deep depression, that I would get up and keep writing. It seems to me that this is not a bad way to look at the rest of your life. You'll trip many times. Don't be surprised when you fall. Maybe even lounge in the dirt a little. And then, get up!

Congratulations again. I wish you a life filled with meaning and laughter.