

OBAMA TO GRADUATES: CULTIVATE EMPATHY

"The world doesn't just revolve around you"

June 19, 2006

Good evening President Bienen, the Board of Trustees, faculty, parents, family, friends, and the Class of 2006. Congratulations on your graduation, and thank you for allowing me the honor to be a part of it.

A few months ago, I came across an article in your student newspaper by Elaine Meyer.

Elaine, give me a little wave if you're out there. There she is. Glad to see you made it to graduation.

So, Elaine wrote this article entitled, "Challenge us, Senator Obama." I thought this seemed like a fair request, so I kept reading. And I noticed that Elaine set out a few expectations for this speech.

According to the article, I'm supposed to be inspirational, but not contrived. I'm supposed to be hopeful, but not cheesy. I should be political, but not too political. I should be better than John McCain, but not so good that I have to spend the day with Jerry Falwell.

To further illustrate what she was looking for, Elaine then very kindly quoted at length from the commencement address I gave at Knox College in Galesburg last year – which then completely ruined my plan to recycle that speech for this year.

Left with no speech and a lot of pressure, I turned to who else but Elaine for help. And what she wrote next is precisely what I'd like to talk you about today. She said,

"When people say they don't want to hear about politics in a commencement address, they are in part speaking of not wanting to hear about the outside world and its problems. We students have been insulated enough for the past four years that it shouldn't hurt us to be challenged for thirty minutes, especially on a day that marks our commencement into the 'real' world."

That struck me as an important statement. And it called to mind a passage from scriptures that some of you may know:

Corinthians 13:11: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away childish things."

I bring this up because there's an assumption in rites of passage like this that growing up is just a function of age; that becoming an adult is an inevitable and natural progression.

But in fact, I know a whole lot of thirty year olds and forty year olds and fifty year olds who are not yet full-grown. And if you talk to my wife, she'll tell you that there are times when I do not put aside childish things; when I continually struggle to rise above the selfish or the petty or the small.

So even today, as a U.S. Senator, I have to remind myself of certain lessons from my own youth – lessons about growing up and being true to my values and ideals.

The first lesson came during my first year in college.

Back then I had a tendency, in my mother's words, to act a bit casual about my future. I rebelled, angry in the way that many young men in general, and young black man in particular, are angry,

thinking that responsibility and hard work were old-fashioned conventions that didn't apply to me. I partied a little too much and studied just enough to get by.

And once, after a particularly long night of partying, we had spilled a little too much beer, broke a few too many bottles, and trashed a little too much of the dorm. And the next day, the mess was so bad that when one of the cleaning ladies saw it, she began to tear up.

And when a girlfriend of mine heard about this, she said to me, "That woman could've been my grandmother, Barack. She spent her days cleaning up after somebody else's mess."

Which drove home for me the first lesson of growing up:

The world doesn't just revolve around you.

There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit – the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us – the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.

As you go on in life, cultivating this quality of empathy will become harder, not easier. There's no community service requirement in the real world; no one forcing you to care. You'll be free to live in neighborhoods with people who are exactly like yourself, and send your kids to the same schools, and narrow your concerns to what's going in your own little circle.

Not only that – we live in a culture that discourages empathy. A culture that too often tells us our principal goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe, and entertained. A culture where those in power too often encourage these selfish impulses.

They will tell you that the Americans who sleep in the streets and beg for food got there because they're all lazy or weak of spirit. That the inner-city children who are trapped in dilapidated schools can't learn and won't learn and so we should just give up on them entirely. That the innocent people being slaughtered and expelled from their homes half a world away are somebody else's problem to take care of.

I hope you don't listen to this. I hope you choose to broaden, and not contract, your ambit of concern. Not because you have an obligation to those who are less fortunate, although you do have that obligation. Not because you have a debt to all of those who helped you get to where you are, although you do have that debt.

It's because you have an obligation to yourself. Because our individual salvation depends on collective salvation. And because it's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential – and become full-grown.

The second lesson I learned after college, when I had this crazy idea that I wanted to be a community organizer and work in low-income neighborhoods.

My mother and grandparents thought I should go to law school. My friends had applied for jobs on Wall Street. But I went ahead and wrote letters to every organization in the country that I could think of. And finally, this small group of churches on the south side of Chicago wrote back and gave me a job organizing neighborhoods devastated by steel-plant closings in the early 80s.

The churches didn't have much money – so they offered me a grand sum of \$12,000 a year plus \$1,000 to buy a car. And I got ready to move to Chicago – a place I had never been and where I didn't know a living soul.

Even people who didn't know me were skeptical of my decision. I remember having a conversation with an older man I had met before I arrived in Chicago. I told him about my plans, and he looked at me and said, "Let me tell something. You look like a nice clean-cut young man, and you've got a nice voice. So let me give you a piece of advice – forget this community organizing

business. You can't change the world, and people won't appreciate you trying. What you should do is go into television broadcasting. I'm telling you, you've got a future."

I could've taken my mother's advice and I could've taken my grandparents advice. I could've taken the path my friends traveled. And objectively speaking, that TV thing might have made some sense.

But I knew there was something in me that wanted to try for something bigger.

So the second lesson is this: Challenge yourself. Take some risks in your life.

This may be difficult for all of you because one of the great things about graduating from Northwestern is that you can now punch your own ticket. You can take your diploma, walk off this stage, and go chasing after the big house and the large salary and the nice suits and all the other things that our money culture says you should buy.

But I hope you don't. Focusing your life solely on making a buck shows a poverty of ambition. It asks too little of yourself. And it will leave you unfulfilled.

I often think about the young Americans – teenagers and college kids not much older than you – from all over the country, watching the Civil Rights Movement unfold before them on their television sets.

I imagine that they would've seen the marchers and heard the speeches, but they also probably saw the dogs and the fire hoses, or the footage of innocent people being beaten within an inch of their lives; or heard the news the day those four little girls died when someone threw a bomb into their church.

Instinctively, they knew that it was safer and smarter to stay at home; to watch the movement from afar. But they also understood that these people in Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi were their brothers and sisters; that what was happening was wrong; and that they had an obligation to make it right. When the buses pulled up for a Freedom Ride down South, they got on. They took a risk. And they changed the world.

So don't let people talk you into doing the safe thing. Listen to what's inside of you and decide what it is that you care about so much that you're willing to risk it all.

The third lesson is one that I learned once I got to Chicago.

I had spent weeks organizing our very first community meeting around the issue of gang violence. We invited the police; we made phone calls, went to churches, and passed out flyers.

I had been warned of the turf battles and bad politics between certain community leaders, but I ignored them, confident that I knew what I was doing.

The night of the meeting we arranged rows and rows of chairs in anticipation of the crowd. And we waited. And we waited. And finally, a group of older people walk in to the hall. And they sit down. And this little old lady raises her hand and asks, "Is this where the bingo game is?"

Thirteen people showed up that night. The police never came. And the meeting was a complete disaster.

Later, the volunteers I worked with told me they were quitting – that they had been doing this for two years and had nothing to show for it.

I was tired too. But at that point, I looked outside and saw some young boys playing in a vacant lot across the street, tossing stones at boarded-up apartment building. And I turned to the volunteers, and I asked them, "Before you quit, I want you to answer one question. What's gonna

happen to those boys? Who will fight for them if not us? Who will give them a fair shot if we leave?"

And at that moment, we were all reminded of a third lesson in growing up:

Persevere.

Making your mark on the world is hard. If it were easy, everybody would do it. But it's not. It takes patience, it takes commitment, and it comes with plenty of failure along the way. The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won't. It's whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.

After my little speech that day, one by one, the volunteers decided not to quit. We went back to those neighborhoods, and we kept at it, sustaining ourselves with the small victories. And over time, a community changed. And so had we.

Cultivating empathy, challenging yourself, persevering in the face of adversity – these are the qualities that I've found to be important in my own life.

But what's true for individuals can also be true for nations.

For what America needs right now, more than ever, is a sense of purpose to guide us through the challenges that lie ahead; a maturity that we seem to have lost somewhere along the way; a willingness to engage in a sober, adult conversation about our future.

When we measure our greatness as a nation by how far the stock market rises or falls instead of how many opportunities we've opened up for America's children, we're displaying a preference for the childish. When we believe that force is the only way to accomplish our ends in the world, when our leaders exaggerate or fudge the truth, we haven't set aside childish things. When we run our budget into red ink for things that we want instead of things that we need, we're indicating that we're not yet full-grown.

For a brief moment, there was the hope that this kind of politics would've ended after 9/11. There was a sense of unity born from the rubble of those buildings – young people signing up to serve; political leaders of both parties working together; people asking new questions about our world, hungry for the answers.

But at some point, we began to drift. Republican and Democrat alike went back to procrastinating about problems that we now have to face. We sent young Americans to fight a war without asking anyone back home to sacrifice their time or their tax cut. We argue about the inconsequential, and caricature our opponents to score cheap political points. Our media returned to covering the sensational and feeding our ever-shortening attention span.

And in the meantime, our problems are left to fester.

We have a global economy that's forcing us to compete like never before. In today's world a job can now travel anywhere there's an internet connection and a worker who's smart and skilled. And if China and India keep educating their kids better and longer than we are, that's where the jobs will go.

We can meet this challenge if we fix our schools, if we make college affordable, if we train our workers, if we invest more in research and technology. We know what needs to be done. What's lacking is the political will.

We have a health care crisis in this country that's left 46 million Americans uninsured; that's left millions unable to deal with rising co-payments; that's left businesses near bankruptcy.

We can meet this challenge if we modernize our health care system, if we improve quality, if we pool our resources to bargain for affordable insurance. What's been lacking is the political will.

We have an energy crisis that's keeping gas prices high; destroying our climate, and forcing us to send billions of dollars to the very countries who want to cause us harm.

We can meet this challenge if we harness alternative fuels and build cars that go further on a tank of gas. But we need to find the will to make it happen.

We need new strategies to fight the war on terror. In a world where terrorists can hide and blend into any city on the planet, we can't just believe – as Bill Clinton says – that we can kill or jail every single one of our enemies.

We can meet this challenge if we realize this isn't just battle of armies but also of ideas; if we rebuild our institutions and strengthen our alliances as Truman and Acheson and Keenan and Marshall did after World War II; if we bring hope to those pockets of desperation where a jihad is a better bet than a job.

But what's lacking is that political will.

Each and every one of these challenges call for an America that is more purposeful, more grown-up than the America that we have today. An America that reflects the lessons that have helped so many of its people mature in their own lives. An America that's about not just each of us, but all of us. An America that takes great risks in the face of greater odds. An America that, above all, perseveres.

Over one hundred and fifty classes have sat where you sit today, some in good times, others in bad. Some were years that just rolled into the next, and others would mark a turning point in our nation.

The class of 1860 would find their country torn apart by civil war in less than a year. Many of them would listen to their President tell them that a house divided cannot stand, and they would answer the call to save a union and free a people.

The class of 1932 would look out a nation in mired in depression; a nation ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed. They would hear a man who could not lift himself from his wheelchair lift a nation by telling us that it was only fear itself standing in our way. And they would answer the call to conquer that fear.

The class of 1960 would find themselves at the beginning of a decade where social and racial strife threatened to tear apart the very fabric of the nation. They would hear a young President urge them to ask what they could do for their country. And they would answer the call to sit at lunch counters and take those Freedom Rides; they would march for justice and live for equality.

And now it is 2006. And here you sit facing challenges as great as any in the past. And the choice is yours. Will the years pass with barely a whisper from your generation? Or will we look back on this time as the moment where you took a stand and changed the world?

Time will tell. You will be tested by the challenges of this new century, and at times you will fail. But know that you have it within your power to try. That generations who have come before you faced these same fears and uncertainties in their own time. And that if we're willing to shoulder each other's burdens, to take great risks, and to persevere through trial, America will continue on its magnificent journey towards that distant horizon, and a better day.

Thank you so much to the class of 2006, congratulations on your graduation, and Elaine – I hope I did okay.

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