

Commencement Address
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It's an honor for me to speak today, to assist in ushering out St. Andrew's Class of 2017 and welcoming them as our newest alumni. I am going to be completely candid with you; I remember very little about my own Commencement ceremony. In fact, up until last night I did not remember who even spoke at my graduation until Mr. Roach reminded me that he was in fact the speaker. Oops. But I'm certain that me not remembering wasn't due to the message that was conveyed. It was all me.

During those final days that preceded graduation and culminated in the ceremony, I was filled with an intensity of emotion that I had never felt before – a combination of excitement, trepidation, sadness, confusion, and accomplishment. You may be experiencing this yourselves, but all of the sudden I felt panicked that I did not spend enough time getting to know certain classmates or teachers. I realized I did not get a chance to fully show my gratitude to staff like Mr. Simmons, who used to open the gym for me to shoot around when technically it was supposed to be closed. He even rebounded for me sometimes. There just was not enough time. So it is my intention that I leave you with something, some nugget that you will remember, but I will not be offended if you do not. I clearly get it.

I would like to start by also sharing another honest thing about me. I absolutely adore the Academy Awards. In my household, the Oscars is like Christmas. My poor husband, Kenny, and my absolutely complicit daughter, Carter, and I make it an all-day affair, starting with critiquing the fashion on the red carpet. This year, Carter even got dressed up and practiced her acceptance speech with her very own "Oscar" in hand, a golden, plastic replica that I picked up a few years ago at a flea market in Hollywood. I typically try to see many of the films that have been nominated. And so I must share with you a secret that I have disclosed to very few people: I refused to see the movie *La La Land*.

Now I have nothing against Ryan Gosling or Emma Stone or any of the fine actors who were featured in that film. I was rooting for Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Moonlight*. He co-wrote the script for the film. A MacArthur Genius Award-winning playwright, Tarell is also a Steppenwolf Theatre ensemble member. And as a board member of Steppenwolf, I have had the pleasure of meeting Tarell many times, and in person, he is a humble, brilliant, sensitive, and extraordinary man, who also happens to be black and gay, and whose personal journey is not entirely autobiographical, but reflected in many ways in the script. So needless to say it was with great anticipation (and heavy eyelids) that we waited for the final award, for Best Picture, to be announced. So when Warren Beatty turned to Faye Dunaway to save him from making what he most likely sensed could be a colossal mistake, (i.e. when he threw her under the bus) and realized that she had mistakenly announced the wrong winner – *La La Land* – and that *Moonlight* had actually won, I felt incredibly vindicated. See?! I was right! Forget *La La Land*!

Moonlight is many things, but in my mind it's largely about finding hope in hopeless situations, overcoming adversity when the prognosis appears impossible, it's about forgiveness, and finding joy even when despair is overwhelmingly pervasive and crippling. For me, *Moonlight* gives me the permission, really the audacity, to feel positive about the future of film – as well as other cultural mediums. It makes me think that stories of inclusion may be becoming an integral part of a new normal, as opposed to isolated incidents that check the diversity box. And unlike the previous year, when like many others, we participated in the #OscarsSoWhite boycott, Carter, Kenny and I could engage in a meaningful way in this celebration.

Why no *La La Land*? You are clearly an astute class of seniors who have figured out that *La La Land* is really a metaphor. I have honestly just lost all tolerance for it – *La La Land* that is. I'm over fake news and appendages, alternative facts and misogynistic politicians and cable news networks. I'm over jerks who give out roses and invite multiple women to fantasy suites. Now let's be clear, the alternative to *La La Land* isn't exactly more palatable. Personally, I'm over my daughter's fear of her father's penchant for the hoodies that he loves to wear or explaining why he repeatedly got pulled over by the police when he would commute to a small city in Florida, about 30 miles from where Trayvon Martin was killed. I no longer have a plausible explanation for why her paternal grandparents, longtime, proud residents of Flint, Michigan, still do not have clean water streaming from their kitchen and shower faucets. And although we live in one of the most iconic and beautiful cities in the world, Chicago, I am tired of worrying about my family's safety, as our city marked 2016 as its deadliest year in almost 20 years. And too often I am concerned about the inhabitants and the staff of the originally small homeless shelter that my grandfather founded on the West Side of Chicago over 50 years ago – the Primo Center for Women and Children – which is now the second largest organization in the city serving homeless women and children, with locations sprawled across the city's toughest neighborhoods. Progress, in this case, is not about getting bigger or better because we are farther away from eliminating homelessness and all of the ensuing traumas associated with this condition than we have ever been.

So as I, like many of you, have struggled to make sense and cope with non-*La La Land*, I recall several months ago responding rather critically to Ms. Diahann Johnson's text of well wishes for a happy 2017. I texted her back with a look-alike emoji of me with a large hammer destroying the year "2016." I added many sad, weeping, emoji faces, the extent of my technical abilities by the way. And in response to my dramatic display of emotion, she wrote back: "It is in God's hands. He just needs us to *stay woke* and keep doing what we are doing and fight the good fight." She wrote this along with a smiley face of course.

Now, for those of you who know Ms. Johnson, the beloved French teacher who is retiring this year after 23 years of service and mother of Caleigh who is also graduating this year, Diahann is a deeply spiritual woman, with tremendous patience, empathy, and optimism. These are only a few of the attributes that make Diahann an outstanding educator and influence on jaded friends like me. So I decided to follow her lead, the more righteous path, and to not give my power away by holding onto negativity and doubt. And it became clear that as a citizen of this world, the only way that I would personally be able to combat any of its many challenges and adversities, is to commit to Staying Woke. No *La La Land* for me. I believe that God has been hinting for quite a while (actually more like banging us over the head with that emoji hammer) for us to wake up

from the stupor, to push aside the apathy and hopelessness and like Tarell did, to go find and cultivate our joy within the despair.

Stay Woke? Yes, I was an English teacher and know that this phrase is grammatically incorrect. But somehow “Stay Awake” or “Be Awake,” just does not have the powerful cadence of Stay Woke. In my opinion, it resonates like Kate Chopin’s 19th century novel *The Awakening* on steroids. One of the first feminist authors of our time, a countercultural game-changer, I think Chopin would approve. Stay Woke means not just keeping your wits about you, it is about staying hyper-aware and vigilant. Often it’s about combatting injustice, but it’s always about movement, actively maintaining a point of view, and sometimes fighting for what you believe is right.

So I ask of you as I have been demanding from myself, the venerable Class of 2017, to Stay Woke. The irony does not escape me that most people think that St. Andrew’s is *La La Land*. Bucolic and idyllic, it is often described as a “bubble.” I had the opportunity to speak to a handful of seniors about a month ago, and several of you articulated your concern about leaving the bubble. Would you be prepared to make tough decisions without the strong and established community that you’ve come to know and cultivate around you? Would you be able to navigate a less perfect or accepting world and create and abide by your own set of standards and expectations? Would you still be *you* without this place, these friends, these teachers? The fact is that this isn’t a bubble – as you have witnessed this year during campus lock-downs or when you’ve been forced to figure out how to balance your workload, art, music or team participation, often in frustration and over little sleep. Many of you have had an experience while you’ve been here that has changed the trajectory of your life in a meaningful way. This is as real as it gets.

In Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie and Teacake escape to the muck, a bountiful, uncensored and fertile part of the Everglades where folks would work and play hard, a place where our protagonist Janie’s “soul crawled out from her hiding place.” Hurston depicts the muck as both refuge and reality, where “all night the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants.” The muck is reminiscent of St. Andrew’s, where your “souls have crawled from their hiding places,” where you are covered communally in, bonded by the black earth, where you have worked quite diligently and also forged incredible friendships. Like Janie, you are now “pulling in your horizon like a great fish-net. Pulling it from the waist of the world and draping it over [your] shoulder. So much of life in its meshes!”

Stay Woke.

As graduates of this esteemed institution, in which almost 50 percent of the student body receives a sizeable allocation of financial aid, you have an obligation to give back to it. Whether you have received financial aid or not, every single one of you has benefitted from this extraordinary experience – in fact the experience was made extraordinary due to almost 50 percent of you receiving financial support – and you all have an obligation to give back to it. Because once you take it for granted, it will disappear and there are many that will follow you who will work just as diligently and sacrifice just as much and deserve this as much as you do or

I did. Don't sleep – or underestimate what will happen if you do not actively participate in maintaining the viability of this amazing school.

My fellow trustee and friend, John Matouk '89, describes St. Andrew's as a compass: a place that we can easily find or stumble our way back to, that reinforces what is good and meaningful, the healing and edifying effects of diverse perspectives and backgrounds that culminates in an ideal of community. Where an ethos of faith, humanity and integrity is counter cultural. But it's not all roses and sunshine either: it's grit, resilience and perseverance. It's making tough calls when it's easier to not bother. It's the highest state of consciousness or wakefulness. This notion of a compass is what he's referring to during his farewell speech when President Obama encouraged America to "hitch your wagon to something bigger than yourselves." This place is something bigger than yourself and you have a responsibility to hitch your wagon to it, in addition to the many significant interests and causes that you will support over your lives. But you've got to fight for it to ensure its viability.

Similar to how Pilate carries her father's bones and her own name she writes on a slip of paper and places in a box that she fashions into an earring in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, I always keep my compass in my pocket. Pilate carries these objects to both redeem and remind herself. The bones are symbolic of her ancestry, simply a reminder of where she really comes from. The earring is a bit more convoluted, but basically is about her choosing to own her name rather than rejecting it or allowing its perceived negativity to define her.

I have kept my compass in my pocket for going on 25 years now. I refer to it all the time, really: when I'm in situations that I just don't feel right about and refuse to compromise my integrity; when I stand up for colleagues or friends or even strangers because they've been treated unfairly; when I could remain angry and resentful but choose empathy and forgiveness. I refer to it when people repeatedly lectured me that I could not possibly help build a diverse, countercultural firm in the financial services industry – and that it could be diverse AND successful.

And recently my compass led me to the difficult decision to actively make a change in my professional life, which even though I now – like you – face uncertainty and an uncharted path, know that it is one of the best decisions I have made in my entire life. It forced me to put aside one of my greatest strengths and greatest hubris – my competitiveness; my irrepressible desire to win – and instead do what was best for me, my mental and physical health and my family. And just because I keep my compass close by does not make me Mother Teresa, in fact extremely far from it – which Will Speers, Tad and Elizabeth Roach can attest to for sure. But I'm not afraid to admit that I'm a proud compass carrier. There is no shame in something that keeps me yoked or hitched to something bigger than myself. It forces me to Stay Woke.

The following is the final story that I would like to share with you today: on a sweltering day in June of 1988 I sat for three hours in a tiny, non-airconditioned office in the basement of Founders Hall. I did not know it then but I would be the first student that Will Speers accepted into St. Andrew's, due to the good fortune of Will being newly appointed as Interim Director of Admissions. My parents, bravely and nervously, would drop me off, just as my uncle and aunt did their daughter Sydney two years ago, now a rising junior at St. Andrew's. I would enter that fall as a III Former.

Of course, Will would not realize until many years later that I – and my large, boisterous, extremely opinionated and overwhelming package-deal of a family – would be a major pain in a certain real appendage of his for the next 29 years and counting. He would be my advisor for the next four years, and then after I graduated from college, my boss for two, and then he would eventually have to tolerate me as a Trustee. In between, Will would become my dear friend, confidante, mentor, rabbi, Kleenex-provider, potential jump-from-roof-remover, amongst many other essential roles that I would require. Over the years, I have been incredibly grateful for his, Tad, Elizabeth and many other faculty's influence in my life but have never been able to express this adequately. Because they have and continue to keep me yoked, and if for just that gift alone, I am deeply indebted.

My story is not unique; you all have similar stories and trajectories – how you came to this magical place, how you will leave it better than when you found it, and how you intend to live in the world, informed by the many examples that were here during your time. And as you go forward, do not forget to give back to this place so that you may always be able to return to it and allow others to receive it as well. Stay Woke. God bless, thank you and congratulations, Class of 2017.