

**SESP Convocation
June 12, 2023**

**Dan P. McAdams
Interim Dean**

I am so happy to see you all today as we mark the graduation of the Class of 2023 here at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy.

First let us all offer our applause of celebration for the triumphant seniors and the brilliant graduate students who are receiving their degrees today.

Second, there are the moms and dads, grandparents and siblings, the other family members, chosen family and close friends, and the SESP professors, too, and staff members who are here this afternoon – so I ask the students out there to turn your attention to your adoring audience and your supporters, who have loved you and helped you along the way. I ask you students to offer your applause of appreciation for them!

In a sense, I am graduating today, too. After serving one very enjoyable year as the *Interim* Dean of SESP, I will be returning to being a regular professor, though

with a different perspective than I had before. For all of you, the transition we mark today is rather more dramatic, as you forge ahead to do something and become someone very new. Still, you and I both are beginning to write a new chapter in our respective life stories. As a professor of human development and psychology, I study people's life stories – how we all derive meaning and purpose in our lives by constructing stories in our minds about who we are, who we were, and who we may become. What is your new story going to be?

When I think of my life story, I recall that I was abducted at age 5. This is true! (Well, sort of.) I was sitting idly out in front of my house, at 4924 Tennessee Street in Gary, Indiana, on a Sunday morning, bored out of my mind (as I often was as a kid), and Mrs. Pelke, the neighborhood Baptist church lady, swooped by in her car and asked me if I wanted to hop in and go with her to church. She had abducted a few other kids, too, who were in the back seat. I asked my mom, and she said fine, whatever – and so began my 12-year stint as an evangelical Christian. Why am I telling you this? Two reasons.

First, it gives me an opportunity, which I will never have again, to sing for you the first verse of my favorite Baptist hymn from back then:

I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love . . .

And it goes on from there. Even at age 6 or 7, I had this thing for *stories*, as evidenced in the hymn. “I love to tell the story.” I loved the stories you heard in the church – stories of life, love, death, suffering, and redemption. *Everybody’s life is like a story*. I think I felt that very early on.

Second, I tell you this because you need to know that a person’s story – your narrative and mine – is always a *moral* story, grounded in moral values, beliefs about what is good and evil, about what is worth pursuing in life and what is worth ignoring. Even though I am today a very different person than I was back then, my Baptist church left inside of me an unconscious sensibility about what is worth living and doing in life. A sense of fundamental values and beliefs about what is good, right, and true.

Let’s pause to consider the moral sensibility that informs your life story, much of which has been worked out, most likely, over the past four years here at Northwestern University and in SESP. Indeed, psychological research suggests

that the college years are prime time for working out your values as you begin to make your story. So, what do you believe to be true and good? What do you stand for?

Now, if I were giving this commencement address back in, say, 2015 or so, I might have begun to draw to a close here. I might have articulated variations on the kinds of inspiring messages that often resonate on occasions like these. Find the life story that is true for you, the narrative that best gives your life meaning and purpose. Shape that story around your most cherished values. Live your life in accord with that story and those values. Go your own way, no matter what the world says. Be true to yourself.

But as I have gotten older, and especially in the last few years, I have come to feel that these kinds of sentiments are good but incomplete, and that the moral convictions that undergird your narrative can be too strong sometimes. If your generation has any hope of successfully addressing some of the world's greatest problems, as well as coping with the daunting personal challenges of day-to-day living, you will probably need to learn to work together with people whose values are opposed to yours. Whose values you hate, even. You will have to talk to

them, get to know them, argue with them – not to prove that you are right and they are wrong, as tempting as that may (that has always been tempting to me), but rather to find some semblance of common ground wherein difficult problems can be solved. You will have to loosen up on your values, in the service of larger aims. You will need to compromise. Meet people halfway. Give in. Show humility and grace. Even show weakness and vulnerability sometimes. Otherwise, you will never build trust with others who are different from you, and without trust, no big human problem can be solved.

We live in what my childhood Baptist church described as a fallen world. An imperfect world, filled with imperfect people, like me and you, living under imperfect, and in many cases oppressive and degrading conditions. We need to do something about it, my Sunday School teachers said. Go out and save souls, bring them to Jesus. Even back then, I did not believe that was the best answer. But I agree with the broader call to action. We face unprecedented societal challenges today. Think: climate change, threats to democracy and self-determination worldwide, systemic racism and unprecedented income inequality, unspeakable gun violence. And in recent months we now see that we will ultimately need to figure out how to live in a world where artificial intelligence

threatens to make the human mind irrelevant, or at best perhaps, subservient.

Oh My God.

In the face of all this, SESP graduates, you can use your Northwestern experiences to do good in the world, even as you do well. But be ready to cooperate and compromise along the way. Be ready to show empathy for those who see the world differently than you see it, even as they seem to oppose you and work against you. Try to understand their stories, too.

The world needs you, SESP grads! The world needs your SESP love, and your talent, your values, your skills, and your stories.

Congratulations to you all. And Godspeed.

Thank you.