

Whenever I stand before an audience, in that first moment before the silence is broken, I look out over the gathering even as I look now, because I want to see the expressions on your faces. I want to see the individuals who have come to this place for this occasion. I remind myself that this gathering is composed of men and women, each of whom has a unique story about how he or she came to be in this place. I do not know your stories, but Nathan Anderson has one, Sara Baynton who spoke so beautifully yesterday, Rebecca Craft who edited the Atlas, Eric John Curtiss, Justin Bond Breese, Richard James Rant, Hannah Seo who read the scripture in John last evening. Yasmine Michelle Watts. You each, each of you have your story. Stories of sacrifices, sincere striving, second and summer jobs. For the parents and the relatives the stories may be of dreams deferred so that college-age loved ones might fulfill their dreams. For everyone who is here, stories of difficult moral choices and a journey to become the best self. I dare not take lightly my selection as commencement speaker, your time is precious, these minutes cannot be retrieved. But be assured I have prepared for these minutes with the highest of respect for you and your time. And I have prayed. Prayed to my creator that my words somehow mark this moment meaningfully, memorably, believing as I do that our words are the lungs through which our spirits breathe.

Good afternoon. Honored graduates, families of the graduates, President Jones, Mr. Lambert chair of the board of trustees, honorary degree recipients, Provost Mahler, others with whom I share the platform, administrative and support staff, alumnae, alumni, guests and friends. It is for me not only an honor but also a particular pleasure and privilege to come back to my alma mater to deliver the address for the 1998 commencement ceremony. Let me first and foremost congratulate each of you. Each graduate. And let me assure you as well as your family members that I know that this moment is not the moment for which you have been waiting four years. My mother and my godmother accompanied me here and they have promised to give me a two-minute warning and also a stop sign if I go on too long. I talked with my nephew Jessie J. McNeil the third and my niece Carla Jean McNeil-Jackson who are both college and law school students, and they indicated to me that I was in a bit of trouble, and I asked them why, and they said, "well, because unless you can tell each one of the students how to get a job and then back it up, you should be very, very, very brief."

Alas I must confess, I cannot guarantee jobs, but having read the Index, having read the Atlas, having learned things about you already, I know that that really will not be an issue or a problem for you. What I would like to address is that which I hope will give you pause as the days come, as you think about not only this ceremony, but also that which you will do with the rest of your life. Now you have heard several times already, and you will hear again most importantly in connection with your bachelor's degree, President Jones say, by the virtue of the authority vested in me by the board of trustees, and today I want to talk to you about the authority vested in you. Today I offer for your consideration this thesis: as you continue your life at yet a new level, your greatest challenge is to live in such a way that only you will determine to whom or to what you will yield, what Douglas Steer calls the nerve center of your consent. I join other speakers in posing questions to you, hopeful that your critical reflection will lead to a life critically conscious, active, worthy of your beliefs, your preparation, and your talent.

First, consider this. Undoubtedly it has come to the attention of many before him, but Martin Luther King Jr. most succinctly presented this idea in his letter from the Birmingham city jail. And I quote,

“Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability.”

And so, first I am compelled to ask how ought you respond to the knowledge that time is neutral. Generations have tried but failed to resolve satisfactorily issues health and healthcare, housing, poverty, economic exploitation, particularly unbridled industrial capitalism, we who have tried so hard still have left unfinished business for you. Much which you must assume in the new millennium we have not come up with strategies for effective conflict resolution, nor have we effectively nurtured our children. Do we know yet what we mean in terms of the full measure of entitlement to rights by virtue of one’s humanity. And I know that you can add several things to this list but I am compelled to note with alarm two recent examples. Representative democracy is in jeopardy when we read in The Nation for June eighth 1998, that in 1997 alone the baby bells and the three major long-distance carriers spent more than thirty million dollars on donations to political action committees and political parties and individual candidates at the time, that deregulation was on the agenda for congress. And that they were among the one hundred largest spenders in Washington lobbying. Local and national news reported just a few days ago, and I quote from the Dallas Morning Herald,

“Three ex-convicts, two of whom claim ties to a racist prison gang, were charged in the weekend slaying of a disabled black man who was beaten, chained behind a pick-up truck, and dragged until he was beheaded.”

What had been James Burg Junior’s offense? And I quote again,

“one of the three white men charged in the slayings told police that Mr. Burg was killed at random, and for no other reason than the color of his skin.”

We have unfinished business. Virtually assaulted by life-threatening and planner-jeopardizing problems, I am struck by how much data we have collected how proficient we are with respect to science and various technologies, how many people hold advanced degrees and are yet in ability to provide pragmatic, good, effective solutions to our problems in human relations. How ought you to respond to the knowledge that time is neutral? Of course you know that no definitive answer can be provided except in the context of continuing discourse. And I wish we could stop for a moment and ask that everyone talk with the person sitting next to him or her, to see what it is that you would focus on as a priority for steps toward our human progress. Yet I would ask you to focus upon two concepts: inner authority and personal freedom.

(Gap in the audio)

Former dean of Harvard University’s chapel and Boston University’s chapel, also a philosopher and educator, and I quote,

"Every person has 24 hours at his or her disposal. What a man or woman does with his or her 24 hours is in large part an indication of how he or she deals with this or with other available options."

From Joan of Arc to Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer, from Frederick Douglas to Nelson Mandela. From Albert Schweitzer or Linus Pauling to Charles Drew and Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. History is replete with examples of lives that provide verifiable evidence of the importance of using personal freedom, and using it responsibly. When I was at K College in the '60's, and Elizabeth Gant was here along with me, we studied—we had mandatory chapels, and we studied courses in religion and philosophy, and I shall never forget that I was introduced then to Victor Franco, the author of "Man's Search for Meaning." Now some of you have been introduced through the book "Seven Habits for Highly Effective People", but I want you to know that Victor Franco was introduced to me here through an assignment at Kalamazoo. I resonated with that book because Victor Franco was one who was in Dakow and Auschwitz, a survivor of the Holocaust, who decided that he still had the freedom to choose and establish meaning in his life, even in a concentration camp. I resonated with that because you see countless Africans and African Americans who were my ancestors, were physically enslaved for centuries, and worked out a way to seize for themselves a margin of freedom even when familial relationships or other considerations prevented them from running away. I learned more later, after reading not only Franco and history and sacred texts, but also theologians and poets and philosophers, many of whom were introduced to me by my philosophy professors here. John Bruce Moore, David Scaro, and Lester Start, the latter two who are here with us today. Influential thinkers that must be included in such a list include Descartes, Kant, John Dewey, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Rawls, William Frankena, but also Howard Thurmon and Samuel Dewitt Proctor and James Melvin Washington, Cornel Wes, Langston Hughes, T.S. Elliot, Audrey Lorde, and my father, a published author who passed just before I entered college. Even when one cannot exercise physical freedom, we learn that one retains the option of exercising one's inner authority, and thereby determining for self on the basis of whatever you hold to be your purpose in life, your mission, what is meaningful, good, true, just, or right. The significance you attach to your life. Because time is neutral I must take responsibility for freedom, my sense of options and alternatives. Remembering there is one option that remains available. And I quote again from Howard Thurmon,

"I can select the things against which I shall stand, and the things for which I shall stand."

To now my second and final question. Have you particular, personal, or ethical obligations that that are consequences of your higher education? I want to quote again from Howard Thurmon for I think it is highly important that we recognize that these advantages are not the advantages of all. And so, as Howard Thurmon says, I share with you,

"Unless we are able somehow to make of our advantages high priests of truth, thinking of truth as that which makes for wholeness, for integration, for health, then we virtually announce to the world and to life that favoring us was a mistake."

Let each one of us say I will make of my talents. I will make of my advantages. I will make of my life a high priest of truth. By so doing you frame, you craft, you ground the statement

of your life. I ask you to listen to the words of Paulo Freire, the exiled Brazilian educator, who spoke of his task of educating the illiterate in Brazil, and was the author of "Education for Critical Consciousness," as well as "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." He says this,

"Knowledge is built up in relations between human beings, and the world perfects itself in the critical problematization of these relations."

Now I hope you will bear with me because I am going to be just a bit longer, because I spent some time doing some research on your class. I wanted to know to whom I was speaking, and those things about which you cared. And so I have gained some sense of who you are as a class by listening to your voices in the Atlas and the Index, perusing the pages of the Kalamazoo Quarterly. With your experiences of study and learning here and abroad, you have had an opportunity to reflect critically on knowledge and the process of knowing. You understand that knowledge reflects the world and explains the world. Excuse me.

(Coughs)

How else could Amanda Lichtenstein study in Kenya and write,

"An idea rearranges—

Excuse me I need some water. Amanda this was so beautiful I do not want to butcher this quotation. Let me begin again. I know that you understand that the world reflects and explains through knowledge and social construction of knowledge, because how else could Amanda Lichtenstein study in Kenya and write, and I quote,

"An idea rearranges itself on the edge of pain, breathing heavily into the humility of a crushed sky."

How else could Jane Woolsey visit ancient ruins and suggest, and I quote,

"Perhaps I am looking at the world too hard, as I tend to do. Squinting in an effort to understand, only making it worse, narrowing vision shutting out into the darkness what I should let come into the light."

Without a sense of the social and cultural context of knowledge and truth, how could Sylvia Copeland ascertain the need for her unique contribution to Asian Studies, and plan her PhD work at Harvard. How could Yazmine Watts determine the significance French for the establishment of our multi-racial global community.

Kalamazoo has a distance to go in its efforts to reflect the diversity of the larger society in the student body and in the faculty. I have looked at the statistics, I have spent time talking with persons from Kalamazoo, but I commend the students for demanding, and I commend the college for listening to the students as they demand greater diversity and demanded it as if it was the most urgent project they had this year. It is time to act. And I pledge my help with identifying for example faculty of color and hope you will be innovative and that students who are soon to be alumni will come back and talk about those who can be scholar teachers, and if you are getting advanced degrees, I hope that you will think about in your predoctoral stages coming back to Kalamazoo to talk about that which you are learning in

graduate school. And beyond that, all knowledge in the world is not resident in people with PhD's. We need to listen to other persons, we need opportunities for persons of various ethnic and racial groups to come and present their ideas and provide opportunities for discourse on this campus. Because I seek to be a scholar, teacher, activist at all times, I was caught by surprise, but then I thought why should I have been surprised that Susan Alteri's critique of the traditional canon and call for the infusion of radical and post-structural theory was so passionate in the Index. I note, however, not only from the left, but the spectrum from the right and the left is represented in your Index. I commend you on that. We must have an atmosphere in which we have the full range of discussion. For if there are things which are so sacred that they are not a part of our discourse or our conversation, we then begin to make religions of some things that ought not be considered that at all. I commend also the Black Student Organization, who with their comrades of different racial and ethnic groups were extraordinary in lifting up their particular concerns this year. And I know that the school will respond to you, that the trustees will learn more about this, and that the faculty will seek to hear from you even as alumni.

I look forward to hearing more from you because the voices that I have heard when I have been reading the Atlas and the Index are voices that need to be a part of the national conversation about race and ethnicity and equity, and discrimination based on sex or sexual orientation. Perhaps those voices will include the same students who addressed the problem of the crime alerts such as Letoyia Brooks and Mindy Bradish. Perhaps we will have responsible journalists who will write and report on every side of the story, like Jennifer Houze. We need this in the larger community. You are an extraordinary class. You are already involved, and I look forward to participation with you, though I have spent decades in struggle, participation with you in a struggle to transform this society. Before I conclude I must add one other comment, for we are in the post-modern era and we are moving into such a highly technological age, there's a particular challenge to you as well as to all persons committed to justice, freedom, peace, and equality, to live in such a way that our social memories, I'm a historian I could not leave that out, that our social memories are neither overwhelmed nor dislocated by the ever-multiplying bits and bytes of information our post-modern technology has permitted us to gather. James Melvin Washington, the editor of Testament of Hope has said this,

"Too much information and not enough insight is one of the dangers that we see in our society today."

It is a phenomenon identified well by Russel Jacoby, the author of "Social Amnesia". We in this nation have often been able to locate and integrate the memories of our forbearers while others participate in perverse and harmful civic arrangements that lead to social murder. Such a concept in Washington's writing may be understood as having a corollary which I call social suffocation, a concept that suggests the prevention of the oxygen of cultural knowledge from circulating throughout the body politic. History, historiography, and current affairs have been adversely affected by social murder. By social suffocation. By social amnesia. Although I do not know each of you personally I ask you to consider your own experience. Few leave Kalamazoo College without having participated in a learning experience that validates two classic philosophical notions. In other words to a greater or lesser degree most graduates come to know that Descartes and Sartre are both correct, I

think therefore I am, but for human reality, to be is to act. Studies, relationships within Kalamazoo community and life in the United States, which assumes a leadership role in our globe but remains marred by our own injustice. Those studies, those relationships point to another truth of Martin Luther King. The mere fact that we are in the United States means that we are caught in a network of inescapable mutuality. Howard Thurmon, once again, illustrates a stubborn truth, and that is one I hope you will ponder in the days to come. He says,

“A person’s life is a single statement of which every incident is but a partial rendering, and not to fight at all is to choose a weapon.”

With courageous risk-taking, integrity, and a vision for the future, we have every reason to be assured as Audrey Lorde poetically framed,

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether or not I am afraid.

You affirmed the authenticity, the meaning, and the integrity of self by never surrendering your inner authority that is consciously selecting and deciding upon those principles, values, beliefs, and practices for which you shall stand and against which you shall stand. And moreover as an author sagaciously insists, and I quote,

“So long as you recognize that no one event, no one event, of your life, whatever it’s character can imprison you.”

Sometimes you need to stop and have fun. Sometimes you must relax and go back to the struggle because each incident, each event is another opportunity, and if you understand that nothing, no one single incident can imprison you, you will never scale down your aspiration for the level of the facts in your present situation. You will let what rides on the horizon constantly inform the event with which you are wrestling, life has an infinite, creative possibility. Thank you.