

The Agency of Humanness

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“A Pocket Speech”

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Remarks as prepared for delivery.

Congratulations UMKC graduates. I am pleased and privileged to be part of your celebration and the marking of a fantastic accomplishment in your lives. Of course, I wish I could be with you in person, but I hope the virtual me conveys the joy and pride I have for each of you and your accomplishments. I join your friends, family, and professors in giving you a big round of applause.

Now, when I was young, I spent a lot of time thinking about change. How it happens, how I could be a part of it, how my voice could be big enough to be heard. And history books are filled with stories, most of them featuring heroes who simply took charge. They knew what to do and when to do it, and in a few simple actions, they altered the course of history, leaving us all better off.

As I've aged, I've learned that these are just stories, told after the fact, that highlight the outcomes and endings, with very little sense of the journey. But today, I will tell you that the journey is everything. It's the true path to change. And here you have what those heroes had. You have agency—the ability to affect the world around you with the actions you take every day.

At no time in my memory has this kind of agency been more critical. The pandemic has torn away the trappings of our normal lives and let us see more clearly what is really there. Some of the revelations have been hard—disparities, divisions, hate, a sense that there is too little for everyone, so we must fight for our fair share. But we've also seen brightness, generosity, vulnerability. We've pulled down the curtains that separate us, and watched each other navigate work, home, and family, from kitchens, bedrooms, and makeshift offices. And time and time again, what we've seen is that we are much more similar than different.

And this is the thing we must pull through and remember from the pandemic. The challenges we face in the world can be solved, but only if we bring our full selves to the task. The parts that lie behind the synthetic divides that have long separated our personal selves from our work selves. The parts that reflect who we truly are. The parts of us that are fully human.

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And here is where you come in. You've overcome so many challenges and persevered to finish your degrees, all while living through a global pandemic, something that hasn't happened in a hundred years. It makes you uniquely prepared to help build the post-pandemic future you want, we all want. You bring something beyond your degrees and programs, you bring lived experience.

As we move past the pandemic, our minds will draw us back to the familiar. Pulling us to return to the way things used to be. But that would be a mistake. *You* have the power to demand something different. To build a world that is better, more generous, more equal, more forgiving, and most importantly, more complete.

So, as you begin the next chapter of your lives, embrace the journey that brought you here. The tragedy of the pandemic can be your strength, your superpower, the thing that separates you. The thing that gives you vision—the vision to see through what is and imagine what can be.

Your task, of course, will be to use your strength. To find agency in your humanness and help others do the same. But I guarantee this: if you do that, our children's children will read about you. They'll wonder how those heroes changed the world. And remember, it will be important to tell them the full story. They did it by being human.

Congratulations graduates. The future is yours, and I cannot wait to see what you do with it.