

King School – Commencement

May 31, 2019

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Good afternoon everyone!

Thank you to Dr. Karen Eshoo, the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, distinguished guests, family, friends – and the members of the Class of 2019.

It is a real honor to be here, an alumnus from the Class of 2004.

As part of a valedictorian speech I was honored to give during the 2004 commencement, I remember asking all my fellow classmates to stand and applaud our family members – without whom we would not have been there on that special today. I ask the class of 2019 to please stand and do the same. Let's hear it for the friends, family, and loved ones who helped you reach this tremendous goal today.

When I was asked to speak during this year's commencement, I was both honored and at a loss for words. The honor comes from distinctly, vividly remembering sitting in your place 15 years ago. Full of excitement, anticipation, gratitude for the finish line of high school. I am humbled to think of all that has happened since then. And at a loss for words because I am an eternal learner. I asked myself: What could I share with you all here today? You've heard a bit of my bio, but there is so much more to my story.

Looking back over the past 15 years, there is no single story that captures what has shaped me and my path. It would be inaccurate, incomplete, or even dishonest to try to sum up who I am with any one personal story. So I won't try – knowing that many of you would agree with the great Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who talked about the "danger of a single story" for her powerful 2009 TED Talk. As Chimamanda shared, let us avoid the single story of a person or place that then becomes the only story.

My journey has had ups and downs, curves and twists. But standing with you all here today, I can truthfully say that most important has been rooting myself in my personal identity. This is not about ego, not about selfishness – and can I be honest? I am not a big fan of huge existential or philosophical questions, so I'm not referring to that either! When I refer to being rooted in who you are, I am speaking as plainly as I can: what has defined you? What matters to you? Why?

Let me ask the members of the class of 2019 and by a show of hands:

During the past month, how many of you have been asked:

- What college are you going to?
- What will your major be?
- Or what about – What is most important to you? What brings you joy?

I am not surprised that fewer hands went up as the questions progressed. That was my experience as well. And in many cases, that continues to be my experience.

Since graduating from King in 2004, I am struck by how often I was asked questions about what, where, and why – sometimes even how much. And how rarely I was asked who I am as a person, and what matters to me most. Yet questions about my personal identity have pushed me the

most, and afforded me the greatest opportunities to stand for something. It has been the foundation on which I built so much of my career, my passion, and my purpose.

Some of what I have learned since high school, during college, graduate school, and during my career is that to delve into personal identity – things can get messy. So much of our identity, or even our attempts to uncover more about ourselves, are pushed aside to conform to a standard. It's a standard that remains unquestioned. The status quo is what remains with this lack of questioning.

I am currently co-founder & CEO of an organization called Anseye Pou Ayiti, which is focused on equipping a new generation of civic leaders in Haiti to prioritize questioning the status quo. Our collective push is for education equity in my native Haiti. Ultimately, the success of the Anseye Pou Ayiti movement is rooted in the “who” question. We now work with 215 teacher-leaders, across 65 rural partner schools, and reach over 7,000 students. And because we have prioritized the power of identity as well as academic excellence, we are seeing significant student achievement gains. Student achievement results have almost tripled – from a community average of 30% to over 85% of students passing on time and on grade level. Our students are equipped to know who they are, where they come from, and to be proud of it. We believe those who have experienced inequity and injustice are best positioned to lead the fight to dismantle it. They are the solution-bearers.

So I turn to you, 2019 graduates:

In thinking about who you are, I hope it becomes the roots of your tree. You will add thickness to your trunk – what builds your character over time – and then branches, limbs, leaves with every experience, position, title you have, with every success and every failure. But plant your roots deep. Your roots will sustain you.

My roots were planted by my father Wectnick and my mother Ghislaine, nurtured by my family members, and further enriched by incredible teachers who inspired my lifelong path as a teacher and educator. While teachers contributed to some transformative experiences – or limbs to my tree as I was referring to before – what I want to share today is that many of those same teachers pushed me to be true to my roots. They are teachers such as:

- Ms. Juliette Salomon, my 4th grade teacher whose pride in her Haitian identity served as a model for me. She carried her identity in her speech, her behaviors, her jokes, her encouragement to every student to always reach higher.
- Teachers like Mr. Brad Wallace, my 7th grade math teacher who recognized my thirst for learning and built up my confidence.
- Teachers like King's very own Mr. Christos Galanopoulos, who taught me that there was a reason why my identity was so wrapped up in my love of history, why I was so drawn to learning about the everyday people of historical social movements. Because I believed – and still do – that to know myself means knowing where I come from and who my ancestors are.

Being rooted in one's identity frees us up to think differently, to lead differently, to orient ourselves toward how we fit into this world, and how we can choose to positively contribute to society as active citizens.

Rooting myself in who I am has helped me understand three principles that I would like to share with today's graduates.

1. **First, history is today:** We are part of systems that exist today, but that have not been created in a vacuum. Whether it's our education system, climate change, or how food systems feed entire populations (or not) – there is history embedded in every aspect of how we live our lives today. While learning more about our own personal histories, let's also encourage each other to dig deep into the systems that we may be taking for granted today as “ready made” or “ready set.” As a social justice activist, I have learned it is impossible to participate in dismantling systems of education oppression or injustice without first recognizing how the systems came to exist in the first place. Let's push ourselves beyond the most well-known texts, social media snapshots, or what is being peddled as “popular opinions” and really unearth the messy, complex factors that have contributed to our social constructs of today. Just as importantly, know that how you express yourself today verbally, in writing, and even on social media either reflects, perpetuates, or shifts social constructs. Let's be aware of the role we play in shaping the world around us going forward.

2. **Secondly, I've learned to constantly ask: Who am I in relation to others? Who are you in relation to others?**

I am not encouraging an approach to personal identity that promotes solitude. On the contrary, human beings are social beings for a reason. But not social beings in the ways that Facebook has defined “friendship” or based on the number of likes on our Instagram posts. When I refer to knowing who you are in relation to others, I mean taking the time for dialogue, relationships, and listening. It would be easier to find shortcuts, because relationship building is difficult. To really listen – not just hear – is difficult. But respect and love – what our world needs so desperately right now – are rooted in relationship building. Citizenship is rooted in relationship building. Many are surprised to learn that we took about 4 years to fully listen to community members across rural Haiti before shaping what our movement for education equity would ultimately become. But it was one of our best decisions, the foundation on which we have built our impact. So as you move on from King, I encourage you to sit and have a meal with someone new as often as you can. Participate in conversations that push you outside of your comfort zone. These experiences will challenge you, but trust they will also deepen your roots and open your perspective. These experiences will help build the relationships that facilitate community.

3. **Third & lastly, I've learned that collective leadership creates social impact.**

Know who you are, then know how you relate to others, and build shared vision as a collective. I am struck by how often we overlook the mobilization of hundreds, thousands of people when we tell the stories of successful social movements. We refer to the power (and rightly so!) of Martin Luther King, Jr., Susan B. Anthony, Toussaint Louverture, and Nelson Mandela, but we must not forget that it took diverse, complex, and sometimes hidden teamwork for social movements to take hold. True systemic change requires collective leadership.

It is tempting to think we can go at it alone – just add a few hours to our study or work day, think through strategic ideas on your own, publicize all your amazing skills as often as you can. But relationships not only sustain us, they also propel real social impact. As the American anthropologist Margaret Mead tells us: “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*” Said another way by an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” I encourage the class of 2019 to be the ones who go far by modeling

collective leadership. Knowing yourself well enough that you can positively contribute to a shared vision. And I'll add one more suggestion: let's build together from an asset-based approach, rather than deficits. The world tells us what is broken, what needs to be "fixed." But let's instead recognize the beautiful assets that exist all around us and leverage them toward shared wellbeing.

The next few months and years will probably go by in a blur. It may not feel like it today, but trust me – it will! There will be a lot of noise, a lot of distractions. It's easy to get caught up. I encourage you to take the time to root yourself in who you are, what matters to you, what brings you joy – and just as importantly, build your tribe and stand for something.

If you were to ask my today: Who am I?

I'd answer: I am a proud daughter of Haiti. I am an educator. I stand for justice.

Who are you?

Thank you. Wishing congrats and best of luck to the class of 2019!