

Good morning.

President de Rosset, Trustees, Faculty, Alumni, Silas House, Family and Friends, and last but not least, Union College, Class of 2009, hi'dy!

True ambition is not what I thought it was. True ambition is the deep desire to live usefully and walk humbly under the grace of God.

I am so delighted to be here, and it feels nothing less than perfect to be receiving an honorary doctorate from the first college in the mountains, the mountains that are my first love. I am very proud to be a hillbilly, and proud to accept this degree from you. Thank you.

I have about 12 minutes to endeavor to say something helpful, memorable, and pithy. I nearly chose not to write a speech; at 12 minutes I've barely drawn a breath! My Dad knows me well and suggested I begin my talk by saying, "And in conclusion, I....."

Union College's spiritual director carried a message to me yesterday from some students who, it became clear, were expecting my talk to be one of my typical cri de coeur social justice speeches. They asked that I consider mentioning Darfur. Thank you to those kids for caring about places like Darfur.

Today, though, my message is not overtly about the service work we do externally in the world, but rather, the work we must do internally, on our own selves, in order to be truly useful out in the world. (So, covertly, it is all about social justice, because we cannot love our neighbor unless we first love ourselves.) Yesterday as I sat in the pits of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway while my husband was whizzing around at 225mph and my remarks were flowing out me, I was curious about the nature of them. But as of last night, when I dined here and was so graciously welcomed by the Union family, it became very clear this message was being crafted inside of me to resonate with Union College, what you have learned here, where articulated core values include integrity of character and spiritual quest. It seems that God has put me here today to reassure you and validate your Union experience with what I have learned in my own life experience: The

principles you have been taught at Union College matter. Character building and spiritual questing matter in this life.

You have given me the gift of a little trip home here in Kentucky, the physical, literal place we call home, but I'd like to draw your attention to a home that is even more beautiful, rich, profound, and full of promise than even Kentucky. Did you even know there is such a place? There is. Indeed, there is. And it is not far away. It is neither the Scottish Highlands nor the Tibetan plateaux, the Amazonian rain forests nor African savannas. It is very near, as close as your own breath, as intimate as your own thoughts. This home is your own soul, that precious endowment from God, and it is exploring your own soul that will provide you with the most fascinating, exotic, and rewarding adventures of your life, and this exploration will serve as the most firm foundation from which to reach out to be in relationship with others and the world.

My meditation teacher, Ekneth Easwaran, calls this type of exploration "vertical travel." We all know about horizontal travel; you in fact have chosen majors, or in the case of your valedictorian, 3 of them, studied hard and earned a college degree to empower you to embark on various and sundry horizontal travels, reaching out from your self to the community. And in terms of vacations, oh, the planning and effort we make to travel horizontally! We search online. We talk to friends. We peruse magazines. We save money, maybe even picking up extra part time work. We day dream about the colorful brochures from the travel agent. We send away for our passports.

Yet the greatest, longest, hardest, and most rewarding trip we ever take is internal: The journey from our heads to our hearts.

You may be vaguely disappointed at this point, having hoped I'd give you suggestions on how to make movies with Morgan Freeman or work with grassroots programs that help the most poor and vulnerable in developing countries. Maybe you were hoping I'd regale you with some of my family's tales or fire you up about how the time is *now* for a diversified, green collar economy to come to Appalachia.....or bare minimum we'd talk about basketball and how to marry a handsome racing driver! But.....and I really hope you can hear me on this....none of these things matter, all my

marvelous experiences are hollow if I am not grounded in my own body, right sized with the God of my understanding and my fellows, and as awake as I can be in this thing called life. We are, as C.S. Lewis said, spiritual beings having a human experience. And, it is remembering this to the best of my ability on a daily basis, and committing time and again to a spiritual quest, that not just allows me to have the life I have, but to have it with meaning, balance, emotional sobriety, and the sense that I am okay on the inside, in spite of and no matter what is going on around me.

I am suggesting to you that in this hey day of your youth, as you develop career goals, dream perhaps of having a family, and strive to make your way in the world, that you not forget the single most important thing you can do is to take care of your precious self.

In the Babylonian Talmud, there is a story about a devout man wrote something on 2 pieces of paper, and placed them in his pants' pockets. One said, "I am nothing but dust and ashes," and the other, "The whole world was made for me." The ultimate paradox, the great riddle of human existence.

Taking care of yourself is not about being grandiose, better than, or trying to stand on the top of the human heap. I am saying it is equally a disservice to yourself and the world you seek to help to be crippled with low self-esteem, which is nothing but pride in reverse. You do no one any good by being less than and languishing on the bottom of the pile.

Your self care is not selfish, it is self esteem. Because it is exactly this self esteem and self nurturing that will empower you to stay the course with integrity, to do good when the going gets rough, not to burn out. I have seen too many good people burn out. Please don't let it happen to you. And critically, self esteem will allow you to trust your intuition and decision making when you are in tricky situations and life is baffling.

And, consider yourselves warned----life can be baffling! But baffling doesn't have to mean "bad." Because when we live on a spiritual basis and lead with our souls, nothing "bad" really ever happens. I have learned my problems are not actually problems. My problem is my perception of my problem. No matter how seemingly extreme, how seemingly tragic and

unfair, my problem, it is always revealed later, lied within my attitude and my reaction. And, today by the grace of God, I do get to acceptance a little quicker, with a little less resistance and struggle. And please note, by accepting something, I am not saying I like it. I am not saying I condone it. I am simply saying, I accept it that it is what it is. Because out of acceptance, magically, serenity comes. And with serenity comes simple, creative ways to respond that are healthy, functional, and for my highest good. Lessons and solutions come from serenity, not from drama.

The lessons that trials yield are invaluable. It is my experience that over time, by trying to live on a principled, spiritual basis, rather than opinions, personalities and wishful thinking, I can actually become grateful for every thing that happens. As Mark Twain put it, "A person who carries a cat by the tail learns something they can learn in no other way." In our trials, we learn what we can learn in no other way.

It is not a mistake to make a mistake. One of my favorite affirmations is "I can make a mistake without being a mistake. And, it can be unnecessary to repeat the mistake. But learning your particular life's lessons takes what it takes, and each of us is on our own journey, and sometimes, time takes time. There is no shame in that. Some lessons, even painful ones, I forget, and thus I am compelled to make the mistake again so I may have the "wonderful opportunity" to "re-member." And, that is okay. I am always right where I am supposed to be. And so you are. I urge you to give yourselves a gift, right here and now. Quit comparing yourselves to other people. Let go of the lie that yours needs to look like theirs, and equally as damaging, the lie that theirs should look like yours. It is none of your business what other people think of you. What matters is what you think and how you feel about yourself. When you make the decision to stand autonomously in conscious contact with the God of your understanding, you can be okay, in spite of no matter what.

In your lifetime, you will be asked to make millions decisions, from "Would you like fries with that?," to "Will you marry me," to perhaps "You can transfer or be laid off," and even, "Your mom can no longer breath on her own, you can put her on oxygen or to let her go peacefully now."

You will need people to support you as you make those decisions. Community is a profound human need, a sense of belonging, to be known, witnessed, compassionately validated in our experience. I know many of you have enjoyed that here at Union. But ultimately, decisions are made in your own soul, that mysteriously and ineffably personal terrain. That, Union College of Class 2009, is where your peace lies, and it is the only true place it can ever be found. Inside of your very own precious self. Oh, certain settings assist peace, and there are tricks that help precipitate peace. But real peace can not come from any person, place, or thing, and every time you free yourself from that illusion, you are consciously reconnected with the peace that passes all understanding. The peace that gives you a sense of security and joy, in spite of, and no matter what.

Whether you live by the world's standards (which are false measures, by the way) a big life or smaller one, the rules are the same and it's the horizontal travel that brings you home.

So, along with your degree, today take yourself as your own best friend, someone you love and adore, and with whom you commit to live with gentleness and acceptance, one day at a time. One of my favorite little sayings is, "The only person who can truly love me the way I want to be loved is me!" And, just like I do, you will forget. You'll sink into negative self talk, abuse yourself, and maybe act out with food or relationships or alcohol or substances or shopping or the internet. Did you know that we only allow others to abuse us at the level at which we abuse ourselves? But the good news is we can start over at any given moment during a day, a project, or a relationship, remembering there is a God and it's not any of us, and that three of the most beautiful words in the English language are, "I need help," exceeded only perhaps by, "Thank you, God."

Remember: self care isn't selfish, it is self esteem. You are worth it; you are precious and irreplaceable.

So much rests on your shoulders. There is much to be done right here in Kentucky. But knowing what is in your soul, I know you are up to the task of making poverty history, of alleviating suffering, and manifesting peace in your lifetimes.

Be the change you wish to see in the world, let it begin with you, and start by taking very good care of your own home, from which your good works will flow with character and integrity. As Helen Keller said,

The world is not moved only by the mighty shoves of the heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.

Congratulations, Union College Class of 2009.

May there be peace, may there be peace, may there be peace.