

Yesterday you were students of Manhattan College. Today you leave as graduates. Think back to what it took to get here. It wasn't easy. There weren't a lot of shortcuts—ok, maybe you figured out a few along the way—but you accomplished what you set out to do.

Congratulations.

I've very much looked forward to being here today with you, and it's made me think back--20 years ago this month--to my own graduation. I could not tell you who spoke or what he – or she—said. I asked my parents: Who was it? What did he—or she—say? They couldn't remember, either. That's because this day isn't about who stands before you and speaks--but who walks across the stage. What you accomplished here, with the support and encouragement of those around you, and how your time in this place will stay with you the rest of your lives.

Since the only thing I can remember from my own graduation commencement speech is that it seemed very, very long--I'm going to be brief. Not quite as brief as Winston Churchill, who legend has it delivered what has to be the shortest commencement speech on record—and perhaps the most powerful. Churchill delivered the speech in 1941, in the early years of World War II, when many thought England would not survive. The great prime minister was speaking to young men who soon would face death on the battlefields of Europe.

Churchill went to the podium, removed his hat and leaned his cane to the side and started with a few remarks. Then he paused. And he said "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never -- in nothing, great or small, large or petty -- never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense."

Then he sat down.

It will take me a few more words. But I am going to make a similar point. Fight. Never never compromise on what's important. Stand up and speak when others sit and remain silent.

My background was a little different than I bet most of yours was. I grew up in rural Alabama. The closest town was 15 miles away—called A-rab—spelled A-R-A-B-- and had 5,000 people in it, a Piggly Wiggly, a skating rink and more churches than fast food joints. I knew no lawyers and no journalists – my high school didn't even have a newspaper. My dad was a farmer, and I grew up with people whose parents worked the land or on the assembly line.

My first summer job was working at the little gas station down the road from our house that my dad owned. Business was so slow that my brother and I spent most of the days drinking RC Colas and killing flies. But because I'd always heard halfway is no way, I got very good with that fly swatter. I grew up going to cow sales, showing steers in 4-H and picking blackberries in the summer on side of dusty roads. My rural county high school had a band, and I was a majorette—but because halfway is no way...well, of course we had to twirl flaming batons.

I went to the University of Alabama on a speech scholarship, and when I graduated and took a job with the Chicago Tribune, my parents helped me move. None of us had ever been to Chicago, and my Dad took the lead, while mom and I followed him in my old Toyota. I could see the skyscrapers from a distance reaching into the sky, and I remember

my heart racing as they got closer and closer---but then, they got further and further away.

We passed Chicago by—we could not figure out what exit to take--and we drove right by that great city. I spent my first night in the general vicinity of Chicago in a shabby motel in a suburb way to the North. I think it was condemned and bulldozed the next year. We would try again the next day to make it in. And we did. I had an apartment downtown by the end of the day.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said "Do one thing every day that scares you."

Never never give in. When you think about it, many of these quotes that these great people said are variations on messages we've heard from our mothers, our fathers, our grandparents--the people who helped get you to this place today. We've all heard it. But do we listen?

Here's how my Dad put it. And you graduates of Manhattan College are going to love this: Keep a hand on the plow and reach for the sky. Really. For those of you who have no idea what a plow is---it's that thing that farmers push through the fields-- let me translate. Keep your hand on the plow. Work hard. Stay grounded. Remember who you are. Where you came from. But don't keep your head down. Look up. Dream big. Never ever ever give in.

And Mom gave me this advice: Don't worry about what people think. Except she said it like this: Jan, you caint worry about what people think. You'll never see these people again. Typically, she pulled that one out when I'd done something incredibly embarrassing—like running into a lamp post when I was walking down the sidewalk and looking sideways, which I did that very first week in Chicago when I was wanting to be a real sophisticated city girl.

But my mother was right. My mom is always right. It's what YOU think. What you want. What you believe. Don't worry about what people think. Challenge conventional wisdom. Question initial assumptions. Be a contrarian. If you look to others for approval—if you define yourselves on what people around you expect—you will never change the world.

I grew up in a time not that far removed from the Civil Rights Movement. Just a year or so before I was born, police turned dogs and fire hoses on peaceful protesters in a city park. People went to jail because they wanted to sit and eat a sandwich. Little girls died in a bombed church, and brave young people were murdered trying to help African Americans vote.

When the Supreme Court ordered integration with all deliberate speed that meant black children would be entering those white schools for the first time. And when 6-year-old Ruby Bridges integrated the public schools in New Orleans, grown men and women threw all kind of things at her and hurled racial epithets and refused to let their own children sit in the same classroom.

I used to stare at the old photographs from that time, and I'd see the middle-aged white women in their bouffant hairdos and print dresses, their faces distorted with hatred, as they screamed at those children like Ruby Bridges and the teenagers in Little Rock--just because they

wanted to go to school. The governor of my home state would stand in the schoolhouse door to block a black student from entering.

And many decent men and women in Alabama and California and Illinois and New York watched. Silently.

The leader of the historic Movement, the man who changed a nation and paved the way for another generation to continue the unfinished work of his own time, would sacrifice his own life bringing our country out of that moral crisis.

That man, Martin Luther King Jr., said: "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

I always wondered what separated those who spoke out against injustice then, who fought to end the virulent and systemic racism, from those otherwise good people who stayed quiet and did nothing. Imagine the hell the protesters, the judges, the ministers, the lawyers, the teachers, the reporters endured because they refused to sit down, shut up and go along.

Why didn't they? How did they persevere, not caring what people thought at the club or the church—those appallingly silent ones who did worry what would people think? What separated the heroes of the Movement—those who changed our nation—from those who did nothing?

What would I have done, had I been 21 in 1966—instead of one? Where would you have been? We all think we would have been on the side of what's right and good. But would we?

And what about today?

My friend Bob Schieffer talks about three groups of people:

Those who see a mountain and want to climb over it, to see what's on the other side.

Those who see the mountain and have absolutely no interest. And those who see the mountain and are afraid of what's on the other side.

America has been built by those who have changed the world by wondering what life is like on the other side of that mountain and eventually demanding that that life be open to everyone. America has settled the West, explored the moon, expanded the boundaries of medicine and science and opened up worlds that those who went before us could never have imagined.

And all along the way, from Jamestown to Selma, from the sands of Normandy to rocks on the moon, those who have changed the world, who have dared to discover, who have left this world a better place, all had one thing in common:

They listened to the dreams of their heart instead of the criticisms of their peers. They pushed forward, got knocked down and stood again to fight.

As one great man said, "never, never, never give in." And as another

great man once told me: "Keep one hand on the plow and the other reaching for the sky."

I've tried Dad. And now I ask you, graduates of the 2007 class of Manhattan College, to do the same. When you leave here today, you can see what's over that mountain or what's beyond the horizon or just around the bend—and make it a better place to be. Use the things you've learned here about right and wrong and honor and faith, compassion and caring for others. Use your energy and idealism to make wherever you go from here a better place than when you got there.

Don't be silent.

May God bless your adventures and discoveries and triumphs. May you make our great nation even greater.

Thank you.