

COLORADO COLLEGE 2011 CONVOCATION
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2011
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO
“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”

I. Introduction

- a. I am deeply honored and humbled by this award.

- b. I am especially grateful to my mother, who joins me today.
 - i. My mother had me when she was young, and spent what would have been her college years raising me.

- c. I am moved by this honor because I am mindful of the many, many other Colorado College graduates who *really* deserve this award.
 - 1. That includes my wife, Charity, who also joins me today.

- d. Colorado College is a special place.
 - i. It was at this college that I came into my own as a student; that I began to learn to think deeply, critically, and analytically; and it was here that I first came to see myself as one who could be an agent for meaningful social change in our country.

 - ii. One of my first classes here was a sociology course about the city and urban life.

1. I remember thinking that I'd have a distinct advantage in this class because I was, after all, from Denver's inner city.
2. And I remember being awed and humbled by the professor's ability to cite some authority *for nearly every thought he had*.
 - a. He was fond of paraphrasing the Old Testament scripture that says, "there's nothing new under the sun."
 - i. He'd go on to say that, as a result, not a single thought that you now have, or will ever have, is original.
 - ii. So, he'd say, when you have thoughts, and that should happen on occasion, and with some frequency, attribute those "original ideas" to the person or persons who thought your thought first."
 - b. And for me, specifically, he offered an additional challenge:
 - i. I had really strong feelings and opinions about much of the subject matter that we covered in class.
 - ii. But he challenged me not just to *feel* a particular way about an

issue, but to couple my strong feelings with *critical thought and analysis* that was supported by what other scholars had said about a particular issue or experience.

3. His broad challenge was for his students to look for the big picture, the larger narrative at work, in every story and to situate ourselves in that story.
 - a. And that our challenge was to give a story altitude by pushing a point to a profounder depth.
4. I took professor Johnny Williams's challenge seriously, and became a voracious reader, devouring texts into the late hours in Tutt Library.
 - a. My experience in Professor Williams's classes, and my Colorado College education more broadly, laid the foundation for my career as a civil rights attorney at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, widely considered the nation's premiere civil rights law firm.
- e. I urge you to take full advantage of the years ahead of you here at Colorado College, because they are unmatched in their possibility.
- f. The years ahead of you are stretched out like a blank canvas on which you get to create your single-most

important work of art: that is, what your contribution will be to the world's story.

II. **Let me ask you:** Have you ever thought seriously about why it is that you are alive at *this time*?

- a. I often ponder this fascinating question myself.
- b. Think about it. You could have been alive at any point in history, now, or sometime in the future.
- c. I think about what that means for me, that I could have been alive before Africans arrived on American soil, or perhaps during that awful voyage across the Atlantic ocean, during which time some 40 to 60 million Africans perished.
 - i. I could have been alive during slavery, another dark period in our nation's history in which blacks were by law the legal property of another.
 - ii. But I am alive *at this time* for a reason.
- d. And the same is true for you.
 - i. You are alive *at this time*, on purpose, *for such a time as this*.
 - ii. And it's my firm belief that you are alive at this time, as opposed to some other time in our earth's lifespan, because you are specially suited for *these times*.
 - iii. And because *you are needed at this time*.

1. That is to say that you have a unique purpose and contribution to make to this world, and that if you don't make it, it won't be made.
- e. But the mistake we often make is that we aren't always intentional about seeking to discover our purpose and understanding how badly needed our contributions are.
- i. This nation and our world is yearning for your contribution; it is starved for your service; and it is hungry for your authenticity.
 - ii. Alice Walker said that the most common way that people fail to use their power is by not recognizing that they have power in the first place.
- f. Let me give you an example.
- i. A friend of mine who mentors teenage boys in Newark shared with me that he was recently trying to motivate his students to do more, to give more of themselves, to reach higher.
 - ii. So he got his students together and he challenged them to raise their hands as high as they could.
 1. And because this exercise was so poorly conceived, the kids, naturally, were reluctant to participate.
 2. So my friend, who happens to be a politician, did what comes naturally to many politicians: *he bribed them*.

- a. He reached into his pocket and offered five dollars to the kid who could raise his hand the highest.
3. Now engaged, the students shot their hands up, and were now comparing themselves to each other to see whose hand was the highest.
4. But in the corner of the auditorium sat the shortest of all of the kids with his arms folded looking dejected, and thinking hard to himself.
 - a. As my friend approached him to encourage him, the student sprinted out of the auditorium.
 - b. After a short footrace, my friend caught up to him.
 - c. But before my friend could say a word, the student said, “let me go, let me go! I’ve got somewhere to go!”
 - i. Confused, my friend asked, “What’s wrong?! Where are you going?”
 - ii. The student looked at him hard and said, “You said you’d give five dollars to the kid who could raise his hand the highest, right?!” (Yes!)

1. Then the student looked over at the kids, and with a wisdom that betrayed his young age, he said, “Well, I know a way to get to the roof!!”
 2. He was obviously given the five dollars.
- g. There’s a serious point to this story, which is simply, to reach higher.
- i. You have power, purpose, and a contribution that must be made to the world.
 - ii. Don’t miss it.
 - iii. This, to me, is the great compromise that is too often made, when people simply resign themselves to the world as it is.
 - iv. People just look at what’s happening outside, and realize, sadly, that they are just spectators in a crazy, complex world *in which they think* they have no power.
- h. But what’s desperately needed are young people, like you,
- i. who understand the world;
 - ii. who understand these times and know what to do in them; and

iii. who recognize that you were made for *such a time as this*.

i. But please don't hear what I am not saying.

i. I am not encouraging you to look inside of yourself, and then began to plan your life.

ii. Because that would imply that you should first find yourself *and then* begin to live your quest.

iii. Exceedingly few people can take an inward journey and come out having **discovered** a **developed self**.

iv. Instead, I encourage you to look *outside* of yourself, and find a problem that will summon your life.

1. A young man confronts the harsh reality of having growing up without his father, and is thankful for the male mentors from the Boys and Girls Club who poured into his life during his formative years.

a. Upon arrival at Colorado College, he learns that there are two Boys and Girls Club campuses near Colorado College, and that 82 young boys and girls with backgrounds *just like his* are on a waiting list to be mentored.

- b. He organizes a group of CC students from his freshman class to mentor these kids.
2. A young college student, moved by the courage of anonymous heroes who literally put themselves in harm's way to move our country closer its stated ideal of equality under law, commits his life to being a civil rights attorney.
3. A mother suffers from multiple sclerosis and a young daughter feels compelled to give her life to help cure that wretched disease.
4. A young man works under a miserable boss one summer, and learns to develop management skills that will ultimately transform the way that businesses operate in this country.
5. A first-generation college student arrives at Colorado College with gratitude in her heart, knowing that, but for her high school guidance counselor, she would not have made it to college.
 - a. Moved by this reality, she commits to gaining the necessary tools here at Colorado College so that upon graduation she can return to serve as a guidance counselor in her hometown high school in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

6. A young woman survives a vicious sexual assault, and is determined to use her experience to help other victims of sexual and other violence recover, heal, and work towards restoration and wholeness.
- v. As I speak these stories into existence, what becomes very clear is that the purpose of life is not, then, to *find* yourself.
 1. No. The purpose of life is to *lose* yourself.
 - vi. I want to close with a story about how my wife, Charity, lost herself here at Colorado College.
 1. While a student, Charity learned of an opportunity to teach through an organization whose mission was help to ensure that “**one day, every child will have access to an excellent education.**”
 - a. Charity learned that the program provided a two-year opportunity to teach children in some of America’s most impoverished, under-served, and marginalized cities.
 - i. Having grown up poor, Charity learned from her mother early in life that a robust formal education is the great equalizer.
 1. And she came to believe that an excellent education could be the antidote to the

grinding poverty that plagued the communities that the program served.

2. Charity was all in.

2. After graduation from Colorado College, Charity packed her car, and drove several thousand miles across the country to Newark, New Jersey, where she'd spend the next two years losing her life.

a. Charity learned that, with a heart to serve, she could make a meaningful contribution as a school teacher.

b. And the needs in Newark were (and still are) staggering:

i. In Newark, a city that is approximately 60 percent black, an incredible 40 percent of those under 18 live below the poverty line;

ii. And the city's public schools are among the lowest-performing in the country.

iii. In Newark, a staggering 6 out of every 10 kids do not graduate from high school.

c. Notwithstanding this harsh reality, Charity ran headlong into teaching in

Newark, quickly finishing her two-year commitment with Teach for America, and spending seven more years in the classroom becoming a master teacher.

i. And just last year, Charity, along with several of her colleagues started a new school, called Brick Avon Academy.

1. BRICK stands for Building Responsible, Intelligent, Creative Kids.

2. A regular traditional public school, BRICK borrowed the best practices from other successful schools to help create an oasis of learning in Newark.

3. Charity shared with me a story about an applicant for a teaching position at her school.

a. The teacher, who by trade was a lawyer, expressed during her interview that she wanted to “help” her.

b. In response, Charity said, “If you want to help us, let’s start by you looking around and telling me what you see when you survey the neighborhood.”

- c. “Well,” the applicant said, “I see the signs of extreme poverty, decaying buildings, empty lots littered with garbage, police cars and lots of despair.”
- d. Disappointed with the applicant’s response, Charity said, “Thanks, but you cannot help us.”
- e. Charity continued, “It’s important for you to understand as you apply for your *next job*, this critical truth:
 - i. The world you see *outside* of you is a reflection of what you have *inside* of you.
 - ii. “And if you are one of those people who only sees problems, limitations, hopelessness, despair, and darkness, then **that’s all there’s ever going to be.**”
 - iii. “But what my kids need is a team of teachers, who, no matter what the conditions, are able to see boundless possibility, opportunity, hope, and light.”
- j. And here’s the application to you.
 - i. That’s the power you have if you choose to realize it and not surrender it.

1. You can literally transform reality.
- ii. This is the story of humanity; it's the great moment.
- iii. That every second, you can choose to accept conditions as they are, or take responsibility for changing them.
- iv. Viktor Frankl, in his powerful work, "Man's Search for Meaning," said that "one of the greatest of all human freedoms is the ability to choose your attitude in any given set of circumstances."
 1. And the question for you is: will you manifest your leadership; your contribution; your service?
 2. Will you lose yourself?
- v. If yes, then let's transform the world through our contributions to it.
 1. And let's begin by finding our way to the roof.