

**Summoned by Life . . .**

**Commencement Address, Whitman College  
Justice Mary Yu  
May 22, 2016**

Good Morning.

President Murray, Provost Spencer, Trustees, Deans, Distinguished Faculty and Guests and Class of 2016, thank you for the privilege of joining you on this festive occasion. Congratulations to the class of 2016!

My understanding is that YOU, this graduating class of 2016, have distinguished yourselves by your deep passion and un-abiding commitment to social justice and inclusivity for all. I have been told you indeed have made a difference on this campus and in the lives of others during your tenure here at Whitman. You are unique and will remain so in the chronicles of Whitman history.

And so as you sit here today (I invite you to experience that moment you have been waiting for all year) you may be wondering what comes next?

Perhaps you know where you are going for graduate studies, or you know where you will be employed, but as a good loyal Whittie, you are probably still asking: will that place *really* be the right fit for me? Will it be a source of growth? Will that next step be a place that continues to foster and nurture my intellectual growth in the same way that I have experienced here at Whitman? Is that next professional step in my life one that will allow me to have the great impact on society that I so desire to make?

And of course there is that big question, despite all of the decisions that you have already made that asks: where am I *really* headed in life?

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My dear friends of Whitman, I can guarantee you that you will have an impact on the world around you. You will have an impact because you are smart, and you have the capacity unlike any other generation to unleash good upon the world. As the President of our country recently said at one his commencement speeches, your generation has more intelligence and tools than at any other time in history and it will be up

to you how you will put those resources to use.

I am confident that you will see the change you seek IF you allow yourself to be summoned by life; that is, that you allow yourself to be shaped and influenced by events external to yourself.

Over the last year and I have spent a lot of time with David Brooks' book *The Road to Character*. I know there may be some of you who may not agree with David Brooks' analysis of current events, and I might share that skepticism in some areas as well, but this book has grabbed and sustained my curiosity and I will borrow some of his thoughts in my remarks today. Perhaps I am so taken with this book because I find myself identifying with the same fundamental questions he is asking about the deeper values that should inform our lives.

Towards the end of his career, he is asking himself: is he the good virtuous person he set out to be? He now knows that career success, monetary wealth, or economic security is not the same as building character, or being wise, or as he puts it, the words that fill a eulogy at

the end of our lives. What kind of person did we end up becoming, when we look backwards? Are we kind, compassionate, generous, loyal to our friends, honest in our transactions and interactions. Did we develop the habit of being virtuous? Or do we have a grand resume but lack character or a moral compass; as David Brooks put it, *those eulogy characteristics?*

Let me spend a few moments with you today inviting you, this class of 2016, to organize your life by asking the question **what does life want from me as opposed to what do I want from life?** Ask yourself: What are the circumstances of our world, our nation, our state calling me to do? What does this society need from me today? The answer will not come from inside . . . the answer is going to be found outside of yourself. The answers are found by seeing, hearing, and placing your feet in a place that will show you what the world needs from you.

What is life summoning **you** to do today?

Well, I know we need an innovator who will find answers to the age old problem of delivering potable water in countries around the world in order save thousands of infants.

I know we need an economist who is committed to creating a policy framework and economic construct that reduces the growing income disparity between those who have and those who don't, and the will to take on the threat that this disparity poses to our common good.

I know we need political leaders with the courage to fund education and mental health.

I know we need teachers who are committed to individualized learning; to opening the mind and tapping the imagination of the next generation.

I know we need managers in our criminal justice system who can help design and create real and meaningful alternatives to incarceration

I know we need lawyers who will be creative and innovative with the law through impact litigation in order to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the homes we sleep in long before we discover the toxicity that has destroyed a child's future.

And finally, I know we need writers and poets who will give expression to hope and the innate desire of the human person to realize our own dignity.

You know I could stand here for quite some time with a litany of needs – but I won't ---- that will be yours to discover.

My simple ask is this – dare to take risks for the sake of the common good ---- dare to be free to **be summoned by life without fear.**

Be aware of the fact that you are in the *here and now* because of history, fate, (evolution or by the design of God) certainly circumstances beyond your control --- you are in this particular moment and you can make a difference –

Your task upon leaving Whitman today is to build confidence in what you know your talents are and to find that **sweet spot** – the **sweet spot** being that nexus where your talents meet the world's needs. Don't be afraid to ask: what *does* the world need today and to plan with how you might respond. Shape your vocation by listening to the needs of the world and responding accordingly.

My friends, if you allow yourself to be summoned by life, I am confident that you will look back at your life and career and you will be able to say, I earnestly did the best I could do to serve the needs of others; to live that virtuous life imagined long ago by Aristotle; to have spent my time fulfilling not only my destiny but to making this a better world; to have contributed to the common good because it is the right thing to do. When you do, it will indeed be a life well lived – our world will be better because you have walked among us.

Whitman Graduates of 2016: Go forth and allow yourself to be summoned by life.