

**Columbia University School of Social Work  
Commencement Address  
Diana Aviv  
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Dean Takamura, members of the faculty, alumni, graduates, family and friends, I am honored to be with you on this special day, which marks a well-defined moment in your lives as you move from one learning stage to another. It is a time that we probably all will remember; a moment in time when we pause to imagine how those journeys ahead will twist and turn to form the contours that shape our lives.

Coming here today for me is like floating back to a time in my own life. I had been in the U.S. for only two years, most of which were spent in New York and at this School of Social Work, when on a beautiful May day I was about to leave the cocoon, rearing to go, confident, optimistic, and totally clueless. The funny thing about confidence is that it allows you to imagine that you know so much more than you actually do. It allows one to take risks, grab chances, and try things out that our more tentative selves might avoid.

In thinking about today, I racked my brain about what to share that might be useful as you embark on the next adventure of your life. I wondered what I may have wanted to hear back in the days when I was graduating from this same School of Social Work, then located on 113<sup>th</sup> street. Such advice, I thought, might

at least remind me of all the steps I could have -- or should have -- taken to avoid a stumble or two along the way. Might that have been useful to you, I wondered? That assumes, of course, that what others say by way of do's and don'ts helps one avoid experiences that are in all likelihood a necessary part of developing. My mother's admonishments to her children to avoid "this" and skip "that" appeared to fall on deaf ears, and we all learned the good old fashioned way: through our own experiences. Concluding that my helpful hints would not necessarily give you the leading edge, and recognizing that the world we live in today is such a very different place than the one I faced, I deemed it more useful to focus on what is ahead of you right now.

Let me hasten to add that this is also a time to savor and celebrate your accomplishments and for all of us to encourage you in your pursuit of full-speed-ahead progress.

Today, I see before me a varied group of graduates heading towards quite different spheres of engagement. For some the work will be through clinical interventions and for others the field of choice includes community engagement, policy development, research, or management. Some of you, I assume, have combined study in these areas of practice with other disciplines as well, all made possible by the leadership of this very fine school.

So good a school, I am told by Dean Takamura, that for the fifth year in a row, one of the graduating students has been selected as outstanding M.S. student from among the seven New York-based schools of social work -- just one of the many honors heaped on the school and its graduating students.

Congratulations to you all for helping to make CSSW an extraordinary place.

As you lift your heads beyond the calm but intense environment of study and practice, I imagine it is hard to escape the realities of the world you are about to enter. Of late, it has been dominated by incessant bad news about the economy; reports continue to pile up about rising unemployment rates and cutbacks in the workforce even from the most stable companies. The stock market is mostly down, and at best, wildly unpredictable; home mortgages and sales continue to offer up very little good news; consumers are staying home with their purses tightly closed.

In our own charitable community the news is not any better, and projections for next year are even less encouraging. For there is a growing gap between the resources necessary to do the work and the funds organizations have on hand to meet their commitments. I read in the *New York Times* a few weeks ago about Wall Street professionals ducking out of the workforce and going back to school to avoid the possibility of being laid off. What good, you might ask, are the professional skills I have

worked so hard to hone if there is not going to be the opportunity to put them to good use? How do I succeed if I am up against an economy that is so unyielding? How do I practice the basic tenets of my profession -- helping to improve the lives of others -- if it is going to be so hard to get a job in my field of choice? Am I really competing against professionals with years more experience who are willing to take entry-level positions just to stay in the game?

And how does the shrinking number of jobs align with the growing need? The president of Feeding America recently shared with me that some local groups are seeing people who in the past had helped hand out food now finding themselves in the food lines. Catholic Charities' CEO observed that requests for help at some of their local dioceses had grown by 100 percent. Even though these particular organizations also saw a slight bump up in donations at the end of last year, the additional resources did not begin to cover the need.

The Obama administration got to work on these issues even prior to assuming office. The result? One of the most astonishing pieces of legislation that I think we will see in our lifetimes. Within weeks of being sworn in, Congress passed a bill designed to stimulate the economy and grow jobs. But it did more than that. Over half the funds -- a staggering \$357 billion -- was to be invested in education, health, and welfare services. The Corporation for National and Community Service also saw a large

allocation of funds and stands to benefit even further from passage of the Serve America Act, which will expand AmeriCorps to 250,000 positions by 2017 if the funding is appropriated. Even the Emergency Food and Shelter program saw its budget double. So it is fair to say that as the money begins to find its way from state coffers to organizations serving relevant populations, not only will jobs be saved but a number of these organizations will also likely expand their work for the next few years. Our collective responsibility is to make sure the money ends up serving the purposes for which it was appropriated.

This muscular and swift action from the administration was followed in short order by an ambitious budget with a significant focus on health care reform. If passed into law, the President's plan would go a long way to reducing costs, stabilizing the system, and rendering health care more accessible and affordable for most Americans.

I share this not to offer a recitation of Obama-Congressional goals and benchmarks, but rather to say that at this moment there is a leader in the White House who firmly believes that it is his responsibility to attend to the economy and to take bold action to move it towards recovery. He believes that such a recovery is not possible without serious health care reform that will include the 45 million Americans who are not currently covered by health insurance. The administration believes that if

we fail to prepare our children adequately for what lies ahead, our chance to secure their future will be compromised. The actions of the Obama administration are different from anything I have seen coming out of Washington in a very long time. Government appears to want to be part of the solution and take swift actions to get there. What a welcome departure!

Will these developments translate into an abundance of jobs just as you need them, offering you the opportunities to ply your skills? The answer to that is partly in your hands. The nonprofit sector is always looking for talented professionals, who are industrious, enthusiastic, and willing to do what it takes to move us through the challenges we face. While in the larger landscape, we are in a period of contraction, in any given community there are sure to be opportunities to pursue. Some of my peers point out that first-rate, entry-level professionals work hard, learn quickly, and are more affordable than other more experienced and expensive job applicants. The real competition, they note, is more likely to come from professionals looking to switch from the corporate to the nonprofit world; professionals willing to start over and who also bring helpful skills to the table.

How, then, do you make sure you secure the job that will best reflect your passions and long-term goals? If history is any gauge, then for most of you the ideal job will not materialize right away. I don't think that is as much a function of this economy as

it is a function of our sometime unrealistic expectations. My own career path was by no means linear. Having grown up in a country that was built on racist policies, I saw social work as a way to work on social and racial justice issues. Being new to America and unfamiliar with the possibilities, I reached for work that provided opportunity, even though those first jobs were not what I had imagined for myself. They did, however, offer me the chance to learn about my craft, understand the importance of teamwork, appreciate the importance of achieving results and being accountable, and also learn how laws and policy intersect with direct service.

I soon discovered that my growth as a professional had just begun. School had given me some basic skills and introduced me to many important ideas, but what lay ahead was a life of learning, experience, and learning all over again. I thought that with college behind me there would be no more "all nighters." Did I say I was naive? Then slowly I made my way towards work that connected in some way with my interest in social justice: first through a program to help battered women and their families, and then by helping defense teams prepare for death penalty cases. Not exactly what I had imagined, but helpful no less to the people I served. These experiences opened up new horizons to me, ones I had never imagined before.

I was the kind of a person who had a vivid idea of the kind of work she had hoped to be engaged in, but without a clear roadmap of how to get there. As long as the work allowed me to deepen my experiences and make life better for others -- first on a small scale and then nationally -- I was headed in the right direction. My quest then was the same as it is now: how can I make an even greater difference?

Many of you will have the opportunity to become leaders in your respective fields of practice. Remember that leadership is never only about what one single person can do; rather, it is about working with others to achieve a stronger outcome. It is also about having a clear vision and the ability to translate that vision for others and inspire them; it is about the discipline to listen and respect the perspectives of others; it is about a commitment to leading by example; and it also is about a strong work ethic.

Leadership is not only about responding to current challenges, but also envisioning and creating a better future. Each one of you shares a commitment to enriching and empowering individuals, and by extension, a promise to build stronger communities and enhance the world in which we live.

Being successful in this field means that you improve the quality of the lives of those you touch, not only because of what you do day in and day out, but also because of the way in which you approach and engage others. And being successful in this field



carries with it the obligation not only of improving lives, but also of *securing brighter futures*.

As you leave this hall today, know that there are many people who will be counting on you to succeed, both for your selves and for those that you serve. Seize opportunities, take risks, reach out, and also reach inward as you grow, improve, and deliver.

I close with a reflection from Lao Tzu's "Tao Te Ching" [*Dao De Jing*]:

*Knowing others is intelligence;*

*Knowing yourself is true wisdom.*

*Mastering others is strength;*

*Mastering yourself is true power.*

Congratulations graduates, and thank you all very much.