

Cadden-Williams Prize Reading

Option 1 | Michelle Obama Commencement Speech Class of 2020

If any of you are scared or confused or angry or just plain overwhelmed by it all — if you feel you're searching for a lifeline just to steady yourself — you are not alone. I am feeling all of that too. I think we all are. So I want you to know that it's okay to be confused. It's okay if you don't understand exactly what you're feeling. We're all sorting through this in real time.

But here's the thing: while this period is certainly unprecedented, it is not a complete anomaly. What's happening right now is the direct result of decades of unaddressed prejudice and inequality. For too many people in this country, no matter how hard they work, there are structural barriers working against them that just make the road longer and rockier.

The tough part is nobody has all the answers. If my generation did, trust me, we'd have fixed the whole of this a long time ago. But that doesn't mean we should feel hopeless. Just the opposite — because what we finally do have is focus. We see what's happening in stark relief. The question is: how will we respond? Like I said before, I don't have easy answers for you. But I do have some lessons I want to share about how to move forward in these tumultuous times.

The first is this: life will always be uncertain. This is a time in your life when it feels like everything is turned upside down and perhaps you're wishing that things could just go back to the way they were. Look — I've been there. But that experience gave me a kind of clarity. I had to forge a new path — one more focused on meaning and service. So I hope that what you're going through right now can be your wake-up call — pushing you not just to think about what kind of career you want to build, but what kind of person you want to be.

That leads me to my second lesson: in an uncertain world, time-tested values like honesty and integrity, empathy and compassion — that's the only real currency in life. Treating people right will never ever fail you. You can climb a long way up the ladder selling falsehoods and blaming others for your own shortcomings, but that is a heavy way to live. It deadens

your spirit and it hardens your heart. There is no substitute for deep and loving connections with others, honest work that leads to lasting contributions, and the chance to leave this world a little better than you found it.

And my third lesson: to share that voice with the rest of the world. For those of you who feel invisible, please know this: your story matters, your ideas matter, your experiences matter, your vision for what our world can and should be matters. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you're too angry or that you should keep your mouth shut. There will always be those who want to keep you silent. If you listen to them, then nothing will ever change. So it's up to you to speak up when you or someone you know isn't being heard. It's up to you to speak out against cruelty, dishonesty, bigotry — all of it. It's up to you to stand peacefully with dignity and purpose.

And here's the last part: anger is a powerful force. It can be a useful force. But left on its own it will only corrode and destroy. But when anger is focused — when it's channeled into something more — that is the stuff that change history.

So it is your time now. Our democracy isn't perfect. But it doesn't work if you silence yourselves. It does not work if you disengage from the process. But if you hold strong with the same faith that carried all of those giants before you toward real measurable progress — you will change the course of history.

I know you can do it. I've seen your creativity and your talent and your resourcefulness. I've seen you speaking out. I've seen you marching with peace and with purpose. And that is why, even in tough times like these, you continue to be what gives me hope.