



Spring Commencement 2008
Saturday, June 14, 2008
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This is incredible. As I look out here... it's like being at Hogwarts. If I'd known they were going to do something like this, I'd have gone to class more.

Oliver Wendell Holmes actually was not a nice man. He was a terrible person. But he found some truth. Ben Padrow taught me years ago not to be afraid to be persuaded by a good argument, but always be afraid to be persuaded by a good arguer. So I'd like to quote someone I have no respect for at all: Oliver Wendell Holmes. But I have respect for what he said, and what he said was this: "Most people go to their graves with their music still inside them."

Think that's true? I'm afraid it is. And at first glance, you would think this is a terrible, terrible observation. But I'd like you to think of it in another way. There may be something positive here. For you see, most of us could not go to our graves with our music still inside of us unless we had music inside of us. *Most* of us wouldn't go to our graves if we couldn't find it, *all* of us would go to our graves if we couldn't find it, which means that some of us find our music. Some of us find the instrument to play that music. Some of us find the stage on which to play it. And some of us find the audience that will come and listen to our dreams. And we do not go to our graves with our music still inside us.

I believe there are two things that are necessary to find and to play your music. The first one: Belief. You must believe you have music. And what I know is that we cannot believe in ourselves unless someone first believes in us.

I was raised here in Portland. I lived on Tenth and Roselawn between Alberta and Killingsworth, ten blocks from what was then Union Avenue – Martin Luther King Boulevard today. I was raised by my grandmother. My grandmother had been on welfare so long she called it relief. I remember one day we went to Fred Meyers on Union Avenue and we had these food stamps, this little Monopoly money, and you had to put different piles of food: the food that the food stamps could buy and then the food that money had to buy, and I hated the cereal that the welfare people approved of – it was awful and it looked like it was in garbage bags and it floated. And I wanted Tony the Tiger cereal because it had plastic army men in it, and I pestered grandma for this and finally she relented and she put that Tony the Tiger cereal there and we were going through the line and grandma was taking this funny welfare Monopoly money out, and there was a man behind us and he looked at my grandmother and he said, "Will you look at that? They are eating better than my family, and I am paying for their food." And then he said to my grandmother, "Old woman. How are you ever going to pay me back for what I have given you? How are you ever going to pay society back for all we have provided?" I was terrified. I was six years old. I was hiding behind my grandmother and she pulled me in front of her with her strong right arm, she put her hands on my shoulders, she looked at that man and she said, "I will not pay you back. I cannot pay society back. But look at this child. This child will pay you back. This child will pay society back, in ways that you could not imagine."

My grandmother believed in me. She had no reason. I had been diagnosed as being retarded because I had a learning disability they didn't understand. I was voluntarily mute till nearly the fifth grade. The best report card I had gotten up to that time was all F's, one D, and a note from the teacher saying that I shared well. She put it on the refrigerator. My grandmother believed in me without a single good reason. So I began to believe in myself. And I began to believe that I might have music. But believing you have music will not cause you to be able to play it. You need someone to teach you.

Who believed in you? For if no one had believed in you, you would not be here today. You know what I think? I think many of the people who believed in you are here right now. But without a mentor, without someone to teach you, what can you do with your music? And I was so lucky to have such great mentors:

Mr. Parks in Woodlawn High School, who knew I wasn't retarded, brought me into class one day, and said, "You're not retarded." I said, "Yes I am." He said, "You're smarter than all the other kids in class." I said, "They're retarded." "You're smarter than many of the teachers in the school." I said, "That doesn't mean I'm not retarded." He said, "That was irony. Retarded people don't use irony." I said, "We do, you just don't understand it."

Glenn Lamb at Centennial High School, the greatest high school speech teacher in Oregon's history.

Dr. Padrow, who taught me that it doesn't matter how well you speak if you have nothing to say.

Dr. Leonard Cain, sociology professor at Portland State, who taught me that sociology was not in a sociology book, but it was in the needs and challenges and common solutions of the groups that are alive and well – and at that time protesting in the Park Blocks.

Art Honeyman, who taught me that in the fight for civil rights, in the fight for the dignity of human beings, that there is no other goal than to be the last man standing, even if you can't stand in the first place.

So when I thought of giving this speech, I did what Gen Y would have done, I Googled it. And I found there were three... you know there's only three commencement speeches? Just three. First one: "Passing the Torch to the New Generation." I will not do that. My generation has made such a mess of the world. Remember when you first started school, you could put a full tank of gas in your car? The cat food from China did not kill your cat. Employers lined up to hire you, like young people when the iPhones came out. And we could eat tomatoes in safety. I am the baby-boom generation. I forgot to save any money, I have no retirement, I lost my money in the dot-com, I'm going to work till I die, and you will not get a good job until I'm dead. I am not passing you the torch – you will light me on fire with it.

The second speech is "Follow My Footsteps." I don't want you to follow my footsteps. I already did. I did it. I want you to follow *your* footsteps. And here's what I know. The shortest distance between where you are and where you want to be is a road that is illuminated by your own dreams, not by the dreams of anyone else.

And the last one is "Please Fix This Mess We Left You."

I know that there are older graduates, but I want to talk about Gen Y, because when I told my employer friends I was going to do this, they said, "Will you tell them to shape up? We're really scared of these people." Do you know that there are thirty national consultants who charge between three and ten thousand dollars a day to consult with employers to teach them how to deal with your generation? And the employers said these awful things about you. And to be honest, I believed many of them, and I decided to look at them with a little more scrutiny.

Here's what they tell me: You have no loyalty. You'll quit. You'll quit on Friday. You'll quit because they ask you to work overtime. You'll quit because they fired your best friend. You'll quit because you have tickets to a concert. You have no loyalty. And I looked at it, and it's not true. You know what you've done? You've done it better than we did it. You want to balance life. You want a life that has work but also a life that includes family and friends and recreation. Our generation gave up a balanced life to dedicate ourselves to our employers, and you saw that, you saw what the employers did to your grandparents and your parents. They laid them off. They merged. Your parents worked night and day only to get a slip from the employer saying "you are now redundant," and you figured out something we never figured out. You're giving employers as much loyalty as they gave your parents.

I was raised believing that job security would be in the job that I had. You figured out that job security is in the job that you can get. What does that mean? It means you want to constantly improve yourself. You want to work for a company, but you want to do different things, you don't want to be caught in a box, you want to try new projects and if they don't let you do it, you quit, and you go to another company that will let you do it, and you know what I tell employers? If you want to keep Gen Y, prepare them to leave you. And they will stay forever.

They say you have no social concerns. Yeah, I've heard the story about going to Starbucks and the girl gives you your coffee and you say, "I'm really glad to see a young woman like you having a peace symbol around her neck." She says, "What's a peace symbol?" "Well that thing around your neck." "That's not a peace symbol; it's my Mercedes Benz necklace." They say you have no social concerns. But you do. This is what I found out: My generation is five times more likely to take out a checkbook and write a five hundred dollar check to clean up a local park. You are fifteen times more likely to get up Saturday morning, get dressed, go out to that local park and clean it yourself.

I like you. You are ten times more likely to take a job that has social meaning than we were. They say you're high maintenance. You don't want an annual review. You want to be told you're doing good every morning. What's wrong with these children? But guess what? I've gone a whole year doing the wrong thing before anyone told me. You don't need high maintenance, you need high levels of feedback, and you learn that by texting – you are Gen X on steroids and Blackberries. You text and you look for consensus and you give respect to your friends. The employers afraid of you – give me a break. You are what they've been dreaming about. You know why? Maybe you won't work overtime, but you'll get so much more done in the time you will be there. You will walk out of a meeting after thirty minutes if it's going nowhere. I sure wish I had had that kind of courage. They say they don't understand your language, but you should think a second. What kind of language did my generation bring in? "Cool." "Groovy." "Heavy." "Trippy." They mean nothing. You brought us "LOL." And the most perfect new word in the English language. "Duh." "Duh" is a statement of your common sense.

And the last criticism is you care too much about your friends. How can you care too much about your friends? After nine-one-one, I was asked to do counseling with people who were survivors in the towers. Companies wanted me to find out what a leader really was in a manager, because they had managers that were not leaders. Who did the people decide to follow? I did this for two months, and we came up with the simplest conclusion that you could come up with. You know the difference between leaders and managers? Leaders know people are more important than stuff. And we have a whole graduating class that has learned that out of the box.

So I will not pass you my torch. I'll tell you why. It's a small torch. Not very good light. It was just light enough to see there weren't enough handicapped parking spaces. You need a bigger torch, but you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to wait, and I'm going to watch, and I can't wait to see the nature of your light. I'm not going to tell you what your music will be, for you must find it. And I wait with such great anticipation and such joy to find out the nature of your music. I. Believe. In you. And how will you pay this old man back? I will tell you how you will pay me back. You will pay me back in ways that I could not even imagine. Thank you.