

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

San Jose State University

Class of 2016

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President Martin, faculty and staff, families, friends and guests, and members of the San Jose State University graduating class of 2016:

Graduates, a little over five decades ago, I sat exactly where you are, waiting in eager anticipation of our commencement speaker's words of insight, wit, and wisdom.

Fifty-two years later, I cannot remember his name, his face, his message, or anything else that he said. But what I do recall with absolute clarity, is that he confined his remarks to the time allotted – and that made it a great speech! That's an exceedingly high bar to achieve – particularly for a sociologist – but I pledge to give it my best shot.

I have always been fascinated and intrigued by the designation of one generation or another as the "greatest generation". There was the generation that forged and fought the Revolutionary War;

there was the generation that fought and won the Civil War and ended the institution of slavery; and, most recently, there was the generation that fought and won World War II and defeated fascism and imperialism.

All of these generations had three things in common:

They had mass movement support; they confronted and prevailed over great challenges; and, for all of their achievements, they left work undone.

First, mass movements are part of the DNA of American political democracy. Sam Adams and his “Sons of Liberty” throwing 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor was not a government program.

In fact, the six greatest advances in broadening the basis of democratic participation in this nation over its 240 year history originated with mass social-political movements;

The Abolition Movement

The Labor Movement

The Women's Suffrage and Liberation Movement

The Civil rights Movement

The Environmental Movement

And The Gay Rights Movement

Each of these movements compelled society and its institutions to confront and seek resolution to critical issues that otherwise likely would have been only belatedly addressed, if at all.

At some fundamental level, this is both the inherent message and the institutionalized charge of the very first line of the Preamble to the United States Constitution where it says: "We The People of the United States in Order to form a more perfect Union..."

It doesn't say "We the Courts", or "We the Congress", or "We the State Legislatures" or "We the Governors". It doesn't even say

“We the Presidents” and most certainly not “We the Presidential candidates”

So, as with all other generations, you have your work cut out for you.

You are the most technologically sophisticated, globally connected, globally-oriented, and tolerant and inclusive generation in history. For all that earlier generations did and accomplished, we left much undone. For example, you are so much more aware and committed than my generation was when it comes to the status, circumstances and outcomes of women and girls.

In the 1960's we fought for racial freedom, justice, and equality for all, often under the presumption that this would resolve the problems of injustice and inequality for everyone. But your generation has come to realize that a great deal of what happens

to women and girls does not happen to them because they are Black or Latina or Asian-American or Native American – it happens to them because they are women – White women included. Also, more so even than my generation, which fought to eliminate racial barriers to marriage and so made it possible for people such as my daughter Fatima and her husband Joe to marry and have a beautiful family – your generation has established unequivocally that marriage between consenting adults is a right for all, not a bias-based selective privilege for some. In these ways and so many more, you are so much better than past generations – including my own for all our activism and effort.

And you are going to need all of your education-based skills, all of your openness to inclusiveness, your openness to change and to progress, and most particularly you are going to need a commitment to participatory citizenship: that dedication to informed involvement, to rolling up your sleeves and organizing

with others seeking resolution to the critical issues of your era, as well as to addressing work left undone, and to meeting those challenges thought resolved but which have resurfaced in some new guise.

Fifty-four years after publication of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", environmental issues are more critically significant than ever and, despite "deniers", climate change looms as an existential threat to us as a species and to life more generally on this planet;

Fifty-one years after President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the "Voting Rights Bill" of 1965, achieved at great sacrifice by my generation, State-sponsored impediments to voting rights have resurfaced;

And forty-four years after Roe v. Wade the battle for legal, safe, and accessible medical services for women – even in the age of the Zika virus – has also resurfaced.

Along with work left undone and the need to re-invigorate some past movement battles in response to resurfaced challenges, there are new, emergent causes that will ultimately demand movement-level attention. For example, little is likely to be done at the levels of critical collaboration and spending necessary to upgrade and protect our regional and national energy and power grids and related infrastructures from looming cyber threats until there is a mass movement among informed and active citizens demanding that private and government interests, that Congress, the military and the various intelligence agencies come together and make addressing and resolving this thoroughly modern cyber-based reality the major “front burner priority” that it should be.

In sum then, your generation’s mandate is clear. In pursuing the job and occupational mission that you have prepared for through

development of your education-based skills, you will demonstrate the caliber of your competence and what you can do.

In pursuing the mandate for participatory citizenship as a component of “We The People”, you will demonstrate the courage of your convictions and commitment, and Who you are.

In closing I want to leave you with three specific directives imperative to participatory citizenship:

First, Keep The Faith.

In today’s 24/7 news cycle, often abetted by an utterly unvetted internet and social media, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that things are so bad, so complicated, confused and intractable that there is nothing that can be done to even influence, much less to change the status quo.

So, before one even gets to the question of facing up to a challenge, much less to the effort to change anything, one must have the faith that he or she can change it despite all rational and irrational analysis and conventional wisdom to the contrary.

There's an old Black gospel song that says in part, "Faith got me up this morning, and faith carries me through the day." These are not just sweet sounding lyrics – this is literally true: it is truly by faith that we "soldier" on. We get up every day and organize our lives around plans, calendars, and schedules, we even harbor long-term hopes and dreams – though we know that one day we are going to get up, put our shoes on and the coroner is going to take them off of us. It is only by faith that we can look in the mirror and with a perfectly straight face say – But Not Today!

I'm also reminded of something that happened in 1962. A group of Black leaders, and opinion makers had gathered at the White

House to petition the Kennedy Administration for the passage of a Civil Rights Bill and a Voting Rights Bill.

At the end of a frustrating meeting, then Attorney General Robert Kennedy made a statement that many in the group found so preposterous, so outrageous, so utterly outlandish as to seem patronizing. What Bobby Kennedy had the faith to believe and the brass to say, even as these leaders were “fuming in anger” over the slow progress toward passage of the Bills was this: “If you keep the faith and continue to work at it, in forty years a Negro could be elected President of the United States” – he was not totally prescient, but close enough. In 2008, almost 40 years to the month of Bobby Kennedy’s assassination in June of 1968, the Democratic party nominated Barack Obama as its presidential candidate and the American people put him in the White House, not once but twice – because people kept the faith, kept working, and kept their eyes on the prize.

Another aspect of keeping the faith is to not be distracted by all of the nonsense swirling around today. Conspiracy theories, alleged government plots , Black ops and helicopter capers, and just outright foolishness – Presidential candidates focusing on how somebody eats pancakes or tacos? Or what somebody is wearing or how they look? On how big their hands are? Really? My hands are 14 1/2 inches from wrist to the tip of my finger and I'll throw in a pair of size 17 shoes ! If that's the standard , make ME the President !. Keep the faith and your eyes on the prize!

Second, Do not be Afraid.

On an individual level, the greatest store house and repository of human creativity and ingenuity on earth is the cemetery because people too often are afraid to step out of their comfort zones, to take a chance, to actively and aggressively pursue their dreams – and so they take those dreams to their graves. Be bold; step up and step out, as the jazz artists say, don't be afraid to stretch out .

You not only find your purpose in life, your purpose also finds you. And you might not find it in your comfort zone! You must move beyond the perimeter of what you know, to the realm of what you dream. And remember Virginia Silviera – don't be afraid to reach out and embrace the unfamiliar, the other.

In a broader context, there is an even greater problem with fear. Today, we would be able to have a much more honest, informed, and enlightened discussion and debate about our problems and how to resolve them as a nation and a society if we were not afraid – mostly of each other. Fear and fear-mongering have become staples of our social and political life as a society. Everybody, it appears, is afraid of somebody. We are fed a steady diet of fear; we are organized and mobilized far too often not by our hopes, and dreams, and aspirations, but by our fears:

Fear the left

Fear the right

Fear the nativists

Fear the immigrants

Fear the Liberals

Fear the Conservatives

Fear the Republicans

Fear the Democrats

Fear the Government

Fear the Fundamentalists

Fear the Secular Humanists

Fear the Muslims

Fear the White Militias

Fear the Black and Latino Gangs

Fear the Black youths in Hoodies

Fear the White men in cop uniforms

Fear the Rich with their great wealth

Fear the Poor and their demands for government services

Fear the Banks

Fear those demanding health clinics and services for women

Fear the Tea Party agenda

Fear the Gay agenda

Fear the "Black Lives Matter" agenda

Fear Citizens with guns

Fear Citizens who want gun control

We are armed to the teeth against each other with over 300 million guns due to fear, and now there is the almost psychopathic fear that the guns might be taken away! Fear begets fear!

The rule of thumb in America today seems to be

"Be whatever you want, but be afraid!"

We have evolved a culture of fear. This is where we are, But, This is not who we are! Fear leads to dislike; dislike leads to disrespect; and disrespect leads to disengagement and hostile relations. The implications here, among other things, is that until White cops sit down in mutual respect with Black parents in

Ferguson and similar environments, and accept that they both want the same things for their children and grandchildren, all of the anti-racist training and police culture changing is going to fall short of the goal of improving police-citizen relations. But first, police and citizens must stop being afraid of each other. I was speaking to a group of young adults and they were saying that they didn't like cops. We have got to get over this. We have diplomatic and trade relations with Vietnam. The very countries defeated by what is currently deemed our "greatest generation" - Germany, Japan, and Italy - are now among our closest allies. The President of the United States is scheduled to speak to the Japanese people at the Hiroshima memorial site . And based on WHAT , we are not willing to sit down with EACH OTHER ? It's FEAR !

The words of our National Anthem tell how far we have drifted on the winds and waves of fear. Those words say " THE LAND OF THE FREE and THE HOME OF THE BRAVE ! Not the land of the FRENZIED and the home of the AFRAID !

A major obligation of your generation , by both action and example, will be to bring this nation back that distance from WHERE to WHO we are.

And, finally, Continue The Struggle.

Ultimately, change is most legitimately and expeditiously achieved in a representative democracy when political leadership is pushed through exercise of participatory citizenship by an informed and mobilized electorate. Aside from your work, your job, find at least one thing that you truly believe in as a change goal, commit yourself to activism in support of that goal, and follow up by voting. Activist struggle and representative electoral politics are NOT mutually exclusive – in fact , the difference between a MOB and a MOVEMENT in a representative democracy is that a movement not only organizes and mobilizes around an issue --- it gets people out to vote !

And always remember, a struggle is not easy – that is why it is called a “struggle” rather than a “picnic” – and, second, that the challenges to “forming that more perfect Union” have always been diverse, dynamic, and ever evolving; therefore our struggle is unavoidably multi-faceted, perpetual, and inter-generational – and there are NO Final Victories.

In graduating here today, you have taken a major step toward positioning yourself to fulfill that obligation enshrined in the words, “We The People”, and toward contributing to the achievement of that “ More Perfect Union”.

And in light of the magnitude of the challenges that you face, if you undertake to meet that obligation to the fullest of your ability, applying all of your skills, insights, and passionate commitment – one day someone standing at this very podium, overlooking some future graduating class may well feel compelled to the judgement

that you, members of the 2016 San Jose State University
graduating class , were part of our "Greatest Generation".

Again Congratulations!

The Very Best of Luck to each of you !

And God's Speed.