

# Keep Your Eyes on the Prize – Hold On.

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President of the National Minority Supplier Development Council

**G**reetings President Kepple, deans, faculty and honored platform guests, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin by congratulating the 2010 graduating class members who are probably very anxious to get through this portion of the ceremony, get their diplomas, and get on with their lives. Congratulations also to the graduates' families who are feeling justifiably proud, but who might also be breathing a collective sigh of relief, and who are ready to get on with their lives, too.

Much of my life is represented in the audience today. This is such a momentous occasion that I'm joined by my husband, one son on crutches since he broke his leg recently, daughters-in-law, and two young granddaughters. So if you hear a small voice call out, "Amma!" that's our youngest family member giving me a shout out. My oldest son was unable to come today, which is truly unfortunate since he's heard many Juniata stories over the years.

Being here as your commencement speaker on the forty-fifth anniversary of my graduation from Juniata would have been beyond anyone's imagination who was here at that time. You see, I spent my time at Juniata, especially my senior year, pushing, prodding, hectoring, and making speeches to move my classmates toward a commitment of ensuring civil rights and voting rights for blacks.

My wish was to be recognized as someone who faced life head on, who challenged assumptions, who felt that there could be no change without confrontation and who definitely was not willing to "go gentle into that good night."

The story of how, in 1965, our little wobbly band of students and faculty drove to Alabama to participate in civil rights demonstrations is embedded in Juniata lore. Our actions, as well as actions against us, were well documented in newspapers and magazines. However, we were a very tiny part of a massive movement for social justice.

While danger swirled around us in the streets, we would pack nightly into stifling hot churches to hear Dr. King and other magnificent orators, but always the most stirring part of the experience was the music. Among the most beloved civil rights songs was "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize—Hold On." And that's what I'd like to speak to you about today—keeping your eyes on the prize in order to achieve success.

At some point during my college years, when we were grappling with the meaning of existentialism, I became enamored with a quote by Martin Buber, an early twentieth century Jewish philosopher. Buber wrote:

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. . . .It is the duty of every person to know that there has never been anyone like him in the world, for if there had been someone like him, there would be no need for him to be in the world. Every single man (and of course woman) is a new thing in the world and is called upon to fulfill his particularity in this world.

So, here you are today, unique from all others, ready, I hope, to gift that uniqueness to the world. Previous generations had the luxury of being able to accept or reject the belief that one must assume responsibility for one's own existence as well as assuming responsibility for the well-being of the world. Your generation, for better or worse, enjoys no such luxury.

The failure of leadership at all levels of society has created a litany of problems so large and complex that solutions will require the talents and collective wisdom of everyone in order to assure a reasonable quality of life for you and your children. For all of our pronouncements that "children are our future," I think we could all agree the quality of our children's future is being seriously challenged.

We have growing budget deficits at the federal, state, and local levels that threaten to stress the economy further, making it increasingly difficult for our government to meet the needs of its citizens. For example, in public education deep budget cuts force reductions in classes like music, art, and physical education. Lunchrooms and gymnasiums are turned into classrooms because of overcrowding.

We spend precious time debating the authenticity of climate change when we should be marshalling our national will to stop the devastation and depletion of our natural resources.

We see long term high unemployment rates that could consign a significant portion of our workforce to perpetual underemployment.

We watch political division reaching levels where the only people we like are those who look, sound, think, and act like us, whatever our definition of "us" may be.

The cacophony in the public marketplace of ideas has all but drowned out rational thinking. There are those who say that the salvation of our society rests on actions like reinventing school curriculums to reflect a different version of American history or even a different version of creation. Some say we'll be saved by being permitted to carry loaded weapons in public places or by permitting law enforcement to stop, search, and arrest anyone who looks like an illegal immigrant. Others want to overturn long standing legal decisions like a woman's right to choose. The recent cries of demonstrators to "take back their country" suggest that they want to return to some romanticized notion of yesterday.

But what about yesterday?

Just yesterday, America's population was mostly from Western Europe. America's foreign policy was based on the Cold War notion of containment of communism. American industry and currency dominated the world marketplace. African-Americans could not vote and for the most part they existed outside of the mainstream of American society. Hispanics were so few as to be considered exotic, and Asian Americans did not figure much in the equation.

The America of yesterday can never return.

The America of tomorrow depends on you, like never before. Each of you in this graduating class, irrespective of your career choices, will have opportunities to contribute your unique talents and make a difference because so many urgent questions need to be answered. So many problems need solutions.

When I shared today's comments with my older son he said, "Mom this is pretty heavy stuff for a graduation speech." Perhaps, but it's the reality of the world you will encounter when you leave this campus. The good news is that your education, based on Juniata's mission to help you "move toward lives of service and ethical leadership in the global community," will stand you in good stead as you navigate real world issues.

Think about it. Individuals from your generation will surface as leaders in every field—business, art, politics, economics, math, technology, medicine, and religion to shape the future during your lifetime. Nobody knows who they are, but they could very well be among us today.

How to begin, you ask?

David Cottrell, in his book *12 Choices that Lead to Your Success* provides the following outline to keep you on your path. There are three types of choices.

First, there are these character choices:

- *The no-victim choice.* Don't let your past eat your future. Do you accept total responsibility for your success?
- *The commitment choice.* Be passionate enough to succeed. Are you committed to paying the price of success?
- *The values choice.* Choose the right enemies. Do you accept that there will be enemies who oppose your values and success?
- *The integrity choice.* Do the right thing. Can your success be accomplished without sacrificing your integrity?

Second, there are these action choices:

- *The do-something choice.* Don't vacation on Someday Isle. Will you attack complacency and do something daily that will move you toward success?

- *The persistence choice.* Learn from failure. Will you hang in there, beyond failure, long enough to achieve success?
- *The attitude choice.* Take the enthusiastic approach. Will you take a positive and enthusiastic approach to the unexpected twists and turns of life?
- *The adversity choice.* Conquer difficult times. Will you work through adversity and achieve your goals regardless of the unfair and difficult things that may happen along the way?

And third, there are the investment choices:

- *The relationship choice.* Connect with success. Will you invest time in building positive relationships with your peers, family, and friends?
- *The criticism choice.* Accept tough learning. Do you accept criticism as valuable feedback that will help you achieve success?
- *The reality choice.* Face the truth. Are you true to yourself and all those around you?
- *The legacy choice.* Leave your gift. Will you share your gift of experience and knowledge with others?

Martin Luther King said, “The ultimate measure of man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

Times of challenge and controversy are also times of extraordinary opportunity—times when fresh perspectives and new ideas are most needed.

The opportunities and possibilities are infinite.

My hopes for you today are that by achieving success you will live a moral life of caring and giving to people; that you will live a political life demanding equity, fairness, and justice; that you will live a prosperous life which will allow you to give back financially to those who need it.

Just remember that “life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass. It’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

May God bless all of your endeavors, and remember to keep your eyes on the prize.