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2015 Commencement Address: Bryan A. Stevenson

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Commencement Address - Bryan A. Stevenson



I'm so deeply, deeply honored to be part of this extraordinary day, and I want to congratulate all of you who have now completed your coursework at Holy Cross, and all of the family members who have made it possible.

Over the last four years, you've done something really, really hard. You've mastered a subject area, you've gotten through challenging courses. You've dealt with a range of enormous challenges, and, because of that, you are absolutely to be congratulated. Now that you've finished your education, I'm going to ask you to do something really, really simple. But I hope you'll take it to heart.

What I would like you to do is change the world. I know it doesn't sound simple, but I absolutely believe that you can change the world. We need more hope in this world; we need more mercy in this world; and we need more justice. I believe you can be the agents of that change. Now, changing the world isn't really that hard if you understand a handful of things that I'd like to take a few minutes to talk to you about.

You've got a lot of information in your head. You've got an amazing education that has shaped your ability to think critically about complex problems and issues. These ideas in your mind are going to give you options and choices as you get through life. I want to urge you to remember that the way you change the world is not simply relying on the ideas in your mind. I am persuaded that you change the world when you let the ideas in your mind be fueled by the conviction in your heart.

I want to talk about what is in your heart, because I'm persuaded that what's in your heart is the necessary thing to change the world. I'm a lawyer who believes that we have to believe things that we haven't seen. We've had a lot of success getting condemned people off death row. We've ended this practice of mandatory life without parole sentences imposed on children. We've gotten women and others who've been wrongly convicted out of jails and prisons. I've seen a real change in America over the last 40 years. In 1972 we had 300,000 peoples in jails and prisons; today we have 2.3 million.

The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. We've got six million people on probation or parole. Seventy million Americans have criminal arrests that will complicate their ability to get a job or to get a loan. The percentage of women going to prison has increased 640 percent over the last 20 years. Seventy percent of these women are single parents with minor children, and their children are condemned too. The Bureau of Justice now reports that one in three black male babies born in America is expected to go to jail or prison. One in three.

That was not true when you were born. That became true in the 21st century. And we will not confront this problem or the problems that we are dealing with, like income and equality, and poverty and despair, or the issues of the environment — whatever the issues — simply with the ideas in our mind. I believe we actually have to turn on the conviction in our heart.

There are five things I want to ask you to think about when you leave here today. The first is your identity. As a Holy Cross graduate you represent more than just a college graduate. You actually represent a graduate who's been prepared to serve others, and I hope you'll embrace that identity. Identity will allow you to do things that other things can't. I am persuaded that you can be a doctor or a teacher or a scientist or a business person, and that doesn't really define who you are. But if you are a committed doctor, a caring teacher, a thoughtful scientist, a dedicated lawyer, a generous business person — that begins to shape you, and I think there is power in identity.

Fr. Borroughs mentioned my grandmother. I can't help but tell this story again because I do think about her all the time. I learned about identity, not from my teachers or from my clients or from my work. I learned about it from my grandmother. I lived in a family that was dominated by my grandmother. She was the matriarch in our household. She was like a lot of African-American matriarchs: she was tough, she was strong. She was the end of every argument in our family; she was the beginning of a lot of arguments in our family, too. She had this quality that always made you want to be near her. She was tough and strong, but she was loving and kind.

When I would see my grandmother, she would come up to me as a little boy, and she would give me these hugs — she'd squeeze me so tightly, I could barely breathe. When I'd see her an hour later, my grandmother would come up to me and say, "Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?" And, if I said, "no," she'd assault me again. And if I said, "yes," she'd let me be. She had this quality, where you always wanted to be near her.

When I was about nine or ten, I was visiting my grandmother, and one morning I got up and my cousins were running around. The challenge with my grandmother was that she had ten children. My mom was the youngest of her ten kids, and we were always competing for her time and attention. I remember this morning, all of my cousins were running around, and my grandmother was sitting across the room, and she was staring at me. I kept looking at her, and she had a very serious look on her face — she kept staring at me. Finally she got up and walked across the room, and she came over to me said, "Bryan, I want you to know I've been watching you. Come out back, we're going to have a conversation."

She took me by the hand, she sat me down, and said: "Now I'm going to tell you something, but you can't tell anybody what I tell you." I said, "OK, Mama." She sat me down and said: "First thing I need to tell you is that I've been watching you. I think you're special. I think you can do anything you want to do." I remember just staring up at her. She said, "You just have to promise me three things, Bryan." And I said, "OK, Mama."

She said, "The first thing I want you to promise me is that you'll always love your mother. That's my baby girl. And you have to promise me you'll always love her and take care of her." I adored my mom, so I said, "Yes, Mama, I'll do that." And then she said: "The second thing I want you to promise me is that you'll always do the right thing, even if the right thing is the hard thing." I thought about it for a second, and I said, "Yes, Mama, I'll do that." And then she said, "The last thing I want you to promise is me is that you'll never drink alcohol." Well, I was 9 years old, so I said, "Yes, Mama, I'll do that."

About four or five years later, when I was with my brother and sister, we grew up in the country. My brother came home one day, and he had this six-pack of beer. He'd gotten it somewhere; I don't know where he'd gotten it. He took my sister and I out back, and he opened up the beer. He had some, and he gave some to my sister, and she had some, and they were offering it to me — and I was hesitating. I said, "No, no, no, y'all go ahead. I'm not going to have any beer." My brother said, "Come on, we're having beer. Your sister had some, I had some — have some beer." I said, "No, no, no."

My brother kept staring at me, and, finally, after a few minutes, my brother looked at me real hard, and he said, "I hope you're not still hung up on that conversation Mama had with you." I said, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Well, Mama tells all the

grandchildren that they're special."

I was devastated, but I'm going to tell you something. I'm going to tell you because we're all here together, graduating together, being honored together. I'm 55 years old, and I've never had a drop of alcohol. I don't say that because I think there's something virtuous about that. I say that because there's power in identity. And when you create the kind of identity where you represent hope, and mercy and justice, and commitment and love, and dedication to the people around you, you can say things to them that will allow the world to change. Your identity will open up a world that allows you to do things that no one currently thinks are possible. It will allow you to believe things you haven't seen.

The second thing I'm going to ask you to consider is that you get proximate to the places in your community, the places where you live, the places where you work — where there's suffering and poverty and inequality. Proximity to difficult spaces will change you. But it's essential if we are going to change the world. The way you begin to understand the problems of the world is when you get proximate.

Proximity will allow you to see and hear things that you cannot see and hear from a distance. I grew up in a community where black children could not go to the public schools. I started my education in a colored school. They didn't let black kids go to the public schools. When my father was my age as a child, he couldn't go to high school — there were no high schools for black kids. Lawyers came into our community and made them open up the public schools, and their choice to get proximate made it possible for me to go to high school. But for that choice to be proximate, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you today. But I got to go to high school, and I got to go to college.

I loved college. I doubt that any of you feel this way, but I really never wanted my college experience to end. I was involved in music, and sports. I was a philosophy major and I just thought college was too fantastic to get over. I was a senior and I would sometimes say to my friends, "I'm going to go out on the hillside and I'm going to do some philosophy." And I later realized that my friends thought I was saying I was going to do drugs or something illegal. But in fact I wasn't. I would just go out on the hillside and I would think what I thought were these great deep thoughts.

One day I was out there and one of my friends came up and said, "Well what are you going to do after you graduate from college?" I heard this as a very hostile question because I realized, all of a sudden, nobody was going to pay me to philosophize when I graduated from university.

I frantically started looking for other opportunities. I'll tell you something you already know. I did not know at that time that if you want to do graduate work in history or English, or political science, you actually have to know something about history, English, or political science. That was pretty intimidating to me. To be honest, that's how I found my way to law school. Because the truth of it is that you really don't need to know how to do anything to go to law school. If you haven't figured out what you want to do, that is still a pathway open to all of you.

In law school I found my way to death row and I got proximate to condemned people. I stood next to people whose lives were being taken and I realized there was something tragic in that space. I don't believe that the death penalty in America is about whether people deserve to die for the crimes they commit. I think that's the wrong question. The question of the death penalty in America is, "Do we deserve to kill?"

The truth is that we have a criminal justice system that treats you better if you are rich and guilty than if you are poor and innocent. We have a criminal justice system that doesn't value people fairly based on their race. We have these problems of inequality and suffering and, because of that, I feel the need to stand with condemned people. Being proximate to condemned people has taught me something about humanity, and power, and beauty.

The third thing I want you to consider: I want you to consider how you are going to change the narrative behind the problems that we face in this country. You see every problem has a narrative that sustains it and those narratives have to be confronted. It's not enough to understand the problem and understand the solution. You've got to change the narrative.

Our country, in my judgment, has been corrupted by the politics of fear and anger over the last 40 years. We've had politicians competing with each other over who can be the toughest on crime, and that has left all of these people beat-up and battered. We have put a million people in jails for simple possessions of drugs. We treat drug possession and drug dependency as a crime problem rather than a health care problem. Today we have disrupted and marginalized millions and millions of people. That narrative has to change.

I think we have to change the narrative about race. We have, all of us, inherited this burden of racial inequality and racial injustice. We have all been affected by it. Our history in this country is a great one, but it is one that has been compromised by our continuing tolerance of racial inequality. I think we have to change that narrative. I believe we have to talk about things we've never talked about. I believe we have to talk about things like slavery. You see I don't think the great evil of America's slavery was involuntary servitude and forced labor. We teach that too often in our history books. But for me, the great evil of American slavery was the narrative of racial difference that we created to legitimate it. This ideology of white supremacy, this notion that some people aren't as good as other people based on their color.

The 13th amendment didn't deal with that narrative, it only dealt with involuntary servitude. So I don't believe that slavery ended in 1865. I think it just evolved. It turned into decades of racial violence and terrorism. Between the end of reconstruction and World War II, we had thousands of people who were lynched in this country and they were the victims of terrorism. Old people of color come to me sometime and they say, "I get so angry when I hear someone on TV talking about how we're dealing with terrorism for the first time in our nation's history after 9/11. We grew up with terrorism. We had to be worried about being bombed, and lynched, and menaced."

That reality shaped their lives. The African-Americans in this community, in Worcester, in Boston, in New York, in Chicago, in Cleveland, in Detroit, in Los Angeles, in Oakland, did not come to these communities as immigrants looking for opportunities. They came to these communities as refugees—exiles from terror in Mississippi, in Alabama, and in Georgia. And we haven't talked about it, and because of that, we continue to struggle.

Even when we talk about the civil rights movement, we are too celebratory. I get nervous — I'm worried about the way we talk about these issues. You say the word "civil rights" and everybody starts applauding. It's like the Civil Rights Movement was this three-day carnival. On day one, Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat on a bus. On day two, Dr. King led a march on Washington. And on day three, we just changed all these laws. If that were our history, we'd be a great country, but that's not our history.

The true history is that for decades we humiliated people of color. For decades we burden and excluded, and battered and belittled

people of color. For decades we denied opportunities and it created injuries that we have not recovered from. We needed truth and reconciliation at the end of the Civil Rights Movement, but we didn't do it and because of that these narratives have persisted.

There is this presumption of dangerousness and guilt that gets assigned to too many people in our country. Black and brown, men and boys, poor people, religious minorities, people who are not born here — we use that presumption and we create inequality and suffering, and the narrative has to change.

The fourth thing: I hope you'll consider the fact that you've got to stay hopeful if you want to change the world. You've got to stay hopeful. I am persuaded that on this hopeful day you are going to see lots of things that will challenge you to get hopeless about the things that you want to do. There are going to be people, and there are going to be times, and there are going to be problems and institutions that will try to tell you that those grand ambitions that you have, those careers you seek can't be achieved. But I want you to protect your hope.

I am persuaded that justice needs hope. Injustice exists, injustice prevails, where hopelessness persists. Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. It is the enemy of progress and your hope is vital — it's precious, it's essential if we are going to change the world. Your hope will sometimes have to cause you to stand up when other people are sitting. It will cause you to speak when other people are quiet. But in your hope you believe the things that others have not seen and you begin to change the world.

Fifth and finally: you can't change the world — and I hate to say this to you on such a glorious day — but you cannot change the world unless you sometimes do things that are uncomfortable. I want to ask you to consider doing uncomfortable things in service of justice. Uncomfortable things that lift up the poor; uncomfortable things that lift up the marginalized; uncomfortable things that confront poverty, bias, and discrimination. It is only when we do the uncomfortable things that we actually begin to understand the power that this degree opens up for us. The power we all possess to change the world.

I believe really simple things. I think that each of us is more than the worse thing we've ever done. I think when somebody tells a lie, they're not just a liar. I think that when somebody takes something that doesn't belong to them, they're not just a thief. I think even if you kill somebody, you're not just a killer. And because of that, there is this basic human dignity that must be respected by law.

I also believe, that in this country, in Massachusetts, in Worcester — no matter where you go — I am not persuaded that the opposite of poverty is wealth. I think we talk too much about wealth in America. I believe that in most parts of this country, in most parts of the world, the opposite of poverty is not wealth. I believe the opposite of poverty is justice. And when we commit ourselves to more just relations, then and only then can we begin to change the world in a way that I think will honor all the things we believe.

And finally, I believe that when I come to beautiful places, beautiful spaces, and I look at all the glorious things that are going on, I can't still judge that space, that place, that community by how we are treating those spectacular things that we achieve. I think you have to judge a country, you have to judge a community, you have to judge a society and its character and its commitment to the rule of law, not by how it treats the rich, the powerful, and the privileged. I believe you judge a community by how it treats the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

It's in that nexus that I await to see you rise, not just as graduates, but as people who will use your identities to get proximate to suffering and inequality, who will change narratives, who will stay hopeful — and yes — do uncomfortable things.

I'll end with this: I believe there's a different metric system that many of you should consider. It is a metric system that will evaluate your progress leaving here — not by how much money you make, not by what kind of job you get, not by how many more degrees you obtain. It's a metric system that looks at how much those ideas in your mind are being fueled by the conviction in your heart and it was taught to me by a man in a church.

I was giving a talk in a church and this older man was sitting in a wheelchair in the back and he kept staring at me all during my talk. He had this very stern, angry look on his face and I couldn't figure out why he was staring at me with such sternness. I kept looking at him, but he kept staring and he wouldn't smile. He wouldn't do anything and I kept getting through my talk. And at the end people came up to me: they were very nice, they were very polite, but that man kept sitting in the back in his wheelchair just staring at me.

And finally when everybody else left, somebody wheeled this man up to me and he came up the center of the aisle of the church and he had that very stern look on his face. When he got in front of me he put his hand up and he said, "Do you know what you are doing?" And I didn't know how to answer, so I just stood there. And he asked me again, "Do you know what you are doing?" I stepped back and I started mumbling something; I couldn't even figure out how to respond. And then he asked me again, "Do you know what you are doing?"

And then that older man looked at me and he said, "I'm going to tell you what you're doing. You're beating the drum for justice." I was so moved, and I was really relieved, too. He said, "You're beating the drum for justice. You keep beating the drum for justice." Then he grabbed me by my jacket and said, "Come here, come here, come here," and he pulled me into the wheelchair.

He said, "I'm going to show you something." And he turned his head and said, "Look here: do you see this scar I have behind my right ear? I got that scar in Green County, Alabama in 1963, trying to register people to vote."

He turned his head and said, "Do you see this cut down here at the bottom of my neck? I got that in Philadelphia, Mississippi, during Freedom Summer in the 1960s, trying to register people to vote."

He turned his head and he said, "Do you see this dark spot? That's my bruise. I got my bruise in Birmingham, Alabama in 1965, trying to register people to vote."

He said, "Let me tell you something young man. People look at me and think I'm some old man sitting in a wheelchair covered with cuts, and bruises, and scars. But I'm going to tell you something: these aren't my cuts, these aren't my bruises, these aren't my scars. These are my medals of honor."

I will tell you that being proximate, changing narratives, staying hopeful, and doing uncomfortable things may mean that you get nicked and cut and bruised and scared a little, but I am persuaded that is how you honor all of that hope, all of that vision that has led so many of you here today; and I want to celebrate that and encourage you to do exactly what your heart tells you you must do to change the world. I wish you all the best. God bless you all.