

June 19, 1996 Stanford Report

Jemison's call to action leavened with humor

Good morning and congratulations to the Leland Stanford Jr. University graduates of the year 1996.

In the book *The Color Purple* one of the characters, Shug, says, "When God made the color purple, God was just showing off."

That's exactly what we're here to do today. We're here to show off all the wonderful things that you all have accomplished over the years you've been here and throughout your life. And we're all so very proud of you and feel very awed being in your presence.

Today is about celebration, and everybody here is celebrating you. And I consider it a privilege to be included in this because at the same time that I know that I was part of Stanford, and I always feel a part of it, in another sense I'm a little bit of an outsider. I didn't go to classes with you, and I didn't go through all the trials and tribulations.

My task today really is exemplified by this widow who went into her local newspaper office and handed the editor a five-page, single-spaced, typed obituary for her husband.

The editor read it and said, "You know, this is really wonderful writing, Mrs. Brown. We just have a small problem. The problem is, it costs five cents a word to publish this in the Sunday paper."

So Mrs. Brown took the paper back and scribbled something on it and handed it back to the editor.

The editor read: "John Brown died."

He said, "This is really wonderful, too, but we still have a small problem. The problem is, there's a seven-word minimum to publish something in the paper."

So Mrs. Brown took the paper back. She scribbled some more on it and handed it back to the editor.

The editor read: "John Brown died. Red Ford for sale."

That's what my job is today as graduation speaker. It's, first, to be brief. Second, to lighten things up. Third, to say something of a little bit of importance and perspective. And, lastly, again, to be brief.

Now graduation is all about marking and celebrating transition and change. We're all moving from one set of relationships to another. Your professors are no longer responsible for your learning, even though they never were because you all did it. And your parents – and I can guarantee this – are no longer responsible, nor do they want to be responsible, for you and your finances.

There are two things that I've really learned in the time since I left Stanford: Our roles in life will always continue to change; we're always going to transition from one area of responsibility to another. But I believe that there are two constants, and those constants are: first, that you have time and you can choose to use it as you please. And second, that, as participants on this planet we all have responsibilities to each other. There is no way that we can step aside and say that we are not responsible. And it's important today that you take the time to center yourself and reflect on what you've done in the past, what you've been through, and where you're going in the future. You have to understand that the years are going to speed past you, and that you're going to end up having to look back and be satisfied with your life.

Let's start by taking a look at what you've done over the past 18, 19, or 20-odd years. These are things I know you've all done.

You've learned a strange language while folks were cooing and gurgling to you.

You learned to walk with the indignity of having a fully loaded cotton handkerchief on your bottom, and people around you laughing and jeering at you as you struggled to right

yourself from a little mis-step.

You allowed yourself to be told that some sharp instrument called a needle that people injected you with was for your own good and you shouldn't struggle.

You learned to share your chocolate with others. Some of you learned to do that, some of you didn't.

And most importantly, you maintained your cheerfulness and your hope in a society that believes that everyone has a right to own a gun, yet not everyone has a right to health care and food.

That ability to do those things, to maintain that enthusiasm and energy under those circumstances, will always hold you in very good stead in life. You'll find, as we look to the future, many people graduating around the country this spring might find themselves transitioning from this individual who had all this enthusiasm, energy and high hopes for themselves and the world . . . to someone who has signed a purchase order and agreed with or looked over ineptitudes in themselves and others, someone who's deferred two weeks of vacation every year because a company really needed them to - they've done that for so long that they can't imagine why anyone else is smiling.

I just say this tongue-in-cheek because that is one possibility, and that's one path that many people follow. But you don't have to follow it. We each get a chance to choose our own path.

There are 86,400 seconds in each day, and each one of those seconds is extremely precious because we can choose to do with each one of those seconds exactly as we please, but we can never get a single one of those seconds back. And each day we have to be able to look back and say that we're satisfied with what we've done. This doesn't mean that we have to have accomplished something great that no one else in the world will ever be able to do. And it might have even been a sad day. But we have to know that we at least felt it and we were here fully in that moment.

We have to be able to have a balance in our life and use our time. We have to be able to party enough so that we can get a smile, but not that we get tired. And we have to be able to work hard enough that we might be a little tired, but we don't lose our smile.

The reality is the world that you're going into is one in which the people before you haven't been very responsible, and haven't been very reasonable in their behavior. They're leaving you a world where folks feel that it is reasonable to say we have to balance the needs of the environment against the needs of business. There is only one need in this world, and that is, how do we maintain it in such a way that life itself, as we want to know, is maintained. That is the need that we have.

You're going into a world where people have behaved irresponsibly and have decided for some reason that they can isolate themselves from one another. The reality in this world is that we will always be together, and there is always going to be a diverse population. There are always going to be differences.

Sometimes, it seems to me, that we are running away from problems and reacting to issues in our world and our societies as though we are afraid of change, that we're afraid of things being a little bit different. And that's keeping us from formulating the right question so that we can solve a problem.

Today we're celebrating people who say they don't want to know about anything. A lot of our leaders, political and otherwise, pride themselves in being obtuse and unwilling to compromise or look like they're going to compromise. We have talk show hosts and business leaders who revel in their pompous, aggressive, vitriolic ignorance. They're belligerent in their desire not to consider the world from anyone else's perspective.

And I believe that the popularity of these people, who promote intolerance, [results from the fact that in] the United States right now, we've allowed ourselves to be very polarized. We've allowed ourselves to look at more, how can we find a difference, rather than how can we find a similarity. And when we start asking about people to be included, everyone gets sort of nervous.

Fran Lebowitz, who's my favorite cynic, said, "Not all God's children are beautiful. In fact, most of them are downright unpresentable."

And she says that, and I agree. Obviously, it doesn't have anything to do with looks, but rather, how we behave toward one another. Because we have this habit right now of thinking

everyone can't have it good. That's the reason people started getting nervous.

We have this peculiar habit of thinking of the world as a zero sum equation, right? Go back just two weeks ago to your classes and remember what a zero sum equation was. A zero sum equation says, if I add something to this side, I have to take something away from the other side. And if we translate that into social issues, it says that people who have had something, that if someone else gains something, then they're going to have to lose it. So if people who've had long-standing disadvantages, if they ask to be included, then people who have considered themselves as having had advantages, they feel they're going to lose something.

I believe that the wealth, the bounty, the ideals of the United States demand that we be more innovative than that. Our philosophical legacy demands that we look for solutions to include all of our citizens in its wealth.

When things get tough, people have the tendency to get nostalgic. I know when I have a hard time humming a rap tune by Snoop Doggy Dogg, I start thinking about how good Earth, Wind and Fire was.

And these days a lot of people keep telling you, look back at the good old days, and they talk about maybe the 1950s and 1960s. I'm not sure. It really depends on the individual what the good old days were. But let me assure you, don't be fooled by those folks. Those good old days weren't so damn good.

It's important for us to understand that history is there, and we know to understand it, but we don't have to repeat it. It's important that any time someone asks to be included or demands fair treatment and consideration, that is reasonable and should not be considered a threat.

The people these days who tell the truth and question the rationality or the sanity of our systems, our popular belief, or news speak, they're in jeopardy. They're considered not politically astute, not politically correct. No matter how correctly and courageously they try to tell the truth and try to clue us in on what's going on, there's a possibility, or the probability, that they're going to be ostracized, dropped from nomination lists, labeled extremist – whether they're labeled extremist conservative or extremist liberal, they're just going to be not mainstream and they're going to be discredited.

But as a country, as a society, we can't move ahead until we do a little bit of a reality check. No matter how painful and unpleasant things are, we have to be willing to act on the facts, not just how we would like to have thought things were. The solution to the problems that we have in the world today is not to revert back to systems that foster exclusion, oppressiveness and divisiveness, but rather, to start to examine things from another perspective.

Our society is not a zero sum equation. The world, the universe, is much more abundant than that. Understand that life is not a zero sum equation.

If you think about it, plants create the basis for all life on earth through the capture of sunlight, air and water. Now that seems like making something from nothing – and I want all you science and biology people to be quiet because I'm using metaphors now. But this is a different way of looking for things than we as mammals, who always have to consume something. The challenge that you all will be facing, and that we all face, as you graduate today, is to be prepared to change. Be willing to change and re-examine the world and come up with new solutions, not just a re-hash of past inequities.

A West African saying goes, "If you wait for tomorrow, tomorrow will come. If you don't wait for tomorrow, tomorrow will come."

The greatest challenge that you all will face is in the area of sustainability. That is, how do we as a species not destroy everything on our planet in our effort to increase our comfort of life.

We have to understand that we in the United States have a very particular responsibility for what's happening in the world today. Because when you think about sustainability and sustainable development, people usually talk about Third World countries. They're the ones who have to watch what's going on. But there are three issues that we have to really understand. There's a division of natural resources we have to understand, that it's not just who gets to use what, but what we use it for. How important is it for us to use all of our resources to develop different color combs that people can use every day? We have to understand that whatever happens in the United States, a lot of other countries are going to try to copy it. So if we use up all the fossil fuels in cars driving aimlessly around, then the other countries are going to expect to do

that.

We have to also understand that it doesn't make sense to spend more on weapons than it does on education and health care.

As long as we talk about stability in this world, and we look for a stable future, we have to know that as long as one country has the capability to attack and destroy another, and they have shown they will do it, people will not feel safe. It is important for us to be willing to move ahead and take the first step.

And in terms of politics, everyone has to be involved in politics. It's not something that anyone can say, oh, I'm an engineer and I don't have to do politics. Politics is involved in everything that we do, and everyone has to be involved in the decision making process if they are going to be expected to be included in it, to abide by it.

Now these are just things from my viewpoint as I've gone along, and each one of us has to personally decide how we're going to meet these challenges. It means that we have to be able to risk change and the unknown.

Some of you may know the Chinese symbol for "crisis." It's called *wei ji*, and it's made up of two parts – one part is danger, and the other part is opportunity.

The danger we face when we have an opportunity is usually not a danger to us physically, but is a danger to our ego. We're afraid that someone may laugh at us or challenge us. Or we're afraid that we will fail.

When I resigned from NASA three years ago, it was one of the most difficult personal decisions I ever made in my life. Because I was leaving and giving up a childhood dream that I had made into a reality. Because I was, and still am, the only black woman astronaut in the world, some people felt I was letting them down.

But I had to ask myself some very important questions. Do I only get one opportunity and do I have to keep it for life? Because something was once exactly right for me, does that mean I cannot grow and change?

I think that perhaps from a different vantage point, from a different perspective, I can be a better advocate for space exploration and human achievement.

I started a company that focuses on integrating technological solutions into societal issues, especially in science education. Perhaps this is idealistic. Perhaps this is a dream.

And some of my friends told me flat out that they thought I was making a mistake. What could I possibly do to top being an astronaut, they asked.

You know what? They are right. There is a chance I may fail. Things may not turn out exactly as I envision them. But we all get many chances in life, and we have to be willing and ready to take advantage of them.

But there's one change that I want to implore you not to be willing to make. And that is a change that you should, after graduation, stop learning and stop growing. We need to always be willing to continue to learn and grow.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Nothing in this world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

We all have to be willing to learn and find out.

And I'm going to do one last physics lesson before you leave. Remember when we talked about potential energy in high school physics, and the teacher would hold up a ball and say, "This ball has potential energy, but it can't do any work until it changes states, until it has kinetic energy"?

I think of everybody in this stadium as having wonderful potential energy. But nothing's going to happen with all that you have to offer until you're willing to make a change. Until you're willing to put things into effect, and be able to move ahead.

And you get that courage by looking inside of you, by keeping away this one fear that we don't actually talk about. We always talk about being humble. But I want to quote Nelson Mandela.

He says, "Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God, your playing small doesn't save the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

"We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Now, I want to end by saying that I know it's really difficult to listen to people give advice, especially during graduation time. But sometimes when I'm feeling particularly mellow and I have a hard time listening to my own good advice, I remember this story about this cowboy and a horse named Speedy. You see, I live in Houston, Texas, now, so I know lots of cowboy stories.

There was this cowboy who was trying to find a fast horse. He needed to find the fastest horse he could because he needed to get from the East Coast to the West Coast immediately.

So he went all over town, trying to find this horse. He finally heard about this horse named Speedy. He went directly to the farmer and said, "I understand you have the fastest horse in town."

The farmer said, "Yup, that's right. Not only that, he's the fastest horse on the East Coast."

The cowboy said, "I don't need to hear any more. Just give him to me. Let me give you some money."

The farmer said, "Hold on. I can't sell you Speedy until I give you some instructions first."

The cowboy said, "I don't need any instructions. I've been riding horses all my life."

The farmer said, "Well, I can't sell you Speedy 'til I give you some instructions."

The cowboy said, "All right. What are they?"

The farmer said, "Speedy will not go 'til you say 'Praise the Lord.'"

The cowboy said "fine," and started counting out the money.

The farmer said, "Hold on. I have some more instructions."

The cowboy said, "What are they?"

The farmer said, "Speedy will not stop unless you say 'Amen.'"

The cowboy said, "All right. Are there any more?"

The farmer said, "No, that's it."

So the cowboy counted out the money, jumped on Speedy and said "Giddyup. Let's go."

Speedy didn't go anywhere.

The cowboy kicked Speedy in the side. "Giddyup."

Speedy just sat there.

Finally, the cowboy remembered. He said, "Praise the Lord," and Speedy shot out like a bullet.

Speedy was *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*.

Speedy was going so fast, he ran over the Appalachian mountains and the cowboy's ears popped. *Boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*.

He tore up the Indiana corn fields, jumped over the Mississippi River, through the St. Louis Arch. Speedy was gone, *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*.

Jumped over the Grand Canyon and tore up the Great Salt Lake - not necessarily in that order. Came up and over the Sierra Nevada mountains, looked at Lake Tahoe.

The cowboy looked out and saw the Pacific Ocean shining clearly, and Speedy's still going *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*.

They're coming up to a cliff. You see, Speedy's not stopping. The cowboy starts getting nervous. He starts saying, "Whoa, Speedy, slow down."

Speedy's still going *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*.

They're almost at the cliff, and the cowboy's pulling on the reins, but Speedy won't stop. They're at the cliff, and the cowboy remembers. He says, "Amen."

Speedy stops on a dime. Right at the edge of the cliff, with hooves barely holding on.

But you see, the cowboy was real happy because he had made it from the East Coast to the West Coast in two hours. The cowboy was so happy, in fact, that he reared back, grinning from ear to ear, and said, "Praise the Lord."

Congratulations!