**15836, Susan Smith**

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentleman,

Mark Twain said, “With courage you will dare to take risks, have the strength to be compassionate, and the wisdom to be humble. Courage is the foundation of integrity. It has taken great courage for each of you to complete your college education. I challenge each of you today to nurture the courage within you each and every day of your lives so that you can not only meet the experiences of your lives, but exceed expectations.

Every day of your life you will be faced with risks. Some will seem small, but some will be daunting. It will require that you take a stand for your beliefs. Take that stand. You will be the better for it because the greater the challenge, the greater the personal growth you will experience.

You might not think compassion would require strength, but it will require so much more than you can possibly imagine. Compassion, you see, is not the same as sympathy. Compassion goes beyond sympathizing with another person’s pain. Compassion reaches out to share that person’s pain and then to help find a solution to it. As with taking risks, this will cause you to grow as a person, and you will be amazed at the growth you experience.

One of the greatest human characteristics for someone to have is humility. It is also one of the rarest. When we are young it is easy to be humble because we are so unsure of ourselves due to our lack of experience. But, as we get older, it is easy to develop our self-esteem and self-confidence to the point where we forget what it felt like to be humble about something. Let me remind you that we will all have times in our lives when life will force us to be humble. The natural instinct is to fight what is causing the humility. Our self-esteem demands that we salvage our self. But, I challenge you, before life throws you such a curve, to embrace humility. Don’t take yourself quite so seriously. Remember where you started your journey. Remember how far you have come. A wise man will retain his humbleness so that life will never be able to force it back upon him.

The courage to face all of these challenges is truly the foundation of integrity. To be willing to take risks, to experience and convey compassion, and have the wisdom to be humble will challenge the best of us, while also challenging us to retain our morality and integrity. But, if you keep this goal before every day, it will set your path before you and help you to make plans and decisions that will align with your personal code of living.

Today you will close the door on one season of your lives and open the door on a new season in your lives. Up to this point your lives have been ordered and directed by your parents and your educators. Going forward from today you will be required to make those decisions yourself. You will still be under the authority of someone else, but you will decide who and what organization that will be, and you will have to live with the results of the decisions you make. Choose wisely.  
You have spent the last four years in college filling your mind with knowledge. But, I hope you have also learned some important life skills, such as becoming an inquirer of life. Learn to seek answers, ask questions, determine what needs fixed and seek solutions. It is my desire that you have learned to think critically about theory and method. It is my hope that you will continue to keep current in your chosen discipline by attending conferences, keeping journals as you study and taking more classes to enhance what you have thus far learned. For, you see, the truly learned individual is a lifelong learner. They are hungry for knowledge, in their chosen field and in other subjects as well, for they thirst for useful knowledge.

One habit that I believe is important for all educated people to develop is reflection. Since you will seek knowledge in your daily life, you will also seek application of that knowledge. You will want to spend time reflecting on what you have learned and how you can use that knowledge. You will then base your daily decisions on this in depth reflection, which you will do frequently and honestly. As part of your reflection, you will consider many possibilities for problem solutions and you will stay open to constructive criticism, learning even from that.

One important character trait that I believe you should have developed in your time here in school is to be proactive. That means that you anticipate problems in management, you anticipate problems and difficulties in instruction, and you address pertinent issues of school and the community to support student learning. A proactive attitude encourages students’ character traits of critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to develop. It plans for important student learning, it fosters visionary thinking and action, and it promotes mindful leadership to improve schools.

A leadership trait that I believe is important for you to learn, if you haven’t already learned it, is to be democratic. I’m not talking about a political party, but a life skill. This means that you will learn to be a skilled facilitator who views others as capable to deal with problems and are able to make decisions. You should promote equitable treatment for all students and have high expectations for all students, just as we had high expectations for you. Even if you do not become formal educators, you will be teaching those who come after you in one way or another. You should always seek the best interest of the students you serve. I would encourage you to be open-minded and be able to view others’ perspectives and accommodate individual differences. We live in such a multicultural society today that you will need to be culturally sensitive in areas of communications, learning, assessment, and cultural norms. Good leaders seek to develop a wide range of leadership skills and to collaborate well with others while they work for the good of the community.

Regardless of your position in your career field there are some traits that will be required. It is essential that you are responsible. But, I believe you have all proven that trait as you’ve completed your education thus far. You will most certainly have to exercise patience and express a professional temperament. It is understood that you will aim to be the best that you can be in your chosen field. That means having a good work ethic, being punctual, and recognizing when your own dispositions may need to be adjusted and develop plans to make those adjustments.

Obviously, you will live out these goals and ideals in different ways depending on your chosen career field. You will accomplish varying degrees of success based upon your individual skills, talents and personalities. But, I believe that you each have a desire to go out into the world and succeed. As Tom Brokaw said, “You are educated. Your certification is in your degree. You may think of it as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative. Think of it as your ticket to change the world.”

 Regardless of your chosen field, I encourage you to do as Tom Brokaw suggested. Use your education to change the world in some way and make it a better place because you were a part of it. Don’t just go about your daily responsibilities. Think about what you can do that is unique. Think about what you can do that will make a difference. Then, go after that unique contribution with all you have within you. Don’t just go through life following the rules, dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s. Look at each day of your life as a new challenge, and chase after that challenge with the singular goal of winning the challenge and making a difference in the lives of those around you.

Good luck to you all.