

2015 Graduation Commencement Speech
School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Austin
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Thank you so very much for that eloquent introduction and thank you all for allowing me to steal a few minutes of your time before we get to the important business of the day- graduation. OUR graduation. That's right everyone. We're graduating- can you believe it? Years of hard work and long days have finally paid off and today I am so happy to say that we are graduating. So, I should begin by saying congratulations. Graduating from a prestigious university like the University of Texas is a feat that few can undertake and successfully complete, so please take some time to truly relish in this moment today. I mean, just think of who we were and where we were in our lives when we began this program and compare it to who we are today- to who we've become. What an amazing and earnest transformation we've all undergone. All of you are absolute rock stars and I am so very proud to know you.

I'm very happy to be speaking to you today, not only because I love the sound of my own voice, which of course I do, but because I get to see all of your wonderful faces shining with creativity and potential. I am so fortunate today because I get to see the people who will be responsible for changing our world. I'm just so overwhelmingly proud of what we have already accomplished and what we have yet to accomplish.

Okay, so as I had mentioned, it is an immense honor to be speaking with you today, It's kind of an overload. Also, in many ways, I believe that the fact that I am addressing you is ironic.

First, me addressing you *alone* is ironic, because one of the most profound things I've experienced throughout my time in the Social Work program has been the intense emphasis on teamwork, on togetherness, and on shared experience. What I really love about the program is that it forces you to go out on a limb and really *trust in the process*, but it doesn't make you do it alone. We all have been uncomfortable or upset at times, but in those times, we have had each other to lean on and say, "Today has been a rough one, I just don't know what to do." In the trenches of social work, there exists one of the most pure forms of camaraderie that I have ever known or experienced. So, with that being said, I feel like it is a little ironic that I am alone up here, where in true social work fashion, we should all be up here in a big circle, with a box of Kleenex, doing this together.

Secondly, I believe that me, a white male, addressing such a diverse, and also predominantly female class, is ironic. I must confess that in most of my classes, as a male, I was in the minority, which was a very unique and new experience for me. However, this is an experience that is absolutely vital to the core of the social work program. This program truly emphasizes the importance of equality and acceptance of all people and experiences. Now, I know that the world is not perfect or equal, but

I do not believe that the program has never lied and said that it was. This program has truly taught us to recognize injustice and inequality in our reality and to develop novel ways to combat those evils through creativity, dedication, and tolerance. Now I do not take lightly the immense responsibility of representing such an amazing and diverse class, but I do hope that I can do justice to my peers by, on some level, attempting to show that people like myself can serve as allies and as advocates against inequality.

Now if it is all right, I would like to steal a brief story from the ephemeral actor Christopher Walken. However, for all the movie buffs in the audience, I'm going to change it up a little bit to make it a little more appropriate to the social work realm. I'm also not going to burden you with my horrible Christopher Walken impersonation. I think that is for another time. So here goes:

So three mice were walking through a barn, enjoying the day and talking about whatever mice talk about. It's at that point that one of the mice makes a misstep and falls into a large bucket of cream. This left two mice at the edge of the bucket, completely terrified for their friend below. Well the mouse in the cream was scared and didn't know what to do. His entire world was turned upside down and he was in a panic. He kicked frantically but to no avail. He began to sink. It is at this point that one of the mice on the ledge threw up his arms and said "I'm out of here-this is too much. I can't watch." And ran away. However, the other mouse stayed and began to speak to her friend. "Take deep breaths, she said. Move your arms and legs in unison. Don't worry. I'm here for you. We're in this together." It is at this point that the mouse in the cream calmed down, he began moving his body in powerful and orchestrated strokes and in no time, he churned that cream into butter and walked out of the bucket.

Now I tell this story because the mouse on the outside of the bucket essentially acted as a social worker. Rather than run away from the situation, the mouse leaned in and was there with the other mouse when no one else was. She shared his experience in that moment. She provided support when no one else would. She helped him to help himself.

As social workers we often interact with people who are not in the best or most stable place. Often times, our clients are flawed people, in a crisis when they come to us, but we accept that. We see imperfection in our clients, in our society, and in ourselves, and rather than run away, we choose to lean in and do something about it. We recognize that a mistake is only an opportunity for a comeback. It's what we do.

To quote author R. J. Baughan,

"The secret of happiness is in knowing this: that we live by the law of expenditure. We find greatest joy, not in getting, but in expressing what we are. There are tides in the ocean of life, and what comes in depends on what goes out. The currents flow

inward only where there is an outlet. Nature does not give to those who will not spend; her gifts are loaned to those who will use them. Empty your lungs and breathe. Run, climb, work, and laugh; the more you give out, the more you shall receive. Be exhausted, and you shall be fed. People do not really live for honors or for pay; their gladness is not in the taking and holding, but in the doing, the striving, the building, the living. It is a higher joy to teach than to be taught. It is good to get justice, but better to do it; it is fun to have things, but more to make them. The happy person is he (or she) who lives the life of love, not for the honors it may bring, but for the life itself.”

Now after today, many of us will enter the workforce and we will be employed in a variety of fields and positions. And that’s what’s truly amazing about social work. With this degree, you can pursue any endeavor you wish, in whatever capacity you desire. Some of us will work as counselors or case managers, while some of us will be policy analysts or professors or consultants.

Regardless of whatever position you occupy, please know that you will always be a social worker at heart. In every action that you undertake, in every dilemma you face, you will know what to do, because you have a professional philosophy that bolsters your decisions and defines your choices. As a social worker, you will always believe in a person’s innate capacity for change. You will always be one that seeks to solve problems rather than run away. As a social worker, you will always be the mouse on the edge of the bucket.

Now after today, it’s show time. But don’t let that scare you. Go out there and live life. Take care of others and take care of yourselves. And no matter what you do, know that we can all be proud, not just because we will always be longhorns, but because we will always be social workers.

Now I think it’s time for some much needed self-care. Congratulations everyone. Thank you.