

COMMENCEMENT REMARKS BY ROBERT F. SMITH
GRADUATE CEREMONY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER
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Thank you, Chancellor Chopp, for your kind introduction. Chairman Scrivner and members of the Board of Trustees: It is an honor and great privilege to join you today.



For a kid from Denver, it doesn't get any better than this.

Faculty, friends, family, graduates, thank you and congratulations. You make an extraordinary sight – a stunning vista of colors that reflect your accomplishments in all their diversity.



Standing here and seeing you, I have a familiar sense of pride and excitement. You see, 45 years ago, my father earned his Doctorate in Education from this very institution.

I remember that day vividly. I was nine years old, and as I sat on my parents' bed while my father put on his graduation robes, I listened to him explain how each school had its own special colors -- the beautiful light blue and yellow, with a little bit of orange – that were the colors of the School of Education.

They were strikingly beautiful – and he was regal in his presentation of them. And it should come as no surprise that the logo of my firm Vista, carries those same shades of blue and yellow -- so I am reminded every day of this university and the profound impact it had on my father's life and my family.

But even as I watched him walk across the stage that day, I didn't fully understand how significant that moment – or his achievements – were. It didn't sink in until later.

That evening, my mother arranged a backyard celebration, something we typically did that I always looked forward to because that meant we would have soda pop in the large steel drums filled with ice, and I would be responsible for plunging my hand into the ice-cold water to fulfill a drink order...which also meant I could hide one orange soda in the corner, guaranteeing that I would get one!

As was typical of all Smith family gatherings, all of father's six sisters and brother and their children showed up that day.

We totaled well over 20 just ourselves -- and of course I expected to see our "extended family," the folks I called my aunts and uncles.

What actually occurred took me by surprise. Instead of a small gathering of very familiar relatives, the entire neighborhood came out to shake his hand and pat him on the back!

And the stream of visitors didn't stop that day. For the next week or so, our doorbell rang constantly with the good wishes of friends, family, and neighbors who wanted to share in the moment.

To understand why this one degree meant so much to them, let me tell you a little bit about the city of Denver and the neighborhood of my childhood. We lived on 26th and Cook, in North East Denver -- just across the street from City Park Golf Course.

And back then, Denver and most other American cities remained extremely divided by race, both politically and geographically. When I started kindergarten, court-ordered bussing to desegregate the school system was just beginning in Denver, and a number of the children in my neighborhood were bussed to the SouthEast side of town -- to Carson Elementary -- on 3rd and Grape.

As a kindergartner, I did not feel the "change" that the older children felt as this was all I knew of school. I did quickly realize that aside from the difference in the hue of our skins, the children in my classes all pretty much acted the same. And over time I came to realize our parents had very similar values in what they wanted for us.

Both communities seemed to be filled with hardworking folks from various walks of life, all with an eye towards advancing this American Dream.

In my community, my neighbors were mostly educated, proud, hard-working, and ambitious. They were dentists, music teachers, politicians, Pullman porters, teachers, contractors and pharmacists.

They were focused on serving the African American community and providing a safe and nurturing environment for the kids of our neighborhood.

They had been on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement. Sacrificed their sons to the Vietnam War. Mourned the death of a Kennedy, a King, and then another Kennedy.

They had yet to achieve the fullness of the American Dream for themselves -- but they believed it was only a matter of time. If not for them, then surely for their children.

They believed that our imperfect nation was becoming more perfect every day. And they believed that by conducting themselves and raising their families with integrity, they were contributing to that process of perfection in a very real way.

And so, we celebrated every sign that the barriers of inequality were collapsing and the doors of opportunity were opening. My neighbors flocked to see my father, because his achievement, in a very real way, was theirs, too.

That afternoon, in our backyard, I began to understand the old saying that "success has many parents." It was true then, and, looking out at all of you, it is certainly true today.

The success of our graduates belongs to all of us.

Earning a graduate degree is one of the greatest and most impressive of life's accomplishments, but as hard as each of you worked, none of you crossed the finish line alone.

You brought a team along, and many of your teammates are here with you. So, first and foremost, graduates of the class of 2017, please stand and join me in recognizing the love and commitment of those who have been on this journey with you.

In my father's time, the prospect of an African American earning a doctorate was virtually non-existent. Even today, it is exceedingly rare for any American to earn a graduate degree.

Less than 9 percent of Americans have earned advanced degrees, and just 3 percent have earned doctorates.

Needless to say, today is your induction into a very small, very important club.

In order to get here, many of you have now dedicated years of your life to higher learning.

You have put other plans aside to do this.

You passed up countless opportunities and deferred many a paycheck to do this.

You have missed time with your family and friends to do this.

And you made these sacrifices for one simple reason:

You believe that scholarship still matters.

You believe that rigor still matters.

You believe that facts still matter.

You believe, graduates, that truth still matters.

But now, as you stand at the finish line and reflect on your efforts and sacrifices, I suspect that some of you are left wondering whether these timeless values are still relevant in a world that increasingly seems more interested in speed and noise, than thought and integrity.

Yes, it's true -- whether you stay in academia professionally, or join the public, private, or civil society sectors, you are launching your careers at a moment of vast and disruptive change.

As much as technology has transformed our world over the past quarter-century, we've not seen anything yet!

We are just now entering the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an era of human history during which technology will evolve from being a part of our lives to becoming central to virtually every part of our lives.

These changes hold great promise for advancing the highest ideals of a freer, fairer, and more hopeful society.

Today, for the first time in human history, success requires no prerequisite of wealth or capital -- no ownership of land, or natural resources, or people.

Today, success can be created solely through the power of one's mind, ideas, and courage.

Intellectual capital can be cultivated, monetized, and instantaneously distributed across the globe. In fact, intellectual capital has become the new currency of business and finance -- and the promise of brainpower to move people from poverty to prosperity has never been more possible.

But for all this extraordinary promise, the age we're now entering also comes with great peril.

We discover every day that technology has enormous power to unite...but it can also alienate.

It can empower, but it can also disenfranchise.

But what keeps me up at night is not the risks of technology. It is the risk of people neglecting their own role and personal agency to decide how technology impacts our communities.

In a world that is changing so fast and so unpredictably, the easiest thing to do is simply take our hands off the steering wheel and coast.

We can either choose to harness technology as a great equalizer -- or we can allow it to minimize, victimize, and fracture our communities.

We can either choose to take up arms in the fight for intellectual capital -- or we can decide to settle for the lowest common denominator.

We can either choose to build communities -- or we can build walls.

The key point is that we have a choice in the matter.

We must make these choices consciously -- and we must remake them every day.

This isn't always easy to do. The consequences of overlooking a moment of choice -- or choosing wrong -- may not be immediately evident.

But when we collectively begin to give up our say in the matter -- that's when we as a society lose our equilibrium.

This has been the focus of many of your academic lives -- studying the equilibrium of systems.

Of natural systems. Of legal systems. Of markets. Of the human body.

My training as a chemical engineer sharpened my passion for complex systems -- for understanding them, deconstructing them, and finding their equilibrium.

But while I found beauty in the absolute truth of machines in the classroom, I found purpose in the messiness of human interactions in the real world.

Regardless of what field you studied or profession you call your own, we all share a common mission – not to be observers or followers, but to be thinkers, doers, and leaders.

And in a world of dizzying speed, complexity, and disruption, I believe there is only one way to approach this daunting task:

Be purposeful.

In your careers, in your causes, and in your communities -- be purposeful.

Just a few years ago, the trendy advice to give in a commencement speech was to experience many different jobs and industries, to try on fresh careers like new suits in a department store until one of them fits.

That may be good advice for some. But one of the burdens of your advanced degree is that you don't have this luxury.

You are now certified experts in your respective fields. You have a fancy new piece of paper that proves it.

But that diploma isn't just for framing. There's fine print: it's actually a binding social contract that calls on you to apply your talents, your intellect, and most of all, your fidelity to truth-finding and truth-telling, to the parts of society that need you most.

You owe the world your focus.

A generation ago, your core responsibilities would have been to establish a successful career, provide for your family, and give back to society when you can.

Today, you must do these things -- and much more. The stakes are higher and your responsibilities are greater.

In the years to come, we will see many of today's challenges grow more acute.

Increasing numbers of people will grow to feel excluded from our political and economic structures.

Entire industries will be upended by technology, creating new wealth and demand in the workforce for some, while leaving others vulnerable and at risk.

Tensions between humans and computers will flare up, creating new vulnerabilities and introducing new ethical dilemmas.

And global discontent and alienation will continue to manifest itself in populism and extremism, opening the door to authoritarian rule, oppression, and civil strife.

You are not expected to tackle all of these problems -- but you are required to focus and make a measurable impact.

Never for a moment give in to cynicism or give up on optimism -- for the tools you honed here at the University of Denver qualify you to be a part of the solution.

I firmly believe, as President John F. Kennedy once said, that --

“Our problems are man-made, therefore they may be solved by man.
And man can be as big as he wants.”

You -- the men and women of this graduating class -- can be as big as you want.

Find your cause. Find it purposefully.

Don't spread around and dilute your talents and contributions. Maximize your impact.

I first learned the value of focus from my mother. She is one of the most brilliant people I have ever met. As far as I know, she only received one grade lower than an A in her life...and that was an A Minus.

She, too, earned her doctorate in education -- and upon graduation, she decided her cause would be to educate the children of our community.

She became the leader at Knight Fundamental Academy and then George Washington High School. Her Fundamental Academy, against all odds, led the district in test scores the entire time she was there.

This was despite – or, perhaps because of – the diversity of students that attended. She did this by setting exacting standards for the children and their parents.

She believed, as I was brought up knowing, that progress isn't inevitable. We must make it so -- and she made it so.

This can-do spirit is represented and embodied by the city of my birth, the city of your graduate education.

When Denver was founded in 1858, it was barely a blip on the great American frontier.

When gold was discovered in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Denver enjoyed an intense burst of investment.

After a gold rush, most boom towns go bust. But not Denver.

When the gold dried up, the people of Denver didn't pack up and head for greener pastures.

They stuck around and built a town that sold supplies to the miners who were on their way to the latest gold town.

Residents of this city had foresight. They realized that the Western gold rush wouldn't last forever, yet seeing our country's Westward drive was here to stay.

So a generation of Denver entrepreneurs then invested in new rail lines that made the city a nexus of travel and commerce as migration intensified.

During World War II, Denver was fueled by investments in the manufacturing sector, and later, the oil and gas industry catalyzed the growth of downtown and Denver's birth as a modern metropolis.

Today, the city is undergoing yet another renaissance as a technology hub. My own company now employs nearly 600 people in Denver - and growing.

Generation after generation -- building, imagining, reimagining, rebuilding.

Yet through the years and the endless cycles of rebirth, this city's pioneering soul endures.

The soul of a city. The soul of a neighborhood. The soul of a family.

Anchored in timeless values, yet fearlessly pushing forward.

Defined by the past, but not confined by it.

This is your story and mine.

Just nine months after I was born, my mother hauled my big brother and me 1,700 miles east to witness Dr. King's historic March on Washington.

She knew that her boys would be far too young to remember, but she believed that the dream we heard in the endless crowd that day would always be a part of the men we would one day become.

Decades later, I had the privilege to take my grandfather with me to the opposite side of the National Mall as a guest of a United States Senator to celebrate the inauguration of our nation's first African American president.

The beautiful poetry of that return to the nation's Capital, under very different circumstances -- a poetry of time and soul that Lincoln called the "mystic chords of memory" -- was lost on neither of us.

You cannot have lived a life like mine, or come from a place like this, without believing in the enduring goodness of our country and its people.

You cannot have witnessed the history I have without profound respect for the unsung everyday heroes who, generation after generation, nudged, shoved, and ultimately bent what Dr. King called "the arc of the moral universe" a little closer to justice.

I am reminded of this every time I'm in Denver, and without fail, at some point during the day a stranger approaches me and says, "You are Bill and Sylvia's Son..."

And then they tell me a story about how my parents changed either their lives or someone in their family's life for the better, and often in a profound way.

Now that is definition and demonstration of having lived a purposeful life.

I should be so fortunate that people approach my children and say that about me one day.

Thank you, mom and dad, for this wonderful gift.

Now, I know you think that one of the great joys of this moment is that it means you will never have to take another test.

No so. Today I will offer a pop quiz: who was the most photographed American in the nineteenth century, just around the same time that Colorado was coming into its own as a state?

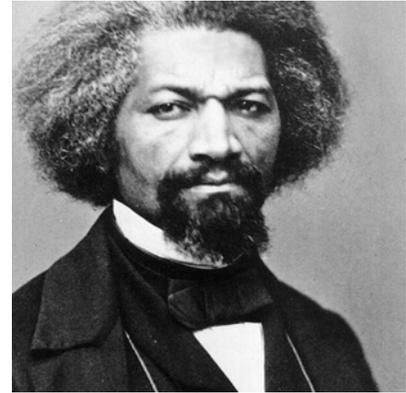
I'll give you one hint -- it was not Abraham Lincoln.

Give up? It was Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass -- an escaped slave and abolitionist, who taught himself how to read and write under cover of darkness.

Like everything Douglass did, sitting for portraits was purposeful.

It was a public stand and an act of defiance.



He wanted to ensure the image of a black man was recorded faithfully and truthfully.

Etched into history, each image became a small signal of progress, a small course correction, another nudge to that moral arc, in a journey he knew would outlast him, as it will each of us.

“Education...means emancipation,” Douglass once wrote.

“It means light and liberty.

“It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light only by which men can be free.”

Graduates, let these words be your searchlight as you set out to make your mark.

Be purposeful.

Be hopeful.

Be flexible in your views, but stubborn in your values.

Contribute your brilliance, your knowledge, and your wisdom, to the glorious light of truth.

Thank you very much. Congratulations, and good luck!