

# SKIDMORE COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

May 16, 2015

## Julian Bond

Mr. President, members of the faculty, administrators, parents, family members, friends—and most importantly, graduates—it is a high honor to have been asked to speak here today.

Ceremonies like this one inevitably call to mind my first commencement, my graduation from high school many years ago. The speaker then was the late Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. He spoke, without notes, in the hot afternoon sun, for more than an hour. As I listened I thought, “Someday I’ll get a chance to do that.”

Luckily for you, this isn’t it.

It is, however, the occasion for congratulations to you and reflections from me.

My grandfather was born in Kentucky in 1863, and because of this, freedom didn’t come for him until the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1863.

He and his mother were property, like a horse or a chair. As a young girl, she had been given away as a wedding gift to a new bride, and when that bride became pregnant, her husband—that’s my great-grandmother’s master and owner—exercised his right to take his wife’s slave as his mistress. That union produced two children, one of them my grandfather.

Your presence here attests to the value you place on education and your willingness to make sacrifices to obtain it. The same was true for my grandfather. At age 15, barely able to read or write, he hitched his tuition—a steer—to a rope and walked 100 miles across Kentucky to Berea College, and the college took him in. When he graduated from Berea 13 years later, the college asked him to deliver the commencement address.

He said then:

The pessimist from his corner looks out on the world of wickedness and sin and, blinded by all that is good or hopeful in the condition and progress of the human race, bewails the present state of affairs and predicts woeful things for the future. In every cloud he beholds a destructive storm, in every flash of lightning an omen of evil, and in every shadow that falls across his path a lurking foe.

He forgets that the clouds also bring life and hope, that lightning purifies the atmosphere, that shadow and darkness prepare for sunshine and growth, and that hardships and adversity nerve the race, as the individual, for greater efforts and grander victories.

“Greater efforts and grander victories”—that was the promise the generation born in slavery made a century and a half ago. That was the promise made by the generation that won the great world war for democracy seven decades ago. That was the promise made by those who brought democracy to America’s darkest corners five decades ago.

And that is the promise you must seek to honor as you leave these ceremonies and enter the world

beyond.

When the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in 1954 in the case called Brown v. Board of Education, a vast army of nonviolent protestors rose up to challenge segregation's morality as well. Students like you began embracing jail without bail, when they sat down to stand up for their rights. They attacked segregated ballot boxes across the South as well.

Throughout this period the federal government helped only reluctantly, and then only when white property or people seemed at risk. State and local government worked in active concert with white terrorists, and the movement had few allies.

But from the first it was a people's movement. The cumulative acts of their passive resistance led to the three great civil rights milestones of the 1960s: the 1963 march on Washington, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

As we celebrate these milestones, we celebrate the ordinary women and men who made the movement mighty.

We celebrate Robert and Jeannie Graetz. On the Sunday after Rosa Parks's arrest, Martin Luther King Jr. called on his congregation to join the planned one-day boycott. Other black ministers across the city did the same, as did one white minister, Robert Graetz, who pastored a black Lutheran congregation. Weeks after the boycott came to a successful end, the Graetzes' home was virtually destroyed by a bomb while their family, including their four-day-old baby, slept.

We celebrate Dorothy Counts. She was 15 years old when, in September 1957, she enrolled in an all-white high school in Charlotte, North Carolina. As Dorothy walked to school, the wife of the leader of the White Citizens' Council urged the boys to "keep her out" and the girls to spit on her. She kept on walking. Many people threw rocks at her. Many did spit on her—so many that her mother said when Dorothy got home her dress was so wet with spit she could wring it out.

We celebrate Hartman Turnbow, a black farmer in Mississippi, the most brutal state of the old Confederacy. I remember him. Dressed like the farmer in coveralls, boots, and an old hat, Mr. Turnbow carried a briefcase. When he opened the briefcase, there was nothing in it but an automatic. In April 1963, Mr. Turnbow went with a group of other black farmers in Holmes County, Mississippi, to try to register to vote. When the sheriff asked, "Who'll be the first?" No one moved. Then Mr. Turnbow said, "Me, Hartman Turnbow. I came here to die to vote. I'm the first."

Four days later, the Klan firebombed his home and fired multiple shots into the living room. Mr. Turnbow fired back. Then the sheriff charged him with arson, accusing him of setting fire to his own uninsured home.

We celebrate Fannie Lou Hamer. If Mississippi was the most repressive state, Mrs. Hamer was its most heroic freedom fighter. When the movement came to her town of Ruleville in 1962, she was 44 years old and a timekeeper on a plantation. She joined eagerly. She gave us a wonderful slogan when she said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

The movement succeeded in spite of cowards planting bombs in the night, in spite of shots fired in the darkness, in spite of lynch mobs and hooded thugs, in spite, as Dr. King said, of the brutality of a dying order shrieking across the land.

In its successes, it has given you graduates much of what has brought you here today. As we honor you for what you have achieved, so should you honor them for what they achieved for you.

They helped you learn how to be free.

They gave you the freedom to enter the larger world protected from its worst abuses.

If you are black or female or gay, their struggles prevent your race or gender or sexual orientation from being the arbitrary handicap today that it was then.

If you belong to an ethnic minority or if you are disabled, your ethnicity or disability cannot now be used to discriminate against you as it was then.

If you are Catholic or Muslim or Jewish, your faith cannot be an impediment to your success.

As you grow older, because of what they did then, you will be able to work as long as you are capable.

Your job—your responsibility—is to make these protections more secure, to expand them for your generation and those who will soon follow you.

Our future as a nation depends on our willingness to continue to reach into the racial cleavage that defines American society and to change the racial contours of our world.

In 1954 the federal government's brief in Brown argued that school desegregation was a Cold War imperative, a necessary weapon to win America's battles overseas. Current events give us the same imperative—to prove to friend and foe alike that our commitment to justice is real.

Wherever you may go from here, if there are hungry minds or hungry bodies nearby, you can feed them. If there are precincts of the powerless poor nearby, you can organize them. If there is racial or ethnic injustice, you can attack and destroy it.

By this ritual today, you are about to be officially enrolled in an elite within our nation: the community of educated women and men. As you go forward from this place, we all hope you will do well. But we hope you will also do good.

You must place interest in principle above interest on principal.

An early attempt at ending illiteracy in the South developed a slogan that was also their method: "Each One Teach One" until all could read.

Perhaps your slogan could be "Each One Reach One."

Each one reach one until all are registered and voting.

Each one reach one until all are productive citizens of our world.

Each one reach one until the weak are strong and the sick are healed.

Each one reach one until your problem is mine, until mine is yours.

Just as it is not enough not to do evil, it is not enough just to do good.

It may be helpful to think of your task in this way:

Two men sitting by a river see, to their great shock, a helpless baby floating by. They rescue the child, and to their horror another baby soon comes floating down the stream. When that child is pulled to safety, another child comes floating by.

“Come back!” yells the man in the water. “We must save this baby!”

“You save it,” the other man yells back. “I’m going to find out who is throwing babies in the river and I’m going to make them stop!”

Racial minorities serve society like the canaries that miners used to carry to warn them when the underground air was becoming too toxic to breathe. But too many people want to put gas masks on the canaries instead of eliminating the poison in the air. Too many want to put life preservers on the babies, instead of stopping them from being thrown into a treacherous, dangerous stream.

As you aspire to greater efforts and grander victories, you must be prepared to offer not just love but justice, not gas masks but pure air, not life preservers but an end to throwing babies away.

This is not easy work, but you know what hard work is— that is what brought you here today.

I urge you to continue to do and be your best—and to apply your talents not just to bettering yourselves, not just doing social service, but bringing social justice.

If my grandfather were here, I think he would ask me now, “What did you do with your freedom?” Some day someone will ask you, “What did you do with your education?”

Be sure you have an answer—for your family, your nation, your world. They are counting on you.