

**Commencement Speech
by Bryan Stevenson
May 7, 2023**

Thank you so much. It is such a great honor to be here, and to offer my congratulations to the incredible graduates of this amazing university.

To each of the graduates, I just want to say I'm so proud to be part of this celebration with you. And today you will earn something that you've been working very hard to achieve. You will become a graduate of The Ohio State University. You will gain a new identity that allows you to move through the world with status and significance because of your degree.

And yes, you've been working really hard, and today is the end of that hard work at this university, but it's also the beginning of hard work that we need to do all over the world. Today we need you graduates, to help create a better world. We need you to help create a more just world. We need you to respond to the challenges that we're seeing all over the world.

I'm worried about the division in our country. I'm worried about the rise of conflict. I'm worried about a lot of things, the violence that we see so often, and I believe that each of you have the capacity to make a difference, to change things. I want us to change the world. I want us to increase the justice quotient in our communities and nations. I want us to make the world healthier. I want to make it safer. But there are some things I think you're going to have to do if you're going to meet these expectations.

Today, you become a graduate of Ohio State, and that becomes a part of your identity, but there are other words that will describe what kind of graduate you are. And I hope you'll think about the other words you want associated with you as you move into your careers.

You can be a graduate, but you can also be a compassionate graduate, a kind graduate, a generous graduate, a graduate who cares about those who suffer.

We have teachers all over the planet. But it's the compassionate ones, the committed ones, the dedicated ones that change lives.

We have physicians all over the planet, but it's the caring physicians, it's the committed physicians that help people really get better.

So there are things I want you to think about adding to your identity today. And I talk about identity a lot not just from my work and my studies, but I talk about identity because it was taught to me by my grandmother.

I had one of these amazing grandmothers. She was the force in our family. She was the quintessential African-American matriarch. My grandmother was the power in our family. And she was very tactical and strategic. She was the daughter of people who were enslaved, and the experience of being raised by people born in slavery gave my grandmother a very unique perspective.

She had ten children, and my mom was the youngest of her ten kids. I would be there with her and my cousins would always be around. My grandmother was a force. She was kind. She was loving. But she was tough. And she was strong. My grandmother was the end of every argument in our family. She was also the start of a lot of arguments in our family.

And when I was about 9 or 10 years old, I was spending time with my grandmother and I went into the living room one morning and my grandmother was sitting across the room and she was staring at me. And I couldn't figure out why she was staring at me so hard. And she had this very sober look on her face. And after a few minutes, she got up, she walked across the room she grabbed me by the hand and she said, "Come on, Bryan, you and I are going to have a talk."

And she took me out back and we sat down on the steps. She said, "I'm going to tell you something, but you can't tell anybody what I tell you." I said, "Okay, Mama." And then she looked at me and said, "I want you to know I've been watching you. I think you're special." She told me that she thinks that I can do anything I want to do.

I remember looking up at her and just taking it all in. Then she said, "There's just three promises you have to make to make to meet your potential, Bryan." I said, "okay, mama." She said, "The first thing I need you to promise me is you'll always love your mother. That's my baby girl and I need to know that you're going to take care of her when I'm gone." I adored my mom so I said, "Yes, Mama I'll do that."

Then she said, "The second thing I need you to promise me is you'll always do the right thing, even when the right thing is the hard thing." I thought about it and I said, "Yes, Mama, I'll do that."

Then the third thing she said to me, she said, "Bryan, I need you to promise me that you'll never drink alcohol." Well, I was 10 years old, so I said, "Yes, Mama, I'll do that."

I have a brother a year older than me, and a sister a year younger than me. And when I was about 14 or 15, one day my brother came home and somewhere he'd gotten beer. I don't know where he got this beer, but he grabbed me and he grabbed my sister and he took us out back and he opened up the beer and he had some. And he gave some to my sister and she had some. And they offered it to me but I hesitated. I said, "No, no, I'm not going to have any beer." And my brother said, "Come on, have some beer. I had some, your sister had some." I said, "No, no, I'm not going to have any beer." I was just hesitating. My brother kept saying, "Have some beer. We're having beer. Have some." I said, "No, no, I'm not going to do that." And then my brother looked at me real hard, and he said, "I hope you're not still hung up on that conversation Mama had with you."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"Mama tells all the grandchildren that they're special, and makes them promise..."

I was devastated.

But I'm going to admit something to you today, because I'm getting a degree from this amazing institution. I'm a lot older now than I was then, but I'm going to admit to you something. I'm going to admit to you that I've never had a drop of alcohol in my life.

And I don't -- I don't say that because I think there's something virtuous about that, but I say that because I think when you create an identity that means something to the people around you, when you create an identity rooted in love, rooted in commitment, rooted in compassion, you will have the power to say things that other people will not be able to say.

When I thought about my grandmother, of course I realized she would think all of her grandchildren are special. And I just couldn't let go of that promise.

I need you to think about the identity you create, so that you can help people get past the challenges. Many of my uncles struggled with alcohol addiction. They struggled with alcohol abuse. And she made us make these promises.

What I'm saying to you is that if we create the right kind of identity, we can change the world. We can increase the justice quotient. And to do that, we're going to have to understand some other things.

I'm worried about how much we've given up on people. In 1972 there were 300,000 people in jails and prisons in the United States. Today there are 2.2 million people in our jails and prisons. We have the highest rate of incarceration in the world. We've got 80 million people in this country with criminal arrest histories, which means that when they try to get jobs, or they try to get loans, they're often disfavored by that arrest history.

The percentage of women that we're putting in jails and prisons has increased 800% in the last 25 years. 80% of these women are single parents with minor children, which means another generation is being impacted by this carceral response to so many of our problems.

I go into too many communities where 12- and 13-year-old children tell me that they don't expect to be free by the time they're 21 and 25. And for me that means we have to change what we're doing. We have to create new dynamics.

And I could respond all of my time talking about the problems of over-incarceration. Talking about the problems of the legal system that we have, that too often treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent.

I could spend all of my time talking about the challenges created by our inattention to the climate, and the things that are destroying our planet, but I want to talk about solutions.

I do believe there are things we can do. And the first thing I am persuaded we have to do is we have to get proximate to people who are suffering. When you leave this university, you'll have all kinds of opportunities. You can go all kinds of places. But I urge you to find ways to get proximate to the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, the disfavored, people who have fallen down.

It's too easy in America to separate yourself from people who suffer and struggle, and I'm going to urge you not to do it. To find ways to get close to people. Because when you're proximate, you hear things you won't otherwise hear. You see things you won't otherwise see.

Our policymakers make a lot of bad policies because they create them in spaces where they're not proximate to those who are struggling. You cannot serve and advance the justice quotient if you don't know something about the lives of people who are experiencing injustice.

And when you commit to that, you begin to do things that disrupt a lot of these strategies and systems that have oppressed and marginalize.

And the thing about proximity is that you don't have to know all the answers when you're proximate to someone who's struggling and suffering. You sometimes just have to be close enough to them to sometimes affirm their humanity and dignity. And we all have the power, everyone in this stadium has the power to find someone struggling and suffering and wrap your arms around them and simply affirm their humanity and their dignity. The world begins to get healthier when we affirm the humanity and the dignity of all of God's children. And we don't do it enough.

And so I urge you, I urge you to find ways to get proximate to the poor and the excluded.

The second thing we have to do is that we have to fight against some of these narratives that are floating all around us. I'm worried about the emergence of what I call the politics of fear and anger all over the world. We're seeing it all over the world. There are people who trying to govern through fear and anger, and I believe that fear and anger are the essential ingredients of injustice and oppression.

In the 1970s and '80s we had political leaders from both political parties who said that people who are drug addicted and drug dependent are criminals, and we need to punish them for their addiction and their dependency.

Fear and anger allowed those policies to prevail.

We should have said that people suffering from addiction and drug dependency have a health problem, and we need a healthcare response, but we didn't do that. And today we have record levels of opioid addiction and death because we haven't responded to the politics of fear and anger. I worry about it. I see it all over the world. I've seen it in history and during the Holocaust. Fear and anger caused the Holocaust. The Rwandan genocide was created by fear and anger. And so I want you to pushback against the fear and anger. I want you to change that narrative that we should live in fear -- we should live in anger.

We have we have to change the narrative about our history of racial injustice. I don't think we're yet free. It breaks my heart, but there's still too many places in our country where the contaminants of this long history of racial injustice have created toxins. And they're in the air.

And it doesn't matter whether you live in New England or the Northwest or here in the Midwest or the South. Wherever you are, you're in a space where there is a history of racial injustice that we've been too silent about.

We haven't talked about the genocide of indigenous people in this country.

What happened to indigenous people when Europeans came and millions were killed through famine and war and disease. We created a Constitution that talked about equality and justice for all, but we didn't apply those concepts to indigenous people. We said no, those native people, they're savages. We created a narrative of racial difference. And that narrative of racial difference was like an infection. And we relied on it to tolerate 2 1/2 centuries of slavery. And I think the great evil of American slavery wasn't the brutality of involuntary servitude. It wasn't the bondage. But instead, it was the narrative we created to justify enslavement. Enslavers that did not want to feel immoral or unjust or unchristian, so they had to create a false narrative that black people aren't as good as white people. That black people are less capable, less worthy, less deserving and that narrative of racial difference, that was the true evil of American slavery.

Because we fought a Civil War and the North won the civil war but the South won the narrative war. That idea of racial hierarchy, it persisted. And it led to all kinds of horrific practices for a hundred years. Black people were pulled out of their homes, they were beaten, they were drowned, they were tortured, they were lynched on courthouse lawns.

And we haven't acknowledged the trauma created by that history. Six million black people fled the American south during the first half of the 20th century. We have a wealth gap in this country today because many of these people left lands that they owned and we haven't acknowledged that the black people Cleveland and the black people in Columbus and the black people in Cincinnati and Chicago and Detroit and Los Angeles and Oakland didn't come to these communities as immigrants looking for new economic opportunities. They came to these communities as refugees and exiles from terror in the American south.

And when they got to these communities, they didn't face the same risk of mob violence. But there was this presumption of danger, this guilt that followed them. And yes, we had a heroic civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s where we tore down the legal architecture of segregation, and we changed some of those laws, but we're still contending with this narrative of racial difference and this presumption of dangerousness and guilt.

And that's why I think it is urgent for all of us to commit to ending this legacy. Because it breaks my heart that some of the Ohio State University graduates today will go on to be great doctors and great lawyers and great teachers and great business leaders and great nurses and physicians and all of these things.

But it breaks my heart to have to say that some of them, the ones that are black and brown are still going to have to navigate presumptions of dangerousness and guilt. And I can tell you because I'm getting older, when you have to constantly navigate these presumptions of dangerousness and guilt, it's exhausting.

And that is why it is so critical that we commit to a new era of truth and justice, truth and reconciliation, truth and restoration.

In South Africa after apartheid, they committed to truth and reconciliation. In Berlin, Germany, you can't go 200 meters without seeing markers and stones that have been placed next to the homes of Jewish families that were abducted during the Holocaust. There is a reckoning with that history.

And in Berlin, everyone has to go to the Holocaust sites. In Berlin, every student is required to study and understand the Holocaust.

You don't have people in Germany saying we can't teach our children about the Holocaust because they might feel uncomfortable or ashamed.

And the beautiful thing -- and the beautiful thing is that we don't have to fear this history. I don't talk about slavery and lynching and segregation because I want to punish America. I want to liberate us. I believe there is something better waiting for us in this country. There's something that feels more like freedom, more like equality, more like justice and it's waiting for us.

But to get there, we're going to have to be willing to tell the truth about our history. We're going to have to commit to truth and justice, truth and restoration, truth and reconciliation.

The narrative has to change.

But thirdly, the third thing we've got to get proximate. We've got to change narrative. But the third I want to say is you've got to stay hopeful. You've got to be hopeful. Nothing worries me more than when I go into courtrooms and I see hopeless lawyers and hopeless judges. When I go into health settings and see hopeless caretakers, hopeless physicians. Our hope is key. Our hope is our superpower. I believe that hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Injustice prevails where injustice continues. And so we've got to commit to being hopeful.

Read your admission essays before you leave here. Make sure you have the same hope leaving this university that you brought into this university. Let your guide be your hopefulness. Believe things you haven't seen. Believe you make a difference in the world. Sometimes some of you are going to have to stand up even when people say sit down. Some of you are going to have to speak when people say be quiet, but you do it knowing there is a community of people, hopeful people who have made it possible for you to be here, including your family.

You've got to get proximate.

You've got to change narratives.

You've got to stay hopeful.

And fourth and finally: to change the world, we are going to have to do uncomfortable things. We are going to have to do inconvenient things. And I hate saying this on your graduation day, because I know as human beings we are psychologically programmed to do what's comfortable. And there's nothing wrong with comfort. But to change the world, to increase the justice, we're going to have to be willing, sometimes, to do uncomfortable things.

I come from Montgomery, Alabama. I stand on the shoulders of people who did so much more with so much less. The generation before me would go to places to push against segregation and the exclusion to vote and they'd be on their knees praying and they'd get battered and beaten and bloodied. They'd go home and wipe the blood off and go back and do it again. And because of their sacrifice I'm standing here today.

And what I'm saying to you is that we have to honor those who have fought before us and make a difference in this world.

I'll end with this.

I was in a church giving a talk, and an older black man came into the church, he was in a wheelchair. And he was looking at me with this very angry look. I couldn't figure out why is he looking at me so angrily. And I got through my talk, and people came up and were very nice and appropriate. That older man wheeled himself to the front of the church. He came to me and put his hand up and said, "Do you know what you're doing?" And I just stood there. Then he asked me again, "Do you know what you're doing?" And I mumbled something. Then he asked me one last time, he said, "Do you know what you're doing?"

And then that man looked at me and says, "I'm going to tell you what you're doing." And he looked at me and he said, "You're beating the drum for justice. You keep beating the drum for justice." And I was so moved, I was so moved.

I was also really relieved because I just didn't know what he was about to do.

And then that man pulled me into his wheelchair. He said, "Come here, come here, I'm going to show you something." That's when this old man looked at me and he turned his head and said, "You see this cut behind my right ear?"

He says, "I'm going to tell you something about it. People look at me and think I'm some old man in a wheelchair just covered with these cuts and bruises." He turned his head and said. "You see this cut I behind my right ear?" He said, "I got that cut in Green County, Alabama, in 1963 trying to register people to vote."

He turned his head, he said, "You see this scar I have down here? I got that scar in Green County, Mississippi, 1964 trying to register people to vote." He turned his head and said, "You see this dark spot? That's my bruise. I got my bruise in Birmingham, Alabama, 1965 trying to register people to vote."

He turned to me and he said, "I'm going to tell you something. People look at me and think I'm an old man sitting in a wheelchair covered with cuts and bruises and scars, but I want you to know something."

He said, "These are not my cuts. These are not my bruises."

He said, "These are not my scars."

He said, "These are my medals of honor."

And what I'm saying to you, graduates, if we get proximate, if we change narratives, if we stay hopeful, if we do the uncomfortable things that make for a more just world, a healthier world, we change things.

I believe that every person is more than the worst thing they've ever done. I think that each of us should never be defined by our worst act. If you tell a lie you're not just a liar. If you take something you're not just a thief. I don't believe the opposite of poverty is wealth. I believe that the opposite of poverty is justice.

And I hope all of you will find ways as you leave this great institution to contribute, to increasing the justice quotient, to improving the health of our nation and making the world a better place.

I want to congratulate each and every one of you, and you thank you for allowing me to be a part of this commemoration.

Thank you.

