

Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice –
Commencement Address
at Southern Methodist University

Saturday, May 12, 2012

Thank you very, very much. Thank you, President Turner, for that wonderful introduction. Thank you to the chairman of your Board of Trustees, Caren Prothro, and to the faculty. Thank you for what you have done to prepare these young people for what lies ahead. To family and friends, and most especially to the graduates of the class of 2012, congratulations to you.

It's great to be here in Mustang country. It's wonderful to be back in Dallas and to join you for this splendid ceremony. I do know that the Golden Mustangs are here, but there are a few other Mustangs here as well – or, as we affectionately call you, the Ponies. And I'll be back here, I can assure you, to try and watch you play, because I do love being on a university campus.

For one thing, it reminds me of my time in a university, and today reminds me of my time at graduation. It's been a lot of years since that day at Denver University, and I remember almost everything about it. I remember how proud my parents were. I remember the closeness that I felt to my classmates and my friends. I remember the thrill of achieving this important goal. I do not, however, remember a single word that the Commencement speaker said. And you won't, either. So I promise not to take it personally when you don't. Because on this day, you can be forgiven for feeling a little restless and a little proud. For many of you, earning a degree from this great university represents a mark of the most substantial achievement thus far in your lives. I'm sure that it's not going to be your last.

Instead, all of you in the class of 2012 will leave SMU with other, more lasting memories than this speech. You will remember the Boulevard, and singing during the Celebration of Lights. I'm

guessing you'll also remember late nights at Club Fondy. You'll remember fraternity parties...well, maybe you won't remember fraternity parties. But of all of your experiences here at SMU, none is more meaningful, of course, than the education that you've received in one of the nation's most highly respected institutions.

You see, education is transformative. It literally changes lives. That is why people work so hard to become educated. And that is why education has always been the key to human beings and their dreams – a force that erases arbitrary divisions of race and class and culture, and unlocks every person's potential.

This university's mission resonates with me on a very personal level, for I've learned in my own life the transforming power of education. I first learned of this through stories about my paternal grandfather, a real family hero named John Wesley Rice Senior. Now, Granddaddy Rice was a sharecropper's son in Eutaw, Alabama. And when John Wesley Rice was a young man of about 19, he decided he wanted to get book learning in a college. So he asked how a colored man could go to college. And they told him there was this little Presbyterian school called Stillman College just a few miles down the road. So he saved up his cotton to pay for his tuition, and he went off to Stillman College in Tuscaloosa.

But after the first year, they said, "Okay, so how are you going to pay for your second year?" He said, "I'm out of cotton." They said, "You're out of luck." But thinking quickly, Granddaddy Rice said, "So, how are those [other] boys going to college?" And they said, "Well, you see, they have what's called a scholarship. And if you wanted to be a Presbyterian minister, you could have a scholarship, too." Granddaddy Rice said, "You know, that is exactly what I had in mind." And my family has been college-educated, and Presbyterian, ever since.

But you know, John Wesley Rice Senior was on to something. He knew that that education was going to allow him to become someone that he otherwise might never have even imagined. And he knew that it would resonate for generations of Rices to come. And indeed, my father

would become not just college-educated but advanced-degreed, and become a university administrator as well as a Presbyterian minister. And his sister, my Aunt Theresa, would go to the University of Wisconsin in 1952, get a Ph.D. in English literature, and write books on Dickens.

Yes, indeed, my grandfather and other ancestors who endured poverty and segregation, and saw that education lifted them up, understood that it was a privilege to be educated, not a right. And so I would like to suggest to you today that that privilege brings with it several obligations and responsibilities.

The first responsibility is actually one you have to yourself, and that is the responsibility to find and follow your passion. Now, I don't mean just any old thing that interests you, or your career. I mean something you really believe is a unique calling to you – in other words, something that you can't live without. As an educated person, you have an opportunity to spend your life doing what you love. As you work to find your passion, you should also know that if you haven't yet found it, it might indeed find you.

Now, that's what happened to me, and Dr. Turner told a slightly cleaned-up version of the story, so let me tell you the real story. I started college as a music major, that is true, and I had studied music since the age of three, that too is true. But then, at the end of my sophomore year in college, I went to the Aspen Music Festival School, and I met 12-year-olds who could play from sight what it had taken me all year to learn. And I thought, "Uh-oh. I'm about to end up playing piano bar, or maybe teaching 13-year-olds to murder Beethoven, or playing at Nordstrom. But I am not going to play Carnegie Hall."

And so I went home, and I did have that conversation with my parents that maybe some of you have had:

"Mom and Dad, I'm changing my major."

“What are you changing your major to, dear?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t you know what you want to do with your life?”

“After all, it’s my life.”

“After all, it’s our money. Find a major.”

And so I went back to college in desperate search of a major. I had to make a quick decision, and so in the fall quarter of my junior year, I tried English literature. Now, with all due respect to the members of the English literature faculty out there, I hated it.

So now it is the winter quarter of my junior year, and I decide that state and local government – that sounds really practical. Well indeed, my little project was to interview the city water manager of Denver, the single most boring man I have met to this day. And I thought, “It’s not that, either.”

And now it is spring quarter of my junior year, and I’m getting those letters from the registrar. “You cannot register again until you declare a major.” And fortunately, I wandered into a course in international politics taught by a Soviet specialist – a man named Josef Korbel who had a daughter named Madeleine Albright. And with that one class, I was hooked. I discovered that my passion was Russian – things Russian, things international, diplomacy.

Needless to say, this wasn’t exactly what a young black girl from Birmingham was supposed to do, but it was like finding love. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew it was right. And you know something? Several years later, when I was working for President George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev was in town, President Bush asked me to take Gorbachev back out to

Stanford, where he was going to California to see more of the country. I sat on the South Lawn at the White House – Gorbachev, his wife, the Secret Service and me – and I thought, “I’m really glad I changed my major.”

But you know, the story doesn’t really end there, because your passion can sometimes be a second passion; but those first passions never leave you, either. And indeed, as National Security Advisor, Yo-Yo Ma did call me, and he asked if I would play with him for the National Medal of the Arts. And of course I said yes. But I was not confused. I was not playing with Yo-Yo Ma because I was the world’s greatest pianist. I was playing with Yo-Yo Ma because I was the National Security Advisor who could also play the piano. Avocations sometimes pan out as well.

So your first responsibility is to find your passion. Your second responsibility as an educated person is a commitment to reason. SMU has prepared you with a true education because you haven’t been taught what to think, but rather how to think, how to ask questions, how to reject assumptions, how to seek knowledge – in short, how to exercise reason. You’ve been encouraged to know that reason and faith are not enemies of one another, but together permit the fullest expression of what it is to be human. This experience will sustain you for the rest of your lives.

But no one should assume that a life of reason is easy. To the contrary, it takes a great deal of courage and honesty. For the only way that you will grow intellectually is by constantly examining your opinions, attacking your prejudices, and completing your journey toward the force of reason. It can be unsettling, and it can be tempting instead to opt for the false comfort of a life without questions. Unfortunately, that’s easier to do today than ever. It’s possible to live in an echo chamber that serves only to reinforce your high opinion of yourself and what you think. That is a temptation that educated people have a responsibility to reject.

There is nothing wrong with holding an opinion and holding it passionately. But at those times when you’re absolutely sure that you’re right, talk with someone who disagrees. And if you

constantly find yourself in the company of those who say “Amen” to everything that you say, find other company.

A commitment to reason leads to your third responsibility as an educated person, which is the rejection of false pride. It is natural, especially among the educated and on a day like today, to credit your success to your own intelligence and hard work and good judgment. And it is, of course, true that all of you sitting here do in fact possess those qualities. But it is also true that merit alone did not get you to this day. There are many who helped and sustained you.

Remember that no one really does it on his or her own. Reflect for a moment on those who have stood with you – parents, family, and friends.

And remember, too, that there are many people in this world who are just as intelligent, just as hardworking, just as deserving of success, but for whatever reason – maybe a broken home, or maybe poverty, or maybe just bad luck – these people did not enjoy the opportunities that you have. SMU has summoned you to the ideals of compassion and charity for those less fortunate. Now, Commencement marks your opportunity – indeed, your obligation – to graduate with both wisdom and humility.

The fourth responsibility of an educated person is to be optimistic. Too often, cynicism can be the fellow traveler of learning, and I understand why. History is full of much cruelty and suffering and darkness, and it can be hard sometimes to believe that a brighter future is indeed dawning.

But for all of our past failings, for all our current problems, more people now enjoy lives of hope and opportunity than ever before in all of human history. This progress has been the concerted effort not of cynics, but of visionaries and optimists, of impatient patriots who have dealt with our world as it was but never lost sight of the world as it should be.

Here in America, our own ideals of freedom and equality have been borne through generations by optimists. There was a day in my own lifetime when the hope of liberty and justice for all seemed impossible. But because individuals kept faith with the ideals of equality, we see a different America. And just imagine this: It has been 15 years since the United States of America has had a white male Secretary of State.

You're headed into a world where optimists are too often told to keep their ideals to themselves. It is your responsibility as educated people to remain optimistic no matter what, but that's not all. You have an obligation to act on those ideals, and this, the final responsibility of an educated person – really, the most important responsibility of all – is to work toward human progress.

Now what do I mean by human progress? I believe that all human beings share certain fundamental aspirations. They want protections for their lives and their liberties. They want to think freely and to worship as they wish. They want opportunities to educate their children, both boys and girls. And they want the dignity that comes with having to be asked for their consent to be governed.

All too often, difference has been used to divide and dehumanize. I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama – a place quite properly called the most segregated city in America – and I know how it feels to hold aspirations when half your neighbors think that you're incapable of or uninterested in anything higher. And I know there are some in this audience who have perhaps faced the same.

And in my professional life, I have listened in disbelief as it has been said of men and women in Asia and Africa and Latin America and Eastern Europe and Russia, from time to time, that they did not share the basic aspirations of all human beings. Somehow these people were just "different." That meant "unworthy of what we enjoy." "Maybe they're just not ready for democracy," it would be said. But of course this was once said even about black people. We

were just too childlike. We didn't care about rights or citizenship or the vote. We didn't care about freedom and liberty.

Well, today in the Middle East, the last bastion of that argument, people are putting a nail in the coffin of that idea. They are not just seeking their freedom, they are seizing it. But freedom and democracy are not the same thing. Freedom and rights have to be institutionalized into rule of law, into constitutions. And if you don't think constitutions matter, just remember this: When Martin Luther King Jr. wanted to say that segregation was wrong, in my hometown of Birmingham, he didn't have to say that the United States had to be something else – only that the United States had to be what it said it was. That is why the creed matters.

But stable democracy requires more than just the institutionalization of freedom. It requires that there can be no tyranny of the majority. And most importantly, it requires that the strong cannot exploit the weak. Indeed, democracy is only as strong as its weakest link. And indeed, if every life is equal before the law, and within the eyes of God, then every life is worthy. Every life is capable of greatness. And it truly doesn't matter where you came from, it matters where you are going.

At SMU, you have been taught the importance of service. You have been taught to serve those who are less fortunate. And yes, it will help them, but it will help you more. Because when you encounter those who are less fortunate, you cannot possibly give way to aggrievement – “Why do I not have?” – or its twin brother, entitlement – “Why don't they give me?” In fact, you will ask instead, not “Why do I not have?” but “Why have I been given so much?” And from that spirit, you will join the legions of impatient patriots and optimists who are working toward a better human future. And yes, sometimes it seems very hard indeed. But always remember in those times of trial, that what seems impossible seems inevitable in retrospect.

I read one summer the biographies of the Founding Fathers, when things weren't going very well for us in the Bush Administration. And by all rights, the United States of America should

actually never have come into being – what with a third of George Washington’s troops down with smallpox on any given day, the Founding Fathers squabbling among themselves, and against the greatest military power of the time – but we did come into being.

And then we fought a civil war, brother against brother, hundreds of thousands dead on both sides – and yet we emerged a more perfect Union.

And those of us who live in the West and have ever come across the Continental Divide know that they did it in covered wagons. And they had to be optimists, because they didn’t even know what was on the other side and they kept going anyway.

And in Birmingham, Alabama, a little girl whose parents can’t take her to a movie theater or to a restaurant – her parents nonetheless have her convinced that she may not be able to have a hamburger at Woolworth’s lunch counter, but she can be president of the United States if she wanted to be, and she becomes the Secretary of State. You see, things that seem impossible very often seem inevitable in retrospect.

This morning marks a new and glorious beginning for each of you, and all of you are well prepared for what lies ahead. You leave SMU to join the ranks of the world’s most privileged community: the community of the educated. It is a club from which you can never withdraw, and it is a club from which you can never be expelled.

But membership confers responsibility. So as you leave, bear in mind your responsibility to find your passion and to act on it, to use your reason, to cultivate humility, and most of all to remain optimistic as you serve others.

And so today, take what you have learned forward with you. You celebrate here, in this moment, what you have achieved. Now, vow to make it matter when you leave, throughout the rest of your days.

Godspeed, and thank you.