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2018 Commencement Address: Michele Norris

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Commencement Address - Michele Norris



*Friday, May 25, 2018
Michele Norris*

Hello everyone. Thank you so much, Fr. Boroughs. Thank you so much for those lovely words. It is such an honor to receive an honorary degree alongside Ellen and David. Thank you for allowing me to share this day. Fr. Boroughs, thank you so very much. And good day to the leadership team, the trustees, the faculty, the families, distinguished guests, and especially — most especially — the graduates! Congratulations to you!

God is good.

Now wait a minute. I worship at a large urban Catholic church, and when we say “God is good,” we normally get a response. Do you know what you’re supposed to say?

[Response from audience: All the time.]

All the time. Because it’s not just some of the time, it’s not just part time, it’s all the time.

So one more time: God is good.

[Response from audience: All the time.]

Yes, he is.

One of the things I love so much about college graduations is that this is a moment filled with possibility and awe. So let me begin by saying that I honor you. I celebrate you. I believe in you. Your future is our great hope.

You all made it! You all made it!

I say you all made it because I know a lot of you wearing those tassels got a lot of help. Physically. Financially. Spiritually. And so while we’re here to celebrate your achievements today — and this really is your day, it is about you — I want you to take just a moment to thank the people who got you here. We heard them in the audience, we heard them cheering and yelling. Some families roll deep! They brought vuvuzelas — there are horns up in the audience. They celebrated you, I just want you to take just a moment to celebrate them. I want you to give them a round of applause.

We don’t get anywhere by ourselves and, Taylor, thank you for reminding us wherever you are out there in the audience in your beautiful address about the importance of bonds. I look at your faces and I see such a swell of pride. I know that you will embrace the honor of entering that special fellowship of highly educated individuals, but I also pray that you will accept the responsibilities that come along with this privilege.

The degrees that you receive today are tremendously important but they also represent something that carries even more weight, even more currency. How will you use all the knowledge that you absorbed in the pursuit of that degree? How will you harness that knowledge to become the caretakers of our culture? How will you become the caretakers of our politics, our economy, our moral compass and our national character? How will you reach across cultures and disciplines and dialects to solve the world’s problems? Because in a whole lot of areas, the current caretakers have left behind a bit of a mess. We’re going to need you to solve the world’s problems and light a candle for the world with the power of your mind and the strength of your ideas.

Being here with you today is an especially big treat for me because my husband of 25 years was out there in the audience 40 years ago wearing a cap and gown and wearing the purple and gold. Now, he tells me that it was a bit of a miracle. His name is Broderick Johnson, and he’s sitting right over there. He said that there was more than a little divine intervention, and a whole lot of Hail Marys when it got close to finals.

And when he was sitting out there, I don’t know how that cap sat on his head because I understand your afro was pretty big at that point? He had a little more hair than he does right now.

But he made it. And we now live in Washington, D.C. We have three children. He’s worked for two presidents. He’s worked on Capitol Hill, he’s the board chair of the My Brother’s Keeper initiative. He’s volunteered his time and resources to make the world a better place. As I get to know more about Holy Cross I see that even though he left Worcester, this place never left him: the values, the vision, the adherence to this notion of faith that seeks justice. It’s all a part of his life and his life story.

He has a Jesuit’s mind and Jesuit’s heart. And I thank the university for all the ways that it shaped him because it has shaped our lives and I can see that now in the wisdom and the advice and sometimes the admonitions that he passes on to our own children. I hope for all of you that that will be true. That when you leave this wonderful college, the College of the Holy Cross, that when you leave this institution, that it never leaves you.

When Broderick graduated 40 years ago the commencement speaker was Vernon Jordan, the legendary lawyer and civil rights leader. And because we live in Washington, D.C., which is really just a big country town in many ways, we saw Vernon on Easter

Sunday. And Vernon and Broderick were reminiscing about what it was like when Vernon delivered the commencement address in 1978. And because Vernon Jordan is one of the most organized people on the planet, when I asked him if he still had a copy he said, "Oh, of course I do. It's in a file. I'll have Gail send it to you and she did." And he shared his address with me and I want to in turn share a section of it with you. This is from the commencement address in 1978. He said:

"It has been a decade of trial and tribulation for America's minorities. The promise of America's second reconstruction was ultimately cut off by war, by benign neglect, by national indifference. Many black people escaped the confines of poverty, many others sank deeper into poverty. And our nation itself has demonstrated a poverty of spirit and determination to make ours a land of equals."

That's the message that Vernon Jordan delivered on May 26, 1978 — 10 years after the Kerner Commission reported on America's deep racial divide. Ten years after the assassination of Martin Luther King followed in this country by racial angst and riots all across the country. Ten years later Vernon Jordan was noting that the country still had much to do, still had a long way to go, as Dr. King said, to make good on the promissory note spelled out in the founding documents of this great nation — that all men are created equal. And we should say not just men, all humans are created equal.

Forty years later, Vernon Jordan's message feels like it was written for today. It feels "of the moment" even though so much has changed, so much progress on so many fronts: technology, economy, education. And yes even the narrowing of our racial divide and thank goodness for that. The healing of our original sins in a country that was founded with a significant birth defect because of legalized slavery and a series of laws and customs and traditions that automatically placed women, minorities, the disabled, and immigrants from a whole host of countries at the back of the line. Immigrants from Italy, China, Ireland, Slovakia, Slovenia, so many other countries.

And no that was not fair, it was just the way it was. And in those times people felt that it was just the way it would always be.

So yes, much has changed in 40 years. You are a generation that has grown up with integration. The color lines that once seemed like they were a hundred miles long and a hundred miles wide have seemingly fallen to create opportunities across the board for all kinds of people who were once marginalized.

We know that change is a surprising thing. The words bias and discrimination and prejudice have for so many decades been attached to people of color in America. But this year in 2018 we also know that change sometimes brings certain surprises. We now know that studies show that a majority of white Americans say discrimination against them exists in America today.

This according to a study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard's School of Public Health. More than half of the people surveyed — 55 percent — said they believed that there is discrimination against white people in America. Now some of you will nod your head in agreement upon hearing that. Some will reel back and say — "whoa — wait a minute, how can that possibly be true?" But those are the true beliefs for all the people who were surveyed. And so we have to at least listen to what they are saying. That America, in their belief, has become less hospitable, less welcoming, less privileged for white Americans, that minorities or people who have only recently arrived in America get the first crack at jobs or get more help from the government or private institutions.

Actual statistics don't bear that out but perception is a powerful thing — especially in an era when America feels so divided and when people are so often only listening to news or news sources or the perspectives of people that come from the members of their own social, political or ethnic tribe because right now America really does feel like a nation of tribes.

The stories we tell ourselves, the stories we hear, the tales that we adopt and embrace, they set a template for opportunity and oppression, they somehow can confine and somehow define us. They set a template for ambition and contrition, for what we accept, for who we would accept, for what we tolerate, for who we tolerate, for who we celebrate.

You leave this campus as both the beneficiaries and ambassadors of what I like to call radical curiosity. And I think that Fr. Borroughs is such a tremendous example of that. You are graduating from a school with a demonstrated hunger for knowledge and excellence but also a hunger for understanding America, through its history and its evolving concerns and attitudes.

And so I want to spend what little time we have together focusing on a few of the ways that you can perhaps carry that notion of radical curiosity.

I'm going to share with you a little advice I like to pass on to those who have the benefit of receiving a college education. It's three things and, perhaps because I was raised Catholic, I tend to think of things in triplicate — the Father, Son, & Holy Ghost. I'm going to share with you a do, a don't and a dare.

A do, a don't and a dare.

First, the dare.

I dare you to listen and engage fully with someone that you don't agree with — to figure out how to do that on a regular basis.

It's probably not surprising that as a longtime radio host I'm giving you advice on listening skills. It's important though. And I'm concerned that we're losing the ability to actively listen and therefore to engage in deep and meaningful conversations that as we pull deeper inside ourselves with our headphones and personal devices and our timelines full of people who we choose to "like" or to "follow," that we put less of a premium on engagement with people that we don't like or that we don't want to follow.

What are we missing if we tune out the outside world?

What are we missing when we consume a limited media diet that only affirms or confirms what we already believe?

It's important to listen to those things and those people you might want to shut out. We have more avenues for listening, more avenues for communication, and yet it's much easier to wall yourself off from people you don't know or you don't agree with.

We're living at a time where there doesn't seem to be a common set of facts, or when so many people can see the same thing and hear the same thing and come away with a totally different interpretation.

Make America Great Again — to some that is a campaign slogan, to others it is an offense.

Black Lives Matter — to some a curiosity. Don't all lives matter? To others, an obvious rejoinder. All lives do matter but history has

shown us that black lives have too often been valued less.

Climate change — an obvious threat to some, a political distraction or distortion to others.

I think quite a bit about reaching across divides because of this exercise that I've been involved with for now almost going on nine years. I run something called The Race Card Project. And in short here's how it works.

I ask people to think about the word race — a big, allegedly toxic word, a toxic topic. All kinds of things come into our minds when we think about that word. So I ask what you think about that word, try to distill your thoughts, your memories, your perceptions, your anthem, to one sentence. And then what if that sentence could only have six words. I originally asked people to send their thoughts on postcards. I went to a local Kinko's and printed 200 postcards. I'm a daughter of postal workers — this made my mother really happy. I was supporting the U.S. Postal Service, except she reminded me that the cards were not regulation sized. Even so, of the 200 cards, about 30 percent came back to me and if you know anything about direct mail that's a very good yield. So I started to print more cards. I got my publisher to print cards. Eventually I started collecting the cards digitally through a website and people took the bait, and you would be amazed at how much people can pack into small package if they only have just six words:

- Reason I ended a sweet relationship
- I'm only Asian when it's convenient
- You're not really black black
- White. Not allowed to be proud
- No, you cannot touch my hair
- Please stop saying I'm articulate
- Grandma, you can't say that anymore
- Children know when injustice exists
- Hardest jails to escape are gate-less
- Lady, I don't want your purse
- You love God but not me?
- But where do you really come from?
- Checked cosmic in the race box
- Total non-issue when the aliens arrive
- Underneath, we all taste like chicken

The submissions are funny and sharp, they're painful and complex — and they're very revealing. They have provided a lesson for me more powerful than anything I've learned in a classroom or anything I've learned in a newsroom. And one of the lessons — the primary lessons — centers around the importance of listening, even offhand listening, taking in the world around you through sight, and smell, through sound. Especially when it comes to reaching across difference.

Differences in color, in culture, in religion, or in social beliefs, in geography.

Race and difference and otherness can form a kind of silent force field in our lives that we're often loathe to talk about it.

If you aspire to get to a leadership position or if you want to sit in the corner office, the lesson for so many of us is: Don't ever talk about that because it might blow up on you.

It seems like walking through a minefield and the results can be potentially catastrophic. And in this country and even in this moment it's easy to see how race and diversity and the debate over equity can be seen as a burden.

But maybe there's another way of looking at it.

My generation may have done your generation a bit of a disservice by repeatedly telling you that race is a difficult subject to talk about. It's become a self-fulfilling prophecy — this notion that race is toxic.

Racism is toxic. And I hope within my lifetime the idea of racism, the actual reality of racism, will be eradicated. But race? That actually describes who we are. This wonderful, multi-ethnic, variegated sea of humanity that represents all kinds of diversity: race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, military service, geographic allegiance. Look in your class. Look to your right and to your left. And this is not actually an off-hand comment. I actually want you to look to your right and your left. Look behind you. Take in this sea of diversity and know that some of us never take it for granted because within our lifetimes to see a graduating class of this composition would have been unusual. In some states within my lifetime — and I'm here to tell you I am not that old — it would have been illegal in very many places. Never take that for granted. It's part of your education. It's part of your birthright now. Fight for it wherever you are and fighting for it means reaching across an aisle, reaching across a perspective and engaging with someone that you don't agree with.

That was your dare. Here's your don't.

Don't try to quantify success in terms of numbers.

That inclination can start early. How much candy did you get on Halloween? You know when you came back with your sacks of candy you sat on the floor and you put all your piles of your BB Bats and Skittles and then you went to school and you bartered and traded? It starts early.

How many soccer games did your team win? How many badges are on your Girl Scout uniform? How many friends, or followers or likes have you amassed on social media (or what my mother likes to call "the Twitter")? It continues into college with grades and internships and measures of popularity. It continues into adulthood with salaries and promotions and the cost of one's home or car or vacation.

Success by numbers is all around us. The Zagat rating at the restaurant. The size of your dress (where small is preferable and unrealistic for some of us). The size of your bank account (where large is preferable and unrealistic for some of us).

Numbers can signal or define success. The zip code. The floor where your office or your home is located. The secret signs that flash into our heads to rate almost anyone and anything.

But I want the young people who hold so much promise today in their caps and gowns — all of you — to know that success and excellence do not always live on the same street. They don't always occupy the same corner office. Success and excellence don't

even often share the same mindset.

Is a million-dollar pitcher more successful than the Little League coach who manages to find time to spend three afternoons and every Saturday with a ragtag team of 10-years-olds — despite the fact that he holds down two jobs?

Is the working woman who dazzles everyone she comes in contact with more successful than the woman who chooses to be a stay-at-home mom and volunteers for a number of good causes?

Is the investment banker more successful than the poet who quite literally helps us see the light of the world?

Is the computer programmer who can churn out algorithms more successful than the journalist who pursues the truth, especially the hard truths that help us understand our world — and pursues that work knowing that they might never get rich, as least not defined by their paycheck?

Is the business tycoon more successful than the elementary school teacher, or the park ranger, or police officer, or the aid worker who does famine relief? Or the person who sits behind the desk at the senior citizen center who's memorized the first name and dietary restriction of every elderly person who walks, or rolls or is carried through the front door?

The answer is simple if you're only looking at numbers. But it's not so simple if you're looking for excellence. Because success and excellence are quantified in different ways. Success is based on all kinds of factors — some in your control, others not. You can be born into success if you're really fortunate and if you're only looking at numbers.

But one is not born into excellence. Even if you entered the world as a singer with perfect pitch as a pitcher with a golden arm, as a future academic with a mind like Einstein, you can only achieve excellence through hard work and a mindset that's based on discipline and self-sacrifice and a strong ethical compass.

Excellence may take you to dizzying heights, but also allows all of us to flourish where we are; to bloom where we are planted even if you are planted in rocky soil. To find our personal best despite our means, our challenges, our restrictions or our relative gifts.

And the pursuit of excellence allows us to measure that same quality in others, to see those who are doing their best, even in simple things to lift up their work to new heights.

The barista who turns a latte into a work of art, the landscaper who transforms a plot of land into an Eden, the swim coach who is known as the pool goddess because she can coach even the most scaredy-cat kids to move into the deep end of the pool — giving them the seeds of courage that will help them flower into more adventurous adults. And every one of you has had your version of that pool goddess in your life.

You begin to value excellence in all its forms when you think of excellence instead of success, the mastery of the complex and the simple talents that elude so many of us. How many allegedly successful people do we all know who are not necessarily excellent listeners? Or excellent at consoling someone in grief? Or excellent in providing an "attagirl" or an "attaboy" at exactly the right moment because trust me — no matter how long you are privileged to live on this earth — we all need the occasional note in our lunch box.

I wish success for everyone, but my great hope for the class of 2018 is that you think long and hard about how you measure success and that you understand the satisfaction, the self-confidence, the self-worth that comes from the pursuit of excellence on your own terms.

It is living life with a work ethic but also with a worth ethic.

So I've shared a dare, a don't. In closing, something I hope you will do — and it's about listening.

Listen to the little voice in your head. Always listen to that little voice in your head.

The amazing, heart-wide-open stories that follow the transom at The Race Card Project. Those six word stories that so often come with a back story. Some people tell me how they came up with their six words. They often have lessons in them. They often have lessons that speak to the importance of listening to that inner voice. There's one in particular that I want to share with you in closing today.

The six words are: race is rocks thrown at kids!

This is the way one man summed up his feelings on race in six words. Now remember, I've asked people share their thoughts, experiences, observations, hopes, laments, viewpoint, anthem about race in one sentence that has only six words.

That six-word story was handed to me by a man when I was visiting North Carolina when I was on my book tour.

He was an elderly man. He was frail. He moved very slowly. And when he leaned in to give me his six words he was fighting back tears. He was reluctant to give me his name but he told me his story. When I encountered him he was in his 70s but he said as a much younger man he was staunchly opposed to integration in North Carolina. He grew up in Jim Crow America. And he grew up assuming that America would always be segregated. And he and his friends made clear their opposition to integration by throwing things at students for crossing the color line in the early days of integration. Rocks, bricks, rotting vegetables at children who were trying to go to school and crossing the color line. He knows that some of those projectiles hit their target and so now when this aging white man with broad shoulders and thick hands that suggested he was someone who worked with his hands — big, broad, thick hands, calloused hands — now when he moves about his community in North Carolina, when he goes to the library, or the local Piggly Wiggly, when he goes to the hardware store, he looks immediately at the foreheads of the people he encounters.

At the foreheads.

Now not all the people he encounters, but the black people he encounters. And he explained to me that he looks at their foreheads, because he's looking for a scar. He knows that he bloodied someone with one of those bricks that he threw. He knows that they were badly hurt because there was a whole lot of blood — and he remembers that he got "attaboys" from making a direct hit. His friends, his community, praised him for hitting someone with a brick.

So when he goes about his errands and he encounters black men who like him are older, or slower, now grey, he looks at their

forehead because he's looking for a scar.

And after all these years, he's looking for something else as well.

He's looking for the chance to say, "I'm sorry."

He said, I just want to say I'm sorry to his face.

Because he knew at the time that throwing rocks was wrong. He knew that the hatred for kids who were really not any different from him except for the color of their skin did not comport with the lessons that he learned in his own life. It did not comport with the lessons that he learned in Sunday School. It did not comport with the lessons that he learned at his own dining room table where he heard messages about loving thy neighbor, where he sang songs about all God's children — except that those children happen to be black. Or perhaps came from another country.

Something inside him tried to tell him that trying to injure people who were just trying to get an education wasn't right, was in violation of the human code of conduct.

There was a little voice that said don't do this. But there were larger voices all around him. Loud, pushy, passionate voices that encouraged him, and indeed implored, him to join the crowd and create a wall of resistance. Really a wall of hatred that would uphold the status quo and keep the schools and the libraries and the public parks and the swimming pools, the way they had always been: cordoned off for white people only.

He didn't listen to that little voice in his head — and six decades later as an old, grizzled man — he wished that he had.

There is a big lesson in that story. That voice is usually your true voice. You must always listen to that voice — even when it is drowned out by the crowd. Especially when it's drowned out by the crowd. Because that voice is your inner compass, it is your moral GPS system — honed by your parents and your elders, fine-tuned at this fine institution — you must always listen to that voice.

Always be in touch with that voice.

Allow it to help guide you as you use your own voice, particularly using your own voice to speak for others who don't have a voice.

No matter how far you travel after graduation, no matter how far your talents and your dreams and your new skills, and that fabulous new degree — hold it up! — will take you, make sure that a piece of this place never leaves you. Because it has helped amplify that voice. This incredible campus, this intellectual circle, this wonderful spirited community, this cocoon of faith. Always listen to that voice.

To the last bits of advice I'm going to give you, because I know there's probably a celebration and a nice lunchtime reservation waiting for you:

- Be bold
- Be kind
- Be gracious
- Be curious
- Be where you are

That may sound a little Zen. But you are the selfie generation. And sometimes you have to put down the phone and actually be where you are.

I took my kids to a Beyoncé concert which made me a cool mom for the day. And if you've ever been to a Beyoncé concert or seen one on TV, it's a thing. If this were a Beyoncé concert, a stage would elevate in the center of the floor and I would dance out — that actually sounds kind of fun — but I would dance out in the middle and I'd have a personal fan with my hair blowing and at some point I would reach out to all of you and try to touch you. But we saw Beyoncé, she reached out into the crowd and she was doing that Diana Ross thing, trying to get a witness, can somebody touch me. No one would touch her. You know why? They all had their phones out. They were all taking selfies, they were Twittering, or Facebooking, or Snapchatting. They were not in the moment. They missed an opportunity.

Be in the moment.

Don't be afraid of change. It's a waste of time.

Every time you start to say, why is this happening to me — stop yourself and instead say, What am I supposed to learn from this?

When you start to say I have to do something — stop yourself and replace "have to" with "get to." "I have to go to class" becomes "I get to go to class." "I have to go to the doctor" becomes "I get to go to the doctor." Even "I have to take out the trash" becomes "I get to take out the trash" because when you go out into the world and travel the world you'll notice that most people in the world don't have trucks that come to their homes at an appointed hour to take their trash away from them. When you replace "have to" with "get to" you get a clearer picture of your blessings.

Write an occasional letter, not an email. A letter with a stamp. Nothing can match the grace and impact of a handwritten letter on lovely stationary. I'm not just saying that because I was raised by postal workers. I understand the value of a letter, particularly a love letter. Make sure at the end of your life you have a shoebox under your bed filled with the letters that mean so much to you.

And as you go out and conquer the world, you will also do well to remember all those who make your life a little easier, a little more comfortable, a little safer. The folks that park your car, or clean the office. The people who will stay behind in this auditorium to fold up the chairs and clean up behind this. When you honor those people, you honor the College of the Holy Cross. Remember that.

Don't let anyone steal your joy.

Listen to public radio as much as you can.

Always wear comfortable shoes, although ladies many of you looked good tipping across the stage with fabulous kicks today.

Take care of each other. Take care of this planet.

Take time for the people you love. Because nothing matters more. Peace be with you.

My six words for you: Peace is out there. Get busy.

To the graduates of 2018: Go out and conquer the world. I cannot wait to see you soar.

Thank you very much.

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