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Commencement Address

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Commencement

Commencement Address



Kathleen M. Murray '79

May 7, 2017

Kathleen M. Murray '79

President, Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Eleanor Roosevelt.

President Jensen; Provost Green; Board of Trustees Chair Vinyard and other Board members; faculty and staff; parents, family, and friends; and most especially members of the Illinois Wesleyan University class of 2017, it is an enormous privilege and honor to be with you today. I find myself feeling very old and very young, both at the same time. It’s difficult to believe that it has been 38 years since I sat where you are sitting (wearing that same green cap and gown). So much has happened in the world, and in my life, so much has changed on this campus. But then I look at you sitting there, and I’m back on that day in 1979, a nervous and shy 22-year-old sitting in the bright sunshine, excited to be receiving my degree and scared to death about what the future might hold for me.

What I didn’t understand at that point, what I didn’t begin to understand until I found myself teaching in a similar institution, was how well my studies in this very special liberal arts setting would prepare me for a lifetime of learning, would set the stage so that I could follow my passions wherever they took me – as a teacher, a thinker, a musician and performer, an advocate for the arts, an engaged citizen in a democracy, a world traveler, a fun-lover, even a college president.

And, I had not yet read the Eleanor Roosevelt quote that I used as the title for my talk today: “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” I didn’t allow myself many opportunities to dream in those days. I was a first-generation college student, from a totally blue-collar family in Davenport, Iowa, who had earned a Bachelor of Music degree in piano performance, and had absolutely no idea what I might do next. I’m pretty sure that my dad thought it was OK for me to study the piano because some nice young man would marry me, and it wouldn’t matter that I couldn’t make a living. (Now, don’t think ill of my dad – that was a generational thing. He lived long enough to see me earn tenure as a piano faculty member and even become Dean of the Faculty, and I know he was proud.)

So, I wasn’t a big dreamer in those days, but I was a big believer. (Remember, the quote says, “The future belongs to those who *believe* in the beauty of their dreams.”) My parents never had the opportunity to go to college, but they instilled in their five children the belief that we could do anything we wanted to do as long as we were willing to work really hard. I benefited greatly from that belief; it was what gave me the courage to leave the relative comfort of Davenport, Iowa, and come all the way (yes, for me, this was a long way at that time in my life) all the way to Illinois Wesleyan University.

I hope each of you shares that belief that hard work will open the door to great opportunities, but I also hope you will allow yourselves to dream beautiful dreams, *even*, or perhaps *especially*, in moments of uncertainty and challenge. You are graduating from college at a time of significant uncertainty and challenge around the globe, and it might feel like the best thing for you to do is to hunker down, to focus inward and just try to take care of yourself, but that will close you off from all of the possibilities that are not apparent except in your beautiful dreams. I think that may be the most important thing I have learned in the 38 years since I sat where you are sitting. Allow your future to be guided by those beautiful dreams. Even if you already think of yourself as a big dreamer, that outlook will be tested at various moments in your life. Continue to allow your future to be guided by your beautiful dreams.

Now, it’s easy for me to reminisce about my time here and to try to connect some of my experience to yours, even 38 years later. But there are two other ideas I want to share with you that I think are important for you and for all graduates, including my own at Whitman, at this particular moment in time. The first idea is one I hope you will continue to pursue, and the second is one I hope you will avoid.

I urge you to continue to develop your capacity for empathy, for the ability to understand, even to share the feelings of others, to experience life as if you were standing in someone else’s shoes. I hope that many of your experiences at Illinois Wesleyan have helped you to build this capacity, as you have lived and learned with people from different parts of the country and world, different racial and ethnic groups, different socioeconomic backgrounds, different political and religious views. William Sloane Coffin, former Chaplain at Yale and deeply engaged civil rights and peace activist who became a mentor to me, defined the root of evil as “the absence of imaginative empathy for others.” Maya Angelou said, “I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.” Our ability collectively to make the

world a better place depends, at least in part, on having the courage to combat evil by displaying imaginative empathy.

The attitude that I encourage you to try to avoid is cynicism, which derives from a belief that people are generally dishonest and motivated solely by self-interest. I work hard, even if I am not always successful, to base my work on the assumption that people are looking out for the best interests of others, and I hope people will give me the same benefit. The distrust and disillusionment that results from cynicism squashes creativity of thought, and creativity is essential if we are to make the world a better place. H.L. Mencken famously said, “A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin.” I hope you will look for the flowers.

So, let’s remember that the word “commencement” means beginning or start. You are beginning the next phase of your lives, you are starting to figure out what that means and what the future might hold. The educational privilege you have experienced these last four years carries with it enormous responsibility, responsibility to give back – to your family, your college, your community, the world. You’ve heard some people say that their undergraduate years were the best four (or five, or six) years of their lives. Others say that the next four years or so were the most exciting, as they began to figure out their paths and follow their passions. Preparing to speak with you has provided me with the opportunity to look back over the 38 years since my commencement and to recall the four years that led up to that moment. I loved my time at IWU; I can only hope it has been as positively transformative for you as it was for me. I’ve also loved (almost all) of the last 38 years because I have learned to believe in the beauty of my dreams. I wish the same for you as you commence today. Congratulations and all best wishes, class of 2017!

Contact: commence@iwu.edu

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