

Roy Miller Convocation Speech

Florida State University School of Social Work

May 2, 2014

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I appreciate your very warm introduction. I am, after all, at home here, having graduated forty years ago.

I noticed recently that last year, across America, Oprah Winfrey addressed Harvard. The Dalai Lama blessed Tulane, and President Barak Obama spoke to the graduates of the United States Naval Academy. According to an internet post I saw, this year Obama travels to the University of California at Irvine. Mary Barra, the CEO of General Motors, speaks at the University of Michigan, Bill Gates goes to Stanford.

You get Roy Miller. You are probably wondering. Times must be really tough and we know budgets in Florida are awfully tight. Who in the heck is Roy Miller and why he is speaking to us?

Hey, I woke up this morning and asked the same questions? Who am I and what am I going to say?

I took comfort from something Al Gore said a few years back at Johns Hopkins. He mused, “In preparing my remarks, in all seriousness, I tried very hard to remember who spoke to me in 1969. I have no idea ... my bet is that 30 years from now you won’t have any idea what was said here. You will remember the parties, your families being here, you will remember all the hard work that got you to this point and you’ll remember how you feel.”

Well, that makes me feel better for sure. You won't remember anyway and it relieves the pressure. So, because you won't remember, I thought I'd share some thoughts others have conveyed to students on the precipice of graduation. I'm giving them credit, I'm clearly not plagiarizing, but because you're in a haze you may think I was this sharp, this insightful:

Randy Pausch, professor of computer science and human-computer interaction, returned to Carnegie Mellon in 2008 only months before passing away from terminal cancer. He said, "We don't beat the reaper by living longer. The question is: What do we do between the time we are born, and the time he shows up? Because when he shows up, it's too late to do all the things that you're always gonna, kinda get around to."

That is good advice about living your life. Don't put off what you want to do. Carpe Diem. That's Latin for seize the day or seize this moment.

J.K. Rowling told graduates at Harvard about her many failed attempts before the writing and financial success she has experienced. She said "...the knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity."

That is a good lesson about life in general.

Not all will go smoothly. Lessons learned from failure can be more important than lessons learned from success. Don't hang your head when things don't go as well as expected. Don't get down on yourself. Learn from your experience. Stay courageous. Keep moving forward.

Bono, ten years ago, told the crowd, "What's your big idea? What are you willing to spend your moral capital, your intellectual capital, your cash, your sweat equity in pursuing outside this university?"

Bringing it home to FSU, I ask, what each of us in this ballroom can do? Big ideas don't have to be big at first. They can start with little steps that grow.

I was fortunate to build the first full service runaway center in Florida. The full service concept was copied repeatedly. We passed legislation that rooted the treatment of these children in law. But it started with a simple question. We asked: what do we need to do to empty the county jails and detention centers of children who were there only because they were running away, truant, or ungovernable, which is legal term for being pains in the backside.

I'm partial to a great speech made by Winston Churchill in 1941 because my parents fought in WW2.

My mother served in a MASH unit (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital). In fact, my parents married on VE Day in Belgium. They are now buried in National Arlington Cemetery. Churchill said, “Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

These are all good pieces of wisdom and advice. At the end of the day, though, it doesn't matter who told you what or when. It doesn't matter what I say or what anyone says. What matters is what you feel in your heart and in your soul; what you do and plan to do for yourself and others. What selfless sacrifice you are willing to make on behalf of those you love, for your community, for humanity.

You have reached a milestone in your personal journey in life. This moment. This very special moment. For some, you may be the first of your siblings to graduate college. For others you may be the last to graduate, like me, the youngest of five. My parents were celebrating the fact they would have money in their pockets for the first time in more than a decade than they were by my accomplishment. And for some, you may even be the first of your family to ever graduate from college. You are opening doors, carrying a torch for others to follow. How cool is that?

Some are here today with their families and some attend today with a touch of sadness because family members have passed away and you are dedicating your personal accomplishment to their memory. I am one of them. I know personal loss, first-hand. I have experienced reflection, recovery, and re-engagement. I can tell you, I have learned, our loved ones will always be with us, cheering us on. I can say, too, those who have passed want us to live our lives, to be bold, to go forward, to love and do good things. We carry the lit candle they can no longer carry for themselves. Do not let that flame extinguish.

Some of you have faced little adversity to reach this point. Others have had to overcome great obstacles to wear the cap and gown of a stellar university and a widely respected School of Social Work.

It is the diversity of those experiences that make these moments memorable and exciting, individually and collectively.

Within this great diversity, we who earn degrees in Social Work, whether undergraduate, graduate, or post graduate, share a common bond, a common denominator: we seek change. Some inner flame, inner boil, or sense of healing delayed or justice denied or plight of under privilege have motivated us to pledge our careers to work on behalf of others.

We seek to make the world a better place. We know we won't get rich doing it. But it's not as if we are opposed to being rich. In fact, I know a lot of social workers who play the lottery each week thinking good intentions and noble acts just might be rewarded.

But deep down, we know that getting rich isn't going to happen and we continue to listen and respond to our inner calling.

I hope you ask Bono's question to yourself over and over again. What is your big idea? What improvement do you wish to make? So much needs to be done to put our state, our country, our world on a better path.

You are graduating at a time of rapid climate change with impacts the extent of which could be more profound than even is projected today; escalating violence perpetrated against younger and unsuspecting people in settings that were once safe harbors like elementary schools, sporting events, even movie theaters; and huge transformations in the economic marketplace as good paying jobs disappear.

Children continue to be harmed and even die due to failures in our child welfare systems of care. Mistakes made by young people when their brains are not fully formed are not expunged from their records, hounding and trapping hundreds of thousands into their adult lives; the gap between those that “have” and those who don’t is growing and overall financial stability and vitality of the middle class is more tenuous now than it was for our parents and grandparents.

Health care is not uniformly accessible and services to the challenged, whether it be the disabled, mentally ill, or victimized are shrinking and waiting lists are growing.

This is the world of social work you are inheriting. Even if you end up in a different career, as some might, or pursue other interests, most of you will become parents, aunts and uncles, or godparents or caregiver to a parent or other family member. It is in any of these capacities that the well-being of the next generation deserves your careful attention and presents a most significant opportunity.

I have confidence in you. In fact, I love and respect millennials. I have the pleasure of working with 15 to 20 of your generation every semester in the Practical Apprenticeship Program at The Children's Campaign.

By direct observation, you are independent thinkers but work well in groups. You, generally, lack the bias of generations who preceded you. It does not matter to you whom you love or live with or want to partner or marry. You accept responsibility and want to balance your work and personal lives. You are more social justice oriented. You give me more hope than I have felt for a long time. We boomers would do well to facilitate your growth and development and then get out of your way.

I have followed two guiding principles in all the years I have served as a change agent and a watchdog for children.

Here's the first guiding principal, a great quotation from anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Almost all of the reform efforts with which I have either led or been associated did not start with a cast of thousands. It started with maybe 4-5 people or 10 sitting around a table and deciding to work together for the common good. The key words in Mead's quote are "citizens, thoughtful and committed". I would add the word strategic. Some good ideas never take hold because of a lack of planning and faulty execution. It's like putting a plant in the wrong soil or wrong sunlight. It's not the plant that was the problem. It was the placement. I spend a lot of my time as an advocate working with groups on their strategy. We would have more wins if strategy prevailed over the more often used style of some advocates to "run and gun."

Here's the second principal, a quote from the humorist Robert Benchley. He said, "Did you ever stop to think of one those dog sled teams? The lead dog is the only one that ever gets a change of scenery." His quote was later rewritten by Southern humorist Lewis Grizzard to read, "Life is like a dog sled team. Unless you're the lead dog, the scenery never changes."

The quote, while very funny, speaks to leadership. You will find there are times to be a leader and times to follow. Knowing when to do each is governed by becoming a keen listener and keeping your ego in check. But do not be hesitant about becoming a leader. Take the power offered to you to change what should and could be changed. Learn to trust your instincts; you will feel it in your soul and in your gut. Take the bull by the horns and don't wait to live off the opinions or actions of others.

In closing, I'll offer five lessons of change; these lessons I have learned over the 40 years since I walked across this same patch of ground after taking my last exam, a buzzing in my ears, knowing my life was entering a totally new phase:

One: Change takes longer than you think it will or should, whether you are treating an individual therapeutically, working with a family or group, transforming an organization, or advocating public policy.

For example, it took 30 years to close the Dozier School for Boys where the bodies of the children are currently being dug up. Never in my wildest imaginations when the process started, did I think as we brought the history of abuse to light that the State would fight us every step along the way to keep that horrific institution open. Not all change will take that long, thank goodness. But it will not happen overnight.

Two: Even after progressive change takes place, you must be attentive to ensure that backsliding does not occur. In the blink of an eye, nearly 40 years after children in Florida were removed from county jails, the law changed and they returned and were subjected to electric shock guns and chemical restraints like pepper spray. Sometimes you have to engage the fight all over again. Be ready to be called upon. Be resourceful.

Three: What happens in the state capital, nation's capital, or local city hall matters to all social workers even if you do not serve in a public policy capacity. Your ability to prevent, intervene, treat, heal, or follow-up is largely determined by regulations and laws passed and appropriations provided. Spend at least a part of your bandwidth professionally – even if on your own time as a private citizen - being part of groups that address public policy concerns.

Four: Government doesn't fund its critics. If you are working in a publicly funded organization or position, your advocacy must adjust to the job. Stay within certain boundaries. Join watchdog groups as a private citizen and give an annual donation. You will need their independent voice.

Five: If you are a leader of change, make sure you have citizen support and a broad range of friends outside of the social work industry. Not all of your colleagues will support your efforts. Some may actively oppose change for a range of reasons. The citizens you could and should engage can become your most reliable partners.

Go forward. Be bold. Be true to yourselves. Enjoy your lives. Be inspired by your good deeds and the good deeds of others. Lead by example.

I wish you well and congratulate your success. Let me know how I can help as you find your way and find your voice.

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