



**2008 Commencement
Westina Matthews Shatteen, Ph.D.
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Dean Takumura, Faculty, Graduates, Parents, Friends and Family...good afternoon and hello everyone.

Well, I wish my father were alive today to see this, for I am sure he would be shaking his head in absolute dismay. He never would have imagined that one day I would be delivering the commencement address at such an august institution in such a magnificent venue.

Oh, he knew I would be “Dr. Matthews” but that I stand before you gainfully employed would cause him to be in a state of utter wonderment.

You see, when I began my career right out of college, I was an elementary school teacher in my hometown (well actually, it is not a town, it is a village) of Yellow Springs, Ohio: 3,400 people, three stop lights, two of which went on blinking yellow at 10:00 p.m.

I left teaching to pursue my graduate studies. When I finished my doctorate from the University of Chicago, I went on to do a postdoctoral fellowship at Northwestern University, and after completing the year at Northwestern, I went on to The University of Wisconsin at Madison to do a second postdoc.

I was about to go off and do a third postdoc at Johns Hopkins, when my father stepped in and told me to get a job. He said that I had become an embarrassment to the family, and reminded me that I had more education than anyone else in the history of our family.

“Don’t you understand,” he said, “that you have both an obligation and a responsibility to give back, to help others, to pay your dues simply for the privilege of taking up space on this planet called earth at this time.”

He started me on my journey in community engagement which I have enjoyed for over 25 years.

I wanted to share with you a little about my own background for two reasons.

First: because I know that we have not only social workers, but also educators, and other community service professionals represented in this audience this afternoon. And while I may stand before you with a title as managing director with a Wall Street firm, I am an

educator at heart...who has spent a lot of time in the community working on social change and social justice issues.

And second: I want to encourage you to keep an open mind about the possibilities, knowledge and the power that you -- and others that you know -- can leverage and maximize in order to make a difference in the world.

Because given my own personal circumstances, if I can stand before you this afternoon as Dr. Matthews, as a managing director, as an author, then I am here to tell you that any one can.

All that it will require is that you keep an open mind about the possibilities, knowledge and the power that are available in each and every one of you.

Graduates: You are problem solvers.

However you decided to use this degree, it is clear that armed with your newly minted degree you will now be able to go get a job, as my father once chided me 26 years ago. And with the cost of your tuition, it looks as though you will be working for a very, very, very l-o-n-g time.

You know, social work is social changing. As change agents, you will find that this commitment to contemporary social change may be at times daunting but I promise you that it will not be insurmountable. I believe that for you to be this instrument of change, it is critical for you to be able to build and to sustain relationships. What kinds of relationships?

Relationships with your colleagues

Relationships with clients of all genders and ages and sexual orientations and religions and colors and languages

Relationships with government officials

Relationships with other agencies, and

Relationships with yourselves and your loved ones.

So, how do you build and sustain relationships? How do you stay in the midst of hurt, rejection, pain, broken promises, illnesses, deaths, or chilly silences? How do you hang in there when all you want to do is to hang up?

In the midst of a relationship, when do you remember and how do you forget? Or how do you forgive, especially during those times when you think that you will never be able to forgive?

How do you know when to move on, or to move out, or to move away? Or when do you stand by, stand tall, stand with, or when do you simply stand still?

Having completed twelve hundred hours in field instruction, I can only begin to imagine the relationships that you have developed, attempted to develop, or failed to develop, as you struggled to address human rights and social justice issues.

And yes, the challenge you face in reaching out, in overcoming, in still believing, in staying motivated, in breaking through the disappointments and the discouragements, is not an easy one to overcome.

So, how do you form and sustain relationships? How does one begin to heal the brokenness of spirit that one might see when trying to form a relationship?

I humbly offer you three steps. They are not based on extensive clinical research. Nor are they based on case studies, nor field instruction, nor an exhaustive review of the literature. They are based simply and humbly on my personal experience and observation on how to form and sustain relationships.

The first step is to have hope. It is first a message about the importance of looking beyond the present circumstances and to have hope. Have hope.

One day, some of your colleagues or projects or assignments or relationships may seem to be destined to end, or perhaps they will be ones that you hope will end. Or perhaps you will have a work situation where the circumstance has become problematic.

As much as we would like to say that the “isms” no longer exist -- you know, racism, sexism, ageism, homophob-ism, disability-ism, crony-ism. Yes, I do have a Ph.D., and I am making up some of the words -- but they do sometimes, sadly and disappointingly still exist.

Within these circumstances, you wonder how to still have hope. How to not give up on yourself or the opportunity? How to not say, “I’ll just work over here; because I don’t have hope that things can improve over there.”

Or you may wonder how to still believe in the possibilities to make a real difference despite the circumstances of the people with whom or the conditions with which you must work or live.

But you must always have hope.

My friends, after a very difficult first marriage, I lost finances, houses, and cars. I have had no food in the refrigerator to eat, and have had to wear socks on my hands for gloves. I have been diagnosed with a critical illness – pericarditis - and not supposed to live. And on 9-11, I found myself in the World Financial Center running for my life down 33

flights and over the Brooklyn Bridge in 45 minutes (Jackie Joyner Kersee has got nothing on me).

But through it all, I have never lost hope. I have never lost hope. And you must not either.

Because you must never lose hope.

Which brings me to the second step. And that is to never give up. Never give up.

It's been said that Winston Churchill was once asked to give the commencement address at a university. The program ran on too long, and Mr. Churchill – being respectful of the time constraints – turned to the last page of his speech, and gave the conclusion. And it was, "Never give up, never give up, never give up."

And while this is not the conclusion of my remarks nor has this commencement gone on too long yet... and it is only my second point of three points, my friends, I still say to you never give up, never give up, never give up.

Oh, it doesn't mean that sometimes you can't finally let go of a relationship because some relationships must be let go. But it does mean that you cannot let anyone steal your joy. I'm here to implore you that you can not let anyone or anything...steal your joy.

In the morning when you wake up, before you get out of bed...somebody or something is trying to steal your joy. The voices get busy in your head, and by the time you get to work, the voices are in stereo.

"I know when I put on that skirt its going to be too tight. I know my boss is going to be in a bad mood. Or "I have tried and tried to talk with this client, and he or she had better not start with me this morning."

But you can't let anyone or anything steal your joy. You must be like Winston Churchill and "never give up, never give up, never give up."

And that brings me to my third and final step. And that is to go to the heart. When you aren't sure what to do, go to the heart because that's the center of your joy. That's your love center.

I remember when I was trying to decide whether to move to New York City to a new job or to stay in Chicago on a job that I enjoyed and did well. I asked my grandmother -- who was 95 years old at the time -- what I should do. Go or stay?

Nana responded with something that has stayed with me for all of these years. And it's the same advice that I often give to others when they are at turning points in their lives not sure what to do especially in relationships either professionally or personally.

Nana said, "I'm not sure which job for you to take. In fact, I don't even understand what you do. But what I can tell you baby is to "go to the heart."

She went on to say that you can go to your head and make a thoughtful decision or make a mindful decision, but if your heart is not happy, you won't be happy. And you can go to your gut and make a fearful decision or a fear-filled decision, but if your heart is not happy, then you won't be happy.

But if you go to your heart, it doesn't matter what your head or your gut says, you will know peace.

And so therefore I say to you go to the heart. Go to the center of your joy. Find the love.

Let me begin to close. And so when you are thinking about how to create, develop and sustain relationships as you go forward; and as you go out to help to build better futures in communities throughout the world; and as you think of some of our "he-ros and "she-ros" in the global social work movement who dedicated their lives to peace and to the eradication of poverty -- names like Jane Addams, Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa...

I invite you to think about those three simple steps:

To have hope. To never give up. To go to the heart.

My friends, I am humbled by your commitment, dedication, and compassion that I know you must draw upon every single day so that you may provide advocacy, service, and programs to help make this world a better place.

But despite these circumstances and challenges -- or maybe because of these circumstances and challenges -- I believe in you. I believe in what's in your heart and in the honor of your intention. And despite these circumstances and challenges -- or maybe because of these circumstances and challenges -- I believe in the important contributions of the Columbia School of Social Work.

I believe in the power of relationships of men and women coming together as faculty, administration, parents, loved ones and you soon-to-be alumni so that future students may also grow to their full potential and fulfill critical leadership roles in academia, government, and the private sector here and around the world.

I believe in the men and women who -- like me, and perhaps like even some of you -- have been denigrated and denied, but who have refused to be diminished. Men and women who have put up with untenable work situations to make sure there was a steady source of income for their families.

I believe in men and women who have earned their undergraduate or graduate degrees...or got their children through school...when all others doubted it could be done.

So, if you are a man or a woman who has never known a sad day, a hard day, a troubling day, a discouraging day, a disappointing day, an “I don’t want to get up today” day, then my message this afternoon may not have been for you. Because this is a message for men and for women who – despite life’s trials and tribulations -- have held on to their hope and are not about to give up. Men and women who are not complacent...but rather who are stretching and searching to be all that we are called to be -- each others “he-roes” and “she-roes.” Men and women who are determined to have hope, to never give up, who will allow no one or no thing to steal their joy, and who will always, always, always go to the heart.

Believe in relationships. Believe in the power of relationships. Because you may never know how your reaching out beyond the appearance of an impossible situation today will make a difference in the world tomorrow.

Let me leave you with the words of the great theologian and mystic Howard Thurman, who once said: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go out and do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive.”

My beloved Graduates: As you stand up and walk across this stage, I charge you to come alive.

Come alive as you demonstrate with your head, your heart, your voice, your vote, and your feet that you do indeed understand and believe that you have both an obligation and a responsibility... to give back, to help others, to pay your dues simply for the privilege of taking up space on this planet called earth at this time.

No matter what might happen in your life as you go forward armed with your sheepskin in your hands, remember how you feel right now at this moment, about to leave this occasion with a hard-earned, well-deserved diploma.

Remember how you feel at this moment filled with hope, with love, with joy, and with expectancy.

Remember how you feel at this moment believing in the possibilities that are available in each and every one of us.

Remember what you may believe right now as impossible -- trust me -- is absolutely, positively, indisputably possible.

Come alive! Come alive!

Because the world is waiting...pleading...begging...and needing...for you to come alive. Ask whatever makes you come alive...and then go out and do it!

Thank you and God bless.