

*Speech by Marian Wright Edelman,
Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund*

It is a great honor to share this day of accomplishment and celebration and transition with SMU's president and faculty and administration, trustees, the family and friends of the graduates today, with the distinguished honorees. Most importantly, I'm delighted to be here with the best graduating class in the history of SMU.

Shortly before he died, my fellow South Carolinian Lee Atwater said the following in a moving essay in *Life* magazine: "Long before I was struck with cancer, I felt something stirring in American society. It was a sense among the people of the country, Republicans and Democrats alike, that something was missing from their lives, something crucial. I was trying," Atwater said, "to position the Republican Party to take advantage of it. But I wasn't exactly sure what 'it' was. My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society was what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood.

"The '80s," Atwater said, "were about acquiring — acquiring wealth, power, and prestige. I know — I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I trade for a little more time with my family. What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends. It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth. But it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know," Atwater said, "who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul."

As you leave SMU, I hope, contrary to what you hear so often in our culture, you will leave here going out into the world asking not "How much can I get?" but "How much can I do without and share?" I hope you will ask less "How can I find myself?" and remember the Gospel and try to ask "How can I lose myself in service to somebody else?"

The older I get, the more I talk about my childhood, and I want to share it again today. When I was growing up, service was as essential a part of my upbringing as eating and sleeping and going to school. Caring black adults were buffers against the segregated prison of the outside world that told me that I, a young black girl, wasn't worth much. But I didn't believe it, because my parents and my teachers and my preachers said it wasn't so. So the message I internalized as a child was that as God's child, no man or woman could look down on me, and I could look down on no man or woman.

I couldn't play in segregated playgrounds or drink Coke at a lunch counter in those days in the South, and my daddy and momma — my daddy was a Baptist minister — built a playground and a canteen behind our church. Whenever they saw a need, they tried to respond. There were no black homes for the aged in South Carolina near my hometown, so my parents began one across the street. All of us children had to cook and clean and serve, and we sure didn't like it a whole lot at the time. But that's how we learned that it was our responsibility to take care of elderly family members and neighbors and that everyone was our neighbor.

Black church and community members were my watchful, extended parents. They reported on me when I did wrong, and they applauded when I did well, and the adults were very clear about what "doing well" meant. It meant helping somebody else. It meant achieving in school and participating in church activities, and it meant reading.

As a child, I figured out early that the only time my daddy wouldn't give me a chore was when I was reading, so I read a lot. Our families and extended community family made children feel useful and important. While life was often hard and resources scarce, we always knew who we were, and that the measure of our worth was inside our heads and hearts, and not outside in things or in personal ambition.

We were taught that the world had a lot of problems, as it does today, and you've heard President Pye talk about the extraordinary changes that have gone on in your world and nation since you've come here to SMU. I was also taught that black folk had an extra lot of problems, but that we could struggle and change them — that intellectual and material gifts brought the privilege and responsibility of sharing with others less fortunate, and that helping others and serving others is the rent that every human being pays for living, not something you do in your spare time or after you've made that first million.

I'm very grateful for these childhood legacies of a living faith reflected in daily service, for the discipline of hard work and a capacity to struggle in the face of adversity. Giving up was not a part of the lexicon of my childhood elders. You got up every morning, and you did what you had to do, and you tried as many times as you had to try to get it done right, and you got up every time you fell down. That's a message I want to leave with you: to keep getting up every time you fall down, because you're gonna fall down a lot when you leave here.

My elders had grit, they valued family life, and they tried to be and to expose us to good role models. They were of two kinds: those who had achieved in the outside world, like my namesake, Marian Anderson. But the ones I remember even more were those without formal education and who didn't have a lot of money. They had a sense of the spirit of the Bible, and they had a special grace in their lives and taught us what Christ and Tolstoy and Gandhi and Martin King and Dorothy Day lived, and that it that the kingdom

of God is within. They knew instinctively what our distinguished Southern writer Walker Percy wrote, and that is that you can get all A's and still flunk life.

I was 14 the night my daddy died. He had holes in his shoes, but he had two children who'd graduated from college, one in college, another in divinity school — and, by the way, he also got a doctorate in divinity here at SMU — and a vision that he was able to convey to me, even dying in an ambulance. That I, a young black girl, could do and be anything, that race and gender are shadows, and that character, self-discipline, determination, and attitude are the substance of life. I want to convey that same vision to you graduates today, as you move out into an ethically polluted nation where instant sex without responsibility, instant gratification without effort, instant solutions without sacrifice, getting rather than giving, and hoarding rather than sharing are the too-frequent signals of our mass media, popular culture, and political life. The standard for success, which I hope you will change, for too many Americans has become personal greed rather than common good. The standard for striving and achievement has become getting by rather than making an extra effort or helping somebody else. Truth-telling and moral example have become devalued commodities.

Nowhere is the paralysis of public and private conscience more evident than in the neglect and abandonment of millions of our shrinking, and increasingly poor, pool of children whose futures are going to determine everybody's standard of living in this room and our nation's ability to compete and lead in the new era, more than any other single factor. Yet every eight seconds of every school day, an American child drops out, and they're not going to be able to sit where you're sitting here at SMU today. Every 13 seconds, one of our children is neglected or abused, and these are not just other people's children. These are not just black kids. They're all of our kids. Every 26 seconds, as we celebrate this wonderful day, one of our children is going to run away from home. About every minute, an American teenager has a baby. Every seven minutes one of our children is arrested for a drug offense, and every half-hour one of our children is arrested for drunken driving. Every 53 minutes in our rich land, an American child dies from poverty.

I think it's disgraceful that our nation permits infants and toddlers to be the poorest Americans. But the worst figure, which I will not get used to and hope that we in this nation will not get used to, is the fact that an American child is murdered every three hours, and that we lose 25 children — the equivalent of a classroom — every three days to gunfire. We have got to get the guns out of the hands of children and people who kill children.

I also want to put a pitch on immunizations, because I am embarrassed that we have had a measles epidemic — 55,000 cases of measles in recent years; 11,000 people hospitalized; 166 people died — that we are having children die of measles in 1993

America. I need your help in telling our political representatives that you want to see American children immunized. It is not right that immunization costs have gone up from \$11 to \$230, and poor and middle-class families cannot afford those vaccine prices. It is not right that the cost of DPT — one of our common, needed vaccines — has gone up 2,784 percent. We have got to find a better balance between profits and people, but we need to immunize America's children. And I hope you'll make your voices heard.

I think we have lost our sense of what is important as a people, and we have got to rediscover it. Too many young people of all races and classes are growing up unable to handle life in hard places, without hope and without steady compasses to navigate a world that is reinventing itself at an unpredictable pace, both technologically and politically.

My generation learned that to accomplish anything, we had to get off the dime. Your generation has to learn to get off the paradigm, over and over, and to be flexible, quick, and smart about it.

For all the change you've heard your president talk about and that you have felt, I want to say to you today that there are some enduring values that don't change. I want to share a few of those, which I shared with my own three wonderful sons. Like them, I know that you can take it or leave it, but you can never say that you weren't told or reminded, and you know how mothers cannot resist an opportunity to give advice. So let me just share a few of the lessons I shared with my own sons with you as you leave SMU.

The first lesson that I want you to remember, which I'm sure you have been taught by your parents and grandparents, is that there is no free lunch. Don't feel entitled to anything you don't sweat and struggle for. Don't think you can park on your wonderful degree today. Help our nation understand that it's not entitled to world leadership based on the past or on what we say rather than on how well we perform and meet changing world needs. For those of you who are minority young people, I want you to know that you can't ever take anything for granted in this country, particularly as racial intolerance is resurging everywhere. For those of you who are white, who feel entitled to leadership by accident of birth, I want to let you know that the world you face and must survive in is already two-thirds nonwhite and poor, and that our nation is becoming, like Texas, a mosaic of greater diversity. You're going to have to understand and respect that. You may not like these poor black and brown kids, but you're gonna need them to work for you rather than shoot at you.

The second lesson I want you to remember is to assign yourself. My daddy used to run us crazy. When we'd come home from school, he'd ask us whether the teacher had given us any homework. If we said no, he'd say, "Well, assign yourself something." We are turning out to be a nation of blamers and whiners. We are in a lot of trouble. There's been a basic breakdown in family and moral values in this country, and it cuts across all

racism and classes and political ideologies. I'm tired of hearing people say, "Why doesn't somebody do something?" Ask yourself, "Why don't I do something?" Democracy is not a spectator sport.

Third lesson is, I hope — contrary to what this culture teaches us — that you will never work just for money. Money won't save your soul or build a decent family, and it won't help you sleep at night. We're the richest nation on Earth, with the highest incarceration, drug addiction, and child poverty rates in the world. Don't ever confuse wealth or fame with character. And don't tolerate or condone moral corruption, whether it's found in high or low places, whatever its color or class. It is not okay to abuse alcohol or to push or use drugs, even if every person in America is doing it. It's not okay to cheat or to lie, even if everybody you know does. You should be honest, and you should demand that those who represent you be honest. Don't ever confuse morality with legality. Dr. King used to remind us that everything Hitler did in Nazi Germany was legal. Don't give anybody the proxy for your conscience. You are going to be accountable to God.

Fourth lesson, and I'm almost done: Don't be afraid of taking risks or of being criticized. If you don't want to be criticized, don't do anything, don't say anything, and don't be anything. Be willing to stand up for something that matters. A good lesson is to take parenting and family life seriously. Our nation talks about family values, but we really don't honor them in our public policies and private-sector policies. We have got to change that. I hope that many of you will run for political office and raise these issues of work and family. I particularly hope that more women will run for political office, since we've been struggling to make these balances. We women cannot do a worse job than the men in power so far.

I have three great sons, one of whom, Joshua, is here today. I hope he and my boys and all the young men in this audience will raise our sons, your sons, to be fair to other people's daughters. I hope the young men in this audience will share, and not just help, with parenting responsibilities. Super Woman has died of exhaustion. I hope every one of us will stress family rituals and be moral examples for your children, and not have them until you are emotionally and economically ready to meet their needs. Children are a lifetime commitment, as your parents know.

You are the big teachers, as parents of children. If you cut corners, they will too. If you spend all of your money on your own backs and tithe no portion of it for SMU or for the poor, they won't either. If you tell or snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison we adults still have not had the courage to snuff out. At this time, when we're seeing racial divisions increase, I hope that not a single person in this room will laugh at or tell or acquiesce in racial, ethnic, religious, or gender jokes or any practices intended to demean, rather than enhance, another human being. Walk away from

them. Stare them down. Make them unacceptable in your presence. It is through daily acts of moral consciousness that each of us can play our part in countering the proliferating voices of racial division that are gaining respectability over Texas and over our land.

Seventh lesson: Listen to the sound of the genuine within yourself. The great black theologian Howard Thurman told my Spelman sisters that there is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in ourselves. It is the only true guide you'll ever have. If you cannot hear it, you will all your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls. As you leave this university, you will find that there are so many noises and competing demands in your lives that many of you will never find out who you are. So I hope you learn to be quiet enough inside to withdraw from the parties and from the television set and the music, and to listen to yourself and try to find the sound of the genuine within, so that you can hear it in other people.

The final lesson is never think that life is not worth living or that you can't make a difference. Never give up, I don't care how hard it gets, and it will get very hard sometimes. There's an old proverb that says, "When you get to your wit's end, remember that that's where God lives." Hang in with life, and don't think you have to be a big dog to be decent or to make a difference.

I always quote Sojourner Truth in my speeches, who was an illiterate slave woman who could not stand second-class treatment of women or slavery. My favorite story occurred one day when she was heckled by an old white man who stood up and said he didn't care anymore about her anti-slavery talk than for an old flea bite. And she said to him, "That's all right — the Lord willing, I'm gonna keep you scratching."

As you go out into Texas and around the country, looking at all the great problems of poverty and economic insecurity and violence, don't think you have to be a big dog and make a big difference. Just commit yourself to being a flea. Enough fleas, biting strategically, can make very big dogs uncomfortable. I hope that you today will decide to be a flea against injustice, against racism, against family breakdown and poverty, against dishonesty and corruption in your own life, in your own home, in your own corporation and law firm or medical practice, because it is in these individual and personal commitments that the institutional patterns of America are made. If each of us commits to being a flea for a transformed America, we will make it un-American for any child to be poor, to be without health care or immunization, without child care, without the hope of an education and a job.

Let me end, as I always do, with a prayer for all children, who must be our children. We must stop this distinction between our children and other people's children. You've got to walk the streets with other people's children. You've got to share a nation with other people's children. There are not enough prisons to make up for the lack of

justice and fairness for every child. Let's all commit to praying and accepting responsibility for all the children of Texas and America who like to be tickled and sneak Popsicles before supper and can never find their shoes. But let's also pray and accept responsibility and go out from this place and advocate for children who cannot bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers, never get dessert, don't have any rooms to clean up, and whose pictures aren't on anybody's dressers and whose monsters are real. Let's pray and accept responsibility for children who spend all of their allowance before Tuesday, throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, squirm in church and temple, and scream into the phone.

Let's also commit to praying and advocating for children whose nightmares come in the daytime all over Texas, who'll eat anything, who have never seen a dentist, are unspoiled by anybody, go to bed hungry, and cry themselves to sleep. Let's pray and accept responsibility for children who want to be carried, but also for those children who must be carried. For those we never give up on, like your parents never gave up on you, but let's also speak for those children who don't get a second chance. For those children whom we smother, but also let us speak and pray and vote and advocate for those children who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

There are only 346 weeks from today until the turn of the century — less than 2,500 days. Let's not waste a single day, and let's not waste a single child's life. Each and every day, let us commit to struggling personally and collectively to help all of our children regain their moral traction in a world that is plagued by ethnic, religious, racial, and national strife. Let us reflect anew, each of us, on why we are here on God's Earth and what it means to be a citizen of the world and what it is to be an American and on all we have been given and on all we have to give. Let us together begin today to build the future peace by affirming, through our lives and leadership and time and money and example and caring, the promise and sanctity of each child. And from whatever faith or ideology or political party or race we hail, please commit to loving and respecting and protecting every child as God's promise of life. If you do that, our great nation will see that no child is left behind. And if no child is left behind in America, America will not be left behind.

Godspeed to you.