

**Commencement Address
Lewis & Clark College
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It's a great honor to share this day of accomplishment, celebration, and transition with your trustees, President/Dean, faculty, administration, your families, and without doubt the best graduating class in Lewis & Clark's history.

Mark Hatfield, a (wonderful) former Republican senator from Oregon asked some decades ago: How can we stand by as children starve by the millions because we lack the will to eliminate hunger, yet we have found the will to develop missiles capable of flying over the polar cap and landing within a few hundred feet of their target? This, Hatfield said, is not innovation; it is a profound distortion of humanity's purpose on earth. The agrarian poet Wendell Berry said the most alarming sign of the state of our society is that our leaders have the courage to sacrifice the lives of young people in war but have not the courage to tell us we must be less greedy and less wasteful.

Something is out of balance and awry in the world that we live in when just 85 individuals control more wealth than the bottom half of the entire global population. The United States alone has 492 billionaires. These wealthiest Americans do not need tax cuts as proposed in the budget House Republicans just passed when more than 2 million Americans have lost long-term unemployment insurance since the end of last year, affecting more than 1 million children, and 15.9 million children live in food insecure households. When the gap between the haves and have nots is at the largest in recorded history. I want to remind us again that something is out of balance, as Dr. [Martin Luther] King tried to remind us and Dwight Eisenhower tried to remind us, when we continue to spend more on the rich than on the needs of human uplift.

In 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower talked about the stark life tradeoffs in our national choices and reminded us that every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone; it is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

I hope many of you will wander off the beaten career path and help redefine success in 21st-century America, asking not "how much can I get?" but "how much can I without and share?" – asking not "how I can find

myself?” but asking “how can I lose myself in service to others?” and building a more just nation and world.

When I was growing up, service was as essential a part of my upbringing as eating and sleeping and going to school. Caring black adults were buffers against the segregated prison of the outside world that told me, as a Black girl, that I wasn't important. But I didn't believe it because my parents and community elders and teachers and preachers said it wasn't so. So the childhood message I internalized was that as God's child, no man or woman could look down on me, and I could look down on no man or woman.

I couldn't play in segregated public playgrounds or sit at drugstore lunch counters, so my father, a Baptist minister, and my mother built a playground and canteen behind our church. Whenever he and my mother saw a need, they tried to respond. There were no Black homes for the aged; so my parents began one across the street, and our whole family helped out. As children we didn't like it but that's how I learned it was my responsibility to take care of elderly family members and neighbors and that everyone was my neighbor.

Black church and community members were my watchful extended parents. They reported on me when I did wrong, and applauded when I did well. Doing well meant being helpful to others, achieving in school and reading. I figured out one day that the only time daddy wouldn't give me a chore was when I was reading, so I read a lot!

Children were taught, by example, that nothing was too lowly to do and that the work of our heads and hands were both valuable. As a young child I went with an older brother to clean the bedsores of a poor, sick woman and learned just how much the smallest helping hands can mean to a person in need.

Our families, our religious congregations, our community made children feel useful and important. And while life was often hard and resources were often scarce, we always knew who we were and that the measure of our worth was inside our heads and hearts and not outside in personal possessions or personal ambition. I was taught that the world had a lot of problems, but that I could struggle and change them; that intellectual and material gifts brought the privilege and responsibility of sharing with

others less fortunate; and that service is the rent each of us pays for living—the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time or after you have reached your personal goals.

I'm grateful for these childhood legacies: a living faith reflected in daily service, the discipline of hard work and a capacity to struggle in the face of adversity. Giving up was not part of my childhood lexicon: you got up every morning and did what you had to do, and you got up every time you fell down and tried as many times as you had to until it was done right. My elders had grit. They valued family life and family rituals, and tried to be and expose us to good role models. And role models were of two kinds: those who achieved in the outside world and those who didn't have much formal education or money but who taught us, by the special grace of their lives, Christ's and Tolstoy's and Gandhi's message that the Kingdom of God is within. And every day I still try to be half as good as those ordinary people of grace who shared whatever they had with others.

I was 14 the night my daddy died. He had holes in his shoes but two children who had graduated from college, one child in college, another in divinity school, and a vision he was able to convey to me—dying in an ambulance—that I, a young Black girl, could be and do anything, that race and gender are shadows; and that character, self-discipline, determination, attitude and service are the substance of life.

I want to convey that same vision to you today as you graduate into an ethically polluted nation where instant sex without responsibility, instant gratification without effort, instant solutions without sacrifice, getting rather than giving, and hoarding rather than sharing are the too frequent signals of our mass media, popular culture and political life.

The standard for success for too many Americans has become personal greed rather than common good. The standard for striving and achievement has become getting by, rather than making an extra effort or helping others. Truth telling and moral example have become devalued commodities. Nowhere is the paralysis of public and private conscience more evident than in the neglect and abandonment of millions of our shrinking pool of children, whose futures will determine our nation's ability to compete and lead in the new era.

Every nine seconds of the school day, an American high school student drops out. Every 47 seconds as we sit here, an American child is confirmed as abused or neglected. Every 32 seconds an American baby is born into poverty. Every 70 seconds a baby is born without health insurance. Every 90 seconds an American child has a child. We produce the equivalent to the city of Cincinnati each year in children having children.

Every three-and-a-half minutes, an American child is arrested for a drug offense. Every 8 minutes, an American child is arrested for a violent crime. Every three hours and fifteen minutes an American child or teen is killed by a firearm.

In 2012, 7.1 million children lived in extreme poverty—below half the poverty threshold for their families. That is almost one of every 10 American children. It's disgraceful that children are the poorest Americans and the younger they are the poorer they are. One in 4 preschool-age children is poor. Two in 5 Black children are poor and 1 in 3 Hispanic children is poor. In Oregon, more than 1 in 4 children under 6 are poor, 1 in 2 Black children is poor and nearly 2 in 5 Latino children are poor. Oregon has the second highest poverty rate for Black children among states, behind Kentucky and ahead of Mississippi and the seventh highest rate for White children. It has the 20th highest rate of child poverty overall, with nearly 1 in 4 children who are poor.

This decade's struggle is for America's conscience and future. The battles will not be as dramatic or visible as Gettysburg or Vietnam or Iraq, but they will shape our place in the 21st century world no less. The bombs poised to blow up the American dream emanate from no enemies without. They are ticking away within ourselves, our families, our communities and our lack of community, and our moral drift. America's moral and economic compass needs resetting.

I believe that we have lost our sense of what is important as a people. Too many young people of all races and classes are growing up unable to handle life in hard places, without hope, and without steady compasses to navigate a world that is reinventing itself at an unpredictable pace both technologically and politically. My generation learned that to accomplish anything, we had to get off the dime—your generation must learn to get off the paradigm, over and over, and to be flexible, quick, and smart about it.

Despite all the dazzling change in this internet age, I do believe there are some enduring values and I agree with Archibald MacLeish that “there is only one thing more powerful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience.” I feel strongly that it is the responsibility of every adult—parent, teacher, preacher and professional—to make sure that young people hear what we have learned from the lessons of life that helped us survive and succeed, what we think matters, and to know that you are never alone as you go to meet and navigate the future. So I want to share a few life lessons as you leave Lewis & Clark from a letter and later book I wrote for my three wonderful sons. Like them, you can take them or leave them, but you can’t say you were never told or reminded.

So here goes.

Lesson one: There is no free lunch. Don’t feel entitled to anything you don’t sweat and struggle for. And help our nation understand that it’s not entitled to world leadership based on the past or on what we say rather than how well we perform and meet changing world needs. For those African-American, Latino, and Asian American and Native America graduates among you, remember that you can never take anything for granted in America—even with a Lewis & Clark degree. And you had better not start now as racial intolerance resurges all over our land. It may be wrapped up in new euphemisms and in better etiquette but, as Frederick Douglass warned us earlier, it’s the same old snake.

If there are any graduates who feel “entitled” to leadership by accident of birth, let me remind you that the world you face is already two-thirds non-white and poor, and that our nation is becoming a mosaic of greater diversity that you’re going to have to understand, respect, work and live with. A majority of all children in America will be non-White in five years. Ten states and the District of Columbia already have a majority non-White child population. (Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas).

I hope each of you will struggle to achieve and not think for a moment that you’ve got it made. Your college degree may get you in the door, but it won’t get you to the top of the career ladder or keep you there. You’ve got to work your way up—hard and continuously. I know you’re not, but I want to remind you: Don’t ever be lazy. Do your homework. Pay attention to detail. Take care and pride in your work. Proof everything – twice. Take the

initiative in creating your own opportunity, and don't wait around for other people to discover you or do you a favor. Don't assume a door is closed; push on it. Don't assume if it was closed yesterday, it's closed today. And don't ever stop learning and improving your mind. If you do, you and America are going to be left behind.

[The political rhetoric of our leaders that we can have our cake and eat it too is a national disaster. A people unable or unwilling to share, to juggle difficult competing demands, or to make hard choices and sacrifices may be incapable of taking courageous action to rebuild family and community and build for the future, as we must. Many whites favor racial justice as long as things remain the same. Many voters hate Congress but love their own Congressmen as long as he or she takes care of their special interests. Many husbands are happier to share their wives' second income than the housework or child care. Many Americans decry the growing gap between the rich and poor and middle class and escalating child suffering, as long as somebody else's taxes are raised and somebody else's program is cut. We all want to lower the deficit, while still trying to get everything we can. So I quote Frederick Douglass again, who reminded us that men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get.]

Lesson two: Set thoughtful goals and work quietly and systematically toward them. Don't feel you have to talk if you don't have something that matters to say. Resist quick fix, simplistic answers and easy gains. They often disappear just as quickly as they come. So many talk big and act small. So often we get bogged down in our ego needs and lose sight of deeper needs. It's alright to want to feel important, if it is not as the expense of doing important deeds—even if we don't get the credit. You can get a lot achieved in life if you don't mind doing the work and letting other people get the credit. You know what you do, God knows what you do, and that's all that should matter.

Lesson three: Assign yourself. My daddy used to ask us whether the teacher gave us any homework. If we said no, he's say, "Well, assign yourself some." Don't wait around for your boss or your friends or spouse to direct you to do what you are able to figure out and do for yourself. Don't do just as little as you can to get by. Don't be a political bystander and grumbler. Vote. Democracy is not a spectator sport. Run for political office, and don't, if you do run and win, think that you or your re-election or job are the only point once you do. If you see a need, don't ask, "Why

doesn't somebody do something?" ask, "Why don't I do something?" And don't wait around to be told to do something. There is nothing more wearing than people who have to be asked or reminded to do things repeatedly. Hard work, initiative, and persistence are still the non-magic carpets to success for most of us.

Four: Never work just for money. Money alone won't save your soul or build a decent family or help you sleep at night. We are the richest nation on earth with one of the highest incarceration, drug addiction, and child poverty rates in the world. Don't confuse wealth or fame with character. And don't tolerate or condone moral corruption, whether it's found in high or low places, whatever its color or class. It is not okay to push or use drugs, even if every person in America is doing it. It is not okay to lie or to cheat. Be honest. And demand that those who represent you be honest. And don't confuse morality with legality. Dr. King once noted that everything Hitler did in Nazi Germany was legal. Don't give anyone the proxy for your conscience.

Lesson five: Don't be afraid of taking risks or of being criticized. If you don't want to be criticized, don't say anything, do anything, or be anything. Don't be afraid of failing. It's the way you learn to do things right. It doesn't matter how many times you fall down. What matters is how many times you get up. And don't wait for everybody to come along to get something done. It's always a few people who get things done and keep things going. This country needs more wise and courageous shepherds and fewer sheep who borrow from integrity to fund expediency.

Lesson six: Take parenting and family life seriously and insist that those you work for and who represent you do so. Our nation mouths family values we do not practice. We are the only "developed" nation that does not provide paid family leave for parents of newborn children. Over half of mothers of infants are in the labor force, and our leaders have yet to establish a safe, affordable, quality system of early childhood development and learning for all of our children which is the Children's Defense Fund's top policy priority over the next three years.

It's time for the mothers of this nation to tell the men of this nation to get with it and stop the political hypocrisy so that all parents can have a real choice about whether to remain at home or work outside the home without worrying about the safety of their children. And if we don't get all our

children ready for school, we will continue to see the nation threatening reality that 60% of all our children and 75% of Latino children and 80% of Black children cannot read or compute at grade level. What kind of future workforce, military, diplomatic and national security protections are we going to have?

I hope your generation will raise your sons to be fair to other people's daughters and to share—not just help with—parenting responsibilities. I hope you'll stress family rituals and be moral examples for your children. If you cut corners, they will too. If you lie, they will too. If you spend all your money on yourself and tithe no portion of it for your colleges, churches, synagogues, and civic causes, they won't either. And if you tell, acquiesce, or snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison my generation still has not had the courage to snuff out.

Lesson seven: Please remember and help America remember that the fellowship of human beings is more important than the fellowship of race and class and gender in a democratic society. Be decent and fair and insist that others be so in your presence. Don't tell, laugh at or tolerate racial, ethnic, religious or gender jokes—or any practices intended to demean rather than enhance another human being. Walk away from them. Stare them down. Make them unacceptable in your presence. Through daily moral consciousness, counter the proliferating voices of racial and ethnic and religious intolerance gaining respectability over the land again. Let's face up to rather than ignore our crippling birth defects of Native American genocide, slavery, exclusion of all women and nonpropertied men of all races from our democratic process. And let's confront our growing racial problems, which are America's historic and future Achilles' heel (Cradle to Prison Pipeline, voter suppression).

How many more potential Barack Obamas, Sally Rides, Barbara McClintocks, Wilma Mankillers, Daniel Inouyes, and Cesar Chavezes is our nation going to waste before it wakes up and recognizes that our ability to compete and lead is as inextricably intertwined with its poor and non-White children as with its white and privileged ones, with its girls as well as with its boys?

And let's not spend a lot of useless time pinning and denying blame rather than healing our divisions. Rabbi Abraham Heschel put it aptly: "We

are not all equally guilty, but we are all equally responsible” for building a decent and a just America.

Lesson eight: Don’t confuse style for substance, political charm with decency or sound policy. It’s wonderful to go to the White House or Congress or State House for a chat, but words alone will not meet children’s or the nation’s needs. And don’t confuse access with outcome. Political and moral leadership and different budget priorities are what matter. Speak truth to power. And put your own money and leadership behind rhetorical concern for families and children in your own homes, law firms, universities, corporations, communities and in whatever areas you pursue. Pay far more attention to what our leaders do than what they say. You are accountable for them and they are accountable to you. Don’t drop the ball.

Lesson nine: Listen for the genuine within yourself. “Small,” Einstein said, “is the number of them that see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts.” Try to be one of them. “There is,” Howard Thurman, the Black theologian, said, “something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in ourselves,” and it is “the only true guide you’ll ever have.” And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”

There are so many noises and competing demands in our lives that many of us never find out who we are. Learn to be quiet enough to hear the sound of the genuine within yourself so that you can hear it in other people.

Lesson ten, and the last one: Never think life is not worth living or that you cannot make a difference. Never give up—I don’t care how hard it gets, and it will get very hard sometimes. An old proverb says that when you get to your wit’s end, that’s where God lives. Harriet Beecher Stowe said when you get into a “tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could no hang on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and the time that the tide will turn.” Hang in with life.

And don’t think you have to “win” immediately or even at all, to make a difference. Sometimes it’s important to lose for things that matter.

Don’t think you have to be a big dog to make a difference. My role model, Sojourner Truth, an illiterate slave woman, hated slavery and she

never lost an opportunity to speak out. My favorite Sojourner story occurred one day when she was speaking out against slavery at a hopeless time, and she got heckled by an old white man who stood up in the audience and said, “Old slave woman, I don’t care any more about your old anti-slavery talk than I do for an old flea bit.” And she snapped back at him, “That’s alright, but the Lord willing, I’m going to keep you scratching.” You just need to be a flea against injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation, as we together are going to transform America in the 21st Century and make it un-American for any child to be poor, without enough food, shelter, health care, child care, and education in our rich land.

Shel Silverstein, the children’s book writer, gets my last word. He said:

“Listen to the mustn’ts, child,
listen to the don’ts,
listen to the shouldn’ts,
the impossibles, the wont’s,
listen to the never haves,
then listen close to me—
anything can happen, child,
ANYTHING can be.”

If you dream it, if you believe in it, if you have faith in it, struggle for it, and never give up. God speed.