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Commencement Address

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Master of My Fate/Captain of My Soul

By Frankie R. Faison

Illinois Wesleyan University Commencement

May 5, 2002

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul

In the fell clutch of circumstances
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of change
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the year
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Invictus by William Ernest Henley

Graduates of IWU, Class of 2002, parents, friends, esteemed faculty and administrators: lend me your ears!

I come to praise and commend you, the graduating class, on your outstanding achievements and accomplishments and say, Right On! Right On! Right On! — for a job well done.

When your president, Minor Myers, called and asked if I would consider this great honor, I responded without hesitation, a resounding YES!

As the weeks rolled along, thoughts of what I would say to you and how I would say it entered and exited my mind like magnificent jumbo snowflakes falling from the sky only to land and disappear on the ground in an instant. But I now stand before you in total calm, with an open heart and a head full of thoughts and ideas and experiences that I want to share with you. But I am going to limit them to that one important thought, given voice in the beautiful poem I opened with, *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley, which has inspired me my whole life: I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul!

What first comes to my mind is a thought I had some 31 years ago when I sat in one of those seats at my own commencement. And I am guessing this is what

you are thinking now: Where will I be partying and celebrating at the end of this day?

While you graduates reflect on that very important concern, I would like to talk to your parents and friends about a meeting that once took place bringing together three great minds. A priest, a minister and a rabbi were asked the question, When does life begin?

The priest said, "Life begins with conception."

The minister said, "No my friend, life begins with birth."

The wise old rabbi said, "I am sorry my learned friends, but you are both wrong. Life begins the day the dog dies and your youngest child graduates college."

I have three daughters, one of whom graduates from college in a couple of weeks; a second is a junior in a college: and a third will be a senior in high school next year. So for me, life has a ways to go before it begins, which means I have more time to prepare for that time when it does begin. I guess the joke is sort of on me...for now!

So if you graduates are done planning your celebrations, let's get back to the business at hand.

Even as I wait for my life to begin, there are philosophies that have helped me get to this point that I would like to share with you.

The great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that he wanted us all to live in a world where we are not judged by the color of our skin, but by the content of our character. I wish that especially for you graduates today. Unfortunately I know there is a lot more work to do before we get there. I am in a profession where that great wisdom continues to be wasted over and over again. Far too often have I been accepted or rejected for work because of the color of my skin. I have been asked point blank by producers, directors, and casting agents; and I know you all would appreciate the irony in this as you see me to be a rather large and visibly dark-skinned black man standing before you— but nonetheless I have been asked far too many times after an audition, and I quote, "Very good Mr. Faison, but can you be blacker?" I want to ask if the person is blind, but I understand the stereotype; I understand the limitations those people are inflicting on me and an audience as well. I also understand, although I don't agree, that they are feeding the appetites of all those who choose to ignore Dr. King's dream. I always have to remind myself...I am the master of my fate. You can't take that away from me.

I have been told over and over, "We are not going black with this or that character." This may sound strange or maybe a little odd to you, but it defines who I am. I have never thought of myself as a BLACK ACTOR. I have always thought of myself as an ACTOR first, BLACK second. In the same way I think of myself as a HUMAN BEING who happens to be black.

I challenge all of you to be strong because you too will be tested and confronted with this same kind of prejudice and ignorance. Judge fairly as you move

through life. One of the greatest pieces of advice I can give you is this: Treat all people with the same respect with which you would want them to treat you.

This leads very easily into my next thought: In the blink of an eye, your life can change in dramatic fashion. The change can be from bad to good, from good to bad, from better to best. Be prepared for the change. Be prepared for the good. Be prepared for the bad. But most importantly, be prepared. None of us has any idea what will happen to us at any given point in our life. I have not expected everything that happened to me in my life and career, but I always felt prepared for whatever it was.

As an actor I live a life of ups and downs, highs and lows, feast or famine. To me, being prepared means being at peace and living in harmony with myself. One moment in I am wondering where next month's rent will come from and the next moment I am being jetted, first class, across the country to stay at a Four Seasons Hotel, with an unlimited charge account, not to mention a fat contract to boot. But when you remember who you are and where you came from, you are prepared to live in dignity as you experience the ups and downs. You know in your heart that you are the same person regardless of what is happening to you. You are the captain of your soul.

One of my most well-known film roles came in a film where I wasn't even supposed to play that particular character. The film, *Coming to America*; the character is that of the seedy but, I think, lovable landlord. It was originally given to another actor. But because his schedule wouldn't allow him to commit to this film, the role was given to me and the rest, as they say, is history because...I am the Landlord...And the landlord says: "Your rent is due. Don't be pulling that falling down the stairs crap on me. You hear me. You conscious!" In the blink of an eye my life changed because of that single opportunity.

During the production of the very powerful and highly awarded play, *Fences* by August Wilson, done on Broadway, I almost quit between tryouts because certain changes the producer wanted to make were in complete contradiction to the validity of my character and the play itself. I fought and stood behind my convictions. Because I choose to remain the master of my fate, I was eventually rewarded with a Tony and Drama Desk Award nomination for my work in that play. Being true to what I believe, even if it threatened my job, turned out to be the right choice. It helped me to understand that the rewards you reap are only as great as the risks that you take.

This next thought energizes me tremendously, and it has served me well my entire life. I have always believed we all have something, one thing we do as well or better than most. For me, it was acting.

You need to get in touch with whatever that talent is in you, and not to be afraid of it; not be afraid to pursue and exploit it in yourself; not be afraid to work hard to develop it to its fullest, because just having a gift and talent, hey, that's not enough.

I recite to you the words of the man/beast Caliban from William Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, which was one of most my memorable roles as a theatre student at IWU. Here Caliban describes his feelings about this wondrous, mysterious, and sometimes terrifying Isle on which he was held captive.

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,

The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.

As beautiful and peaceful as sleep can be, I say to you graduates, WAKE UP. It's OK to dream. But wake up to life. See yourself! Be yourself! Don't ignore your gifts! Do what you do!

Here I stand before you: Newport News, Virginia, Huntington High School's class of '67, most boisterous and class clown! A distinction I would learn to cherish.

An actor needs to be heard and an actor needs to have a very vivid imagination. I think I will always be a bit boisterous and a bit of a clown (it pays big bucks in Hollywood). Now that's me. What about you?

Your time on this earth belongs to you. You have to decide with whom and how you will share it. Just make sure that when you look in the mirror at the end of the day, you feel good about what you see. Be the captain of your soul. Be the master of your fate. Love and live this gift of life.

I now give you the words I know you're anxious to hear and that is, "in conclusion," I would like to say this has been a great treat for me. I love IWU, yes I do, and am truly grateful for all that it has meant to me. I am smiling big today and so should you be. We should be all be smiling big as we share in this wonderful celebration.

I close with Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

Oh, the Places You'll Go!

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!
You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
Any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go.

Oh!
THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.
A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
How much can you lose? How much can you win?
And IF you go in, should you turn left or right...
Or right-and-three-quarters? Or, maybe, not quite?
Or go around back and sneak in from behind?
Simple it's not, I'm afraid you will find,
For a mind-maker-upper to make up their mind.

And will you succeed?
Yes? You will, indeed!
(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed)
Graduates, You'll move mountains!
So....
Be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
Or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,
You're off to Great Places!
Your mountain is waiting.
So, graduates,...get on your way!

THANK YOU.