

Northwestern School of Education and Social Policy 2023 Convocation

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Thank you so much for that wonderful introduction. It's fantastic to be here for this convocation celebration. I want to start by saying hello, good afternoon, and congratulations to the brilliant Class of 2023. Please give yourself a round of applause.

Good afternoon to the dean, the faculty, staff, the parents, the family, friends, and guests of the graduates. A thousand thank yous for all of the support you have provided to these wonderful graduates along the way.

It is a true honor to join you today for this special occasion. I love graduations. Well, other people's graduations. My own graduations historically have been stressful. At my high school graduation in Atlanta, Georgia, there was a torrential downpour just before the ceremony. We all had to scurry to move the whole celebration inside.

I spent the day before my graduation from undergrad chasing down my crew coach. I had rowed crew, badly, for 1 uneventful quarter my freshman year, and never got course credit for it. As commencement approached, it became clear I was one credit short of the required number to graduate, so to ensure that I received an actual diploma and not an empty case, I tracked down my coach, she signed off on that credit – actually she gave me 2 just to be safe - then I had to hunt down my linguistics professor and make sure that my final project was approved. I told him, as I plead my case, that I was on my way to Northwestern for graduate school and I promised that I would do my best to do something with my life. Professor Wasow, I know you're out there – I like to think you would be proud to see me today.

I graduated from Northwestern in 1995. My primary memory of that graduation is of being relieved. Being excited that I made it to the finish line to get my degree, yes... and also wondering how the heck the next chapter of my life was gonna go. Sound familiar?

So as for my own graduations – Well, I couldn't always be in the moment. But other people's graduations, their accomplishments, I have always truly enjoyed celebrating. I have tremendous respect for the hard work it takes to get to where you are all sitting today. I celebrate the enormous accomplishment of finishing a course of study, marking an important transition. When I talk about learning in my work, I always say the journey from not knowing to knowing is never easy. It takes determination.

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And you all bravely took that journey, from day 1 to today. Through the days when you felt great about what you were doing and learning, through the times that you doubted yourself. Heck, through a global pandemic. You learned your way through it, and you should celebrate yourself for that. Yes, please give yourself another round of applause.

While I was at NU, I spent most of my time at a little building at the corner of Maple and Emerson. It was called the Institute for Learning Sciences – ILS - I think now there are condos there; Evanston has changed tremendously over the years, although magically, the top floor of Norris looks exactly the same as it did 30 years ago. Go figure. Anyway - In that little building, the late Professor Roger Schank, then professor of computer science, psychology and education had architected an innovative partnership between Northwestern and then Andersen Consulting, where I started my career. As a corporate fellow, I was a beneficiary of that partnership. Roger, as we called him, by all counts a complicated man, was an outspoken theorist and researcher in artificial intelligence and cognitive science. He founded that interdisciplinary Institute for the Learning Sciences, and the nation's first doctoral program in that field, all of you know quite well.

I did not get a PhD through that groundbreaking program, I received a master's degree in computer science, despite my father's insistence that I push through to get that terminal degree. What can I say, I was eager to get out into the real world and make some money. Dad, I told him, I'll get a PhD later. He responded by saying -if you don't do it now, it will be much harder to come back in the future. Well, he was right. At least he got to celebrate the PhD that my then roommate received, Dr. Nichole Pinkard, now of course a professor here at SESP, and still a great friend of mine.

When I was thinking about what I would say to you today, I spent some time researching SESP online. I found an informational video, which started out by saying:

Nothing thrives in isolation. In order to succeed, we must connect. Visibly or invisibly, everything connects into relationships and systems of interdependence. Communities are systems. Businesses are systems. Families are systems. Individuals themselves are systems too – a unique

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blend of biology, culture and society. That is why we must explore beginnings and endings, and everything in between.

As a lifelong learner, I agree with this completely. *Explore beginnings and endings, and everything in between.* I am a first-generation African born in America. My beginnings go back to a tiny village in southern Nigeria, where my paternal grandfather Moran Sampson Basse was well known because he was an accomplished teacher. All four children of his were successful through school, including my father who boldly departed from a village in Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria to Bonn, Germany- - without any means of livelihood, any inkling of what he would find, and totally not knowing what the next day would bring. All he knew was that he wanted to learn – to take that journey from not knowing to knowing. He enrolled in medical school, not knowing a word of the German language and learned both German and medicine at the same time, finishing at the top of his class. He changed the trajectory of his family's story. My 1-year-old son, Sampson, who is here today, bears both my father's and grandfather's middle names. He has no choice but to be a great learner.

My beginnings go back also to Bernard Hanoba Etomi, my maternal grandfather. He was well known around Lagos, Nigeria as being someone who valued education. He educated all of his children and any children that came into his sphere of influence, telling them, if they were smart and committed, he was ready to help them go anywhere in the world to get an education. My mother, who is here today – Hi Mom, took that promise to heart, and after having met my father in Nigeria, she traveled first to the UK and then to Germany, they married, and then came to the US where my sisters and I received the same message: Learning is important. Education is the only thing that no one can take away from you. We all understood the assignment, and notably 2 of the 4 Basse girls ended up at Northwestern, myself, and my sister, Maeyen who graduated in RTVF.

Those were my beginnings. And if I had to guess, I would imagine that some of you, graduates, when you think of your beginnings, you can point to someone – a parent, grandparent, a mentor, a colleague, a friend who instilled in you the value of education. How it can be transformative. And not just education for some – for all. For anyone who has the desire to walk that worthy path from not knowing to knowing. You have embraced the fact that a commitment to learning can be a true superpower.

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What I love about SESP is the commitment to investigating that learning superpower from so many different perspectives, bringing together cognition, computing, and cultural context, to innovate in creating effective and engaging development experiences – both on a 1 to 1 basis, and tackling systemic issues as well.

You are #mypeople.

In my work as Chief Learning Officer of The Kraft Heinz Company, I often share that impactful leaders are more often than not continuous learners. Or to use a phrase made popular by internet entrepreneur/co-founder of LinkedIn, and venture capitalist, Reid Hoffman, they are “infinite learners,” that is, they have an ability to learn constantly and to learn quickly. There is no more powerful a catalyst for change or tool for transformation than a commitment to lifelong learning. And there is no more sacred a task than really investigating the systemic issues that prevent anyone from having access to the opportunity to learn and grow, and making changes so that those issues are creatively resolved.

In addition to my professional pursuits, inspired by journalist A. J. Jacobs and his comedic “lifestyle experiments,” I have treated my life like a laboratory – completing what I call passion projects, allowing them to change me and my life, and sharing what I learned from them.

My first passion project was a year-long learning experience that came to be known as the My 52 Weeks of Worship Project. It was inspired by grief, and a desire to figure out how to make sense of several challenging personal tragedies that occurred within the span of one year. In April 2009, my maternal grandmother died unexpectedly. That August, my father died after a battle with cancer. Finally, as the year ended, I experienced a betrayal from a loved one.

Searching for answers, I made a personal commitment to visit a different place of worship every week for a year, whether that place reflected my own religious tradition or not. I visited churches and mosques, synagogues and temples, living rooms and basements. I navigated countless sacred spaces, from the South Side of Chicago to South Africa, from Brazil to Brooklyn.

Clear, transformative lessons emerged. I benefitted repeatedly from the kindness of strangers. I experienced the power of stepping out of my comfort zone, stepping into someone else’s shoes and being humble enough

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to simply shut up and listen – when I found myself in a situation that I didn't fully understand. This project was a master class in inspecting the interconnectedness of us all, of spending time in community after community – experiencing relationships and systems of interdependence - and gave me a chance to really think about what I believed and what core values would sustain me when life got hard.

And therein lies a key lesson I want to share today: Make the time to understand who you are, what you believe, and what drives you. Learn how to be fully you, living your purpose, aligning your time and the way you spend your life with **your** values, and **your** priorities.

Especially in these days of transformative technologies and the discussions we are having about how they will change the world as we know it, how they will change the way we teach and learn, one thing remains clear – it is more important than ever to continue to ask questions, the right questions. It is more important than ever to spend time understanding what makes us uniquely human, understanding the values you will fight for – for yourselves, and for others in the world. Continue to ask the hard questions. And as you come to your own conclusions about what makes sense to *you*, I challenge you to embrace a truth that I hold quite dear: It's quite okay to deeply believe one thing and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other people who believe something completely different. In a world where not nearly enough people make that choice – learn to live in the AND. Learn how to be fully you, AND respect others who have different lived experiences, who learn differently, who believe differently. *Nothing thrives in isolation.* Learning how to communicate respectfully across difference will help you to be successful no matter what path you choose.

Fast-forward to 2018, when I found myself beginning a new position as chief learning officer of the Kraft Heinz Company. In this role, I was responsible for creating a culture of continuous learning, bold creativity and intellectual curiosity – for driving training and learning at one of the largest food companies in the world.

When you are called to take on a new challenge, it is wise to gather the lessons learned from prior experience and see how they can be applied. I was inspired to begin a second year-long learning experience: one that also started with a personal decision, but which was focused on delivering professional impact. I launched the my '365 Days of Learning' project on a

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snowy day in Toronto, Canada - February 1st, 2019. This time, instead of a weekly commitment, the stakes were raised. It would be a daily commitment. I made a promise: every day for a year, I would learn something new, and would share it with the organization through our internal social media channel, which we called the KetchApp – because, what else would we call it?

To model how leaders can make a personal commitment to their learning. I consumed articles, e-learning courses, podcasts and books. I attended conferences and learning events. I spent time everyday writing, reflecting on what I had learned and sharing it with others. Most excitingly, I watched my new colleagues do the same, committing to a learning practice of their own and creating a culture of generosity – because by learning, reflecting and sharing, they were empowering others as well as themselves. My 365 Days of Learning became the foundation of a learning transformation for a company going through significant change.

From my year of learning, I learned 365 valuable lessons and we could spend the rest of the day talking about them, but I want to highlight just 1. And that lesson is this: **Make a point to practice everyday courage.** I was introduced to this concept – of everyday courage, competent courage on day 48 of my year of learning, when I read a business review article authored by a UVA professor, Jim Detert. It took me back to a decade old memory.

In the summer of 2010, I had the privilege of visiting South Africa to enjoy the very first World Cup on African soil. I joined a large hearty group of uncles and cousins and we traveled together from Nigeria to South Africa to participate in the global celebration of the beautiful game. While in South Africa, I visited Nelson Mandela's house in Soweto. It was full of awards, mementos and history. Throngs of people joined me at the small, refurbished house, to pay homage to a giant of a man who touched so many lives.

Some of the bricks in the house were replaced with brass plates that had words of inspiration and motivation on them. I took pictures of many of those bricks – one of my favorites said simply: Courage.

That brick reminds me of this lesson – in regard to life and to being an effective leader – of self, team, family, organization or community. Practice every day courage. What does every day courage look like?

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- You may find yourself in a room where you disagree with the suggestions that are being made – or have some innovative new thoughts you want to share. You can decide to stay silent or be courageous and speak your mind. It's hard to disrupt if you never speak up.
- You may have to have a difficult conversation or make a difficult choice.
- You may make a conscious decision to operate outside of your comfort zone so that you can grow.
- You may decide not to fight a particular battle so you can position yourself to win the proverbial war.

These are all examples of opportunities to practice everyday courage. To be Brave. And let me tell you the key is everyday. Practice in low stakes situations so you are ready in high stakes situations.

So, a recap – Explore beginnings, endings, and everything in between. Learn what **you** believe, what matters to you. Learn how to respectfully engage across difference. Practice everyday courage.

To close: I want to wish you well. Whether your path forward is clear, and you will be an educator in some context, or you will be paving the way for educators. OR, you are doing like I did and taking a path through industries and functions – providing an example of how lifelong learning can be transformative, I salute you.

You will all do great work. You will change the world in the ways that you discussed in classrooms and in late night conversations. This, I know. I hope you will keep your eyes open for possibility, stay curious, and stay focused on clearing space to learn and grow – and to enable others to do the same. I wish you success, however you define it, a lot of love, laughter, good health, wealth, and a life that exceeds your wildest dreams.

Class of 2023, CONGRATULATIONS, you are the very best, and we are all proud of you. Thank You.