

2013 GW Commencement: Kerry Washington

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- Ladies and gentlemen, our commencement speaker, Dr. Kerry Washington. (audience applauding) - Thank you. (audience cheering) I love you too. President Knapp, trustees, friends, family, fellow honorees, and most of all, class of 2013, congratulations.

(audience cheering) It is great to be with you back on the Ellipse in DC. It seems like just yesterday I was here for my own commencement ceremony. Like many of you, my parents are here today. And I think we should all take one more moment to thank our loved ones for being here and for being a source of love and support throughout the journey that led us to this moment.

The doctoral regalia that I am wearing belongs to my mother, Dr. Valerie Washington. In my profession it is important to dress for the part. So when my mother offered me her robe for today, I gratefully accepted. It is my hope that even a tiny bit of her insight and grace be embodied in my words to you. I am proud to be here, I am shaking, and tremendously grateful for the honorary degree you have bestowed on me.

And I will spend the next few minutes trying to earn it. But I have to admit that I am even more proud of the GW degree that took me four years, a lot of sleepless nights, student loans, study groups, and more than a few drinks at Lindy's to earn. Although we called it The Red Lion back then. So I stand here today in solidarity with you. As a proud alum of this institution, I celebrate you and I welcome you into the great lineage and legacy of GW.

Today you join the ranks of award-winning journalists like Bob Woodward and Dana Bash. Statesmen and women like my cousin, Colin Powell. Elected leaders like Harry Reid and Eric Cantor. Civil rights champions like Raul Yzaguirre. Yeah? Yeah. Philanthropists like Dr. William Magee, who founded Operation Smile. Taste makers from Jackie Kennedy to Ina Garten. Astronauts like Michael Coats and Anousheh Ansari.

And physicists like Dr. Ralph Alpher, who came up with the Big Bang. I am of course talking about the theory, not the television show. You join an impressive tradition and our commencement is part of that tradition. Year after year, GW sends its graduates into the world on the wings of advice from esteemed leaders and thinkers. And this year, you got me. Well look, I know. (audience cheering) No, no, no, no.

No, no, no, no, no. Nope. I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking we're celebrating our academic and intellectual achievement with that lady who's having an affair with the president on that TV show? I know, I get it. On television I play a character who is smart and powerful and successful. Olivia Pope could give you all

some advice on making it to the top. But in real life, I am just an actor.

I play pretend. I tell stories. So bear with me, because that is what I am going to do. When I first arrived at GW, I didn't think I would be an actor. I dreamt of being a psychologist or an educator like my mother. From an early age I was fascinated with people and how we become who we are. But acting, that was a hobby. A hobby, however, that helped me pay for my education here. As you heard, in my senior year of high school, GW offered me financial aid as a member of the Presidential Scholars in the Arts program.

And while I did not have to major in acting, there were several requirements. Among these was the stipulation that I had to audition for every single performance produced by the theater and dance department. More on that in a minute. So instead of studying how to pretend to be people, I studied people. I designed an interdisciplinary major in various social sciences, psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology.

And one of the things. (cheering) Nice. And one of the things that fascinated me most was the importance of storytelling. In every culture and in every moment of human existence, the ritual of storytelling has been a central tenet of our experience. Because it is through stories that we understand ourselves and each other. When we engage in a story, whether it's a great novel or a film or a documentary, we learn more about who we are. We who want to be, who we don't want to be.

And in that way, stories transform us. As we journey along with the hero of any story, we realize that we too are the lead characters of our own lives. I am here today to remind each of you that you are the heroes of your story. And I am not just referring to your heroic victory over Georgetown in the 2010 Snowmageddon snowball fight.

Your life is your story. And the adventure ahead of you is the journey to fulfill your own purpose and potential. So I want to share a little something with you about stories and about heroes and about how this all works. It was here at GW that I first read the work of Joseph Campbell. And what attracted me to his writing was the concept of the hero's journey. He wrote, the hero's journey always begins with the call.

One way or another, a guide must come and say look, you're in sleepy land. Awake. Come on a trip. There is an aspect of your consciousness, your being that's not being touched. And so it starts. This call to adventure is what we call in film the inciting incident. It's an invitation out of your comfort zone and into your strength. Because by definition, being a hero requires pushing beyond the bounds of what's comfortable.

In 1996 in my junior year here, I had to push beyond the bounds of my comfort zone. The musical that year, which as you know, I was required to audition for, was entitled Croak, the Last Frog. It was a beautiful musical about frogs by GW's own Professor Leslie Jacobson. Now I have to be honest with you, it was not my lifetime dream role to play a frog.

In fact, the thought of it terrified me. Scared that the role would be too difficult and afraid of the embarrassment that would result from my failed attempts, I wondered if there was some way that I could get out of this

audition. This is what Campbell describes as phase two of the hero's journey, the refusal of the call. You've experienced it. An exciting opportunity presents itself, but our fear makes us believe that we're not capable of meeting the challenge.

There are 17 stages of the hero's journey as Campbell describes it. But don't worry, I'm not going to go through all of them. What I will tell you is that I crossed the threshold into unknown territory. Meaning I showed up for my audition because I believed in the message of the production. A message of love and family and environmental conservation. I wanted to support Leslie Jacobson, my brilliant professor and my mentor. And I had to fulfill my scholarship requirements.

Because as many of you probably relate to, I wanted to complete my degree and graduate. So, I answered the call. I pushed past my comfort zone. And when I did, I won the role. So now I was in the belly of the whale. Now I had to be willing to be the lead frog. Again, I was terrified. This was a serious musical with important dramatic themes. How could I commit to the role and bring life to the character in a way that made people think and feel rather than giggle and mock us?

So I approached the role as a social scientist, the way GW taught me to. I thought, I am going to study frogs. I went to the zoo up in Woodley Park and I spent hours watching frogs. I read about frogs. I held frogs. I watched frog documentaries. I figured out ways to physicalize my performance as a frog without seeming to be a cartoon. I faced my fears and I stepped out onto that Marvin Center stage and it became a role that transformed my thinking about how I use my body to do what I do every single day.

And more importantly, to this day it is my father's most favorite thing I've ever done. I'm serious. You can ask him. But the lesson here isn't how you too can be a frog. The lesson is that you are sitting here today because you too learned how to answer the call. Your degree is proof that you have what it takes to take the leap into the adventure of your unique experience.

You don't earn a degree by doing and being and existing in the comfort zone of what you already know. So whether it's taken two years or seven to get today's degree, I want you to look back on the journey that brought you here. What moments challenged you most? When were you asked to step outside of your familiar territory in order to rise to the occasion of your potential? How have you pushed past your fear?

I want you to remember those moments because they will embolden you and affirm you and remind you that you did this. You completed this journey. You answered the call. And now you can continue to do so. But the choice is yours. When you leave here today and commence the next stage of your life, you can follow someone else's script, try to make choices that will make other people happy, avoid discomfort, do what is expected and copy the status quo.

Or you can look at all that you have accomplished today and use it as fuel to venture forth and write your own story. If you do, amazing things will take shape. Look at the stories you've already begun writing. Stories of warrior poets like Elaina Kim, who served for five years in Iraq and has been working with local high school

students to turn veterans' personal essays into art projects.

Today, as a graduate of the Elliott school, she along with 152 other student veterans wears a cap and gown instead of a uniform. (audience applauding) Stories of idealistic pragmatists like Daniel Basali and Winslow Marshall, who started a PAC on the belief that paying for policy makers to share drinks will lead to shared dialogue.

When they hosted a summit on campus, they proved that a beer can go a long way towards bipartisan action. Stories about agents of change like MBA grad Shashwat Gautam who will be returning home to Bihar Province in India. When he steps off the plane, he'll step immediately onto the campaign trail for state assembly and continue to fight to eradicate poverty and disease. Stories of, yes.

(audience applauding) Stories of innovators like the team that participating in the solo decathlon. Champions for women's rights. Champions for labor rights. Scientific leaders in the field against climate change. Your stories astound me. Your list of accomplishments is as long as the list of graduates today. Because as you sit here, you are not only graduates, you are adventurers.

In my eyes, you are heroes who have faced fears and taken risks and forged ahead to conquer one of the most important chapters of your life. Now that you have achieved the goal of this great quest, now you must ready yourself for when the call to adventure comes again. And when it does, don't follow the path prescribed by someone else. Don't give into fear. Continue to define your unique path in faith and with the experience of the accomplished adventurer that you are.

You and you alone are the only person who can live the life that writes the story that you were meant to tell. And the world needs your story because the world needs your voice. Every single one of you. And because as your story unfolds, you will inspire others to find their stories and so on and so on and so on.

And those stories, George Washington graduates of the class of 2013, those are the stories that I can't wait to watch. In fact, don't be surprised if you get a call from me wanting to option the really good ones and turn them into movies. Because I'm so Hollywood now. Graduates, may God bless you in all that you do. It is an honor to share this day with you. I promise you that you will hearing from the alum.

I love you too. I promise you that sooner than you know it, you will be hearing from the alumni association very soon. So again, congratulations and welcome to the club.