

Kathy Bates Commencement Address
May 18, 2002

Thank you President Turner, Dean Carole Brandt, and Dr. Bonnie Wheeler for this extraordinary honor and congratulations to Gloria Steinem and Lord Butler on receiving their honorary degrees. Thanks to all my friends and my two sisters who've come a long way to be with me today.

To the Southern Methodist University Graduating Class of 2002, congratulations to all of you on this wonderful day! I imagine your parents are bursting with pride and heaving enormous sighs of relief all at the same time.

I graduated a semester early and didn't get to attend my own graduation so I'm grateful to the Faculty Senate Nominations Committee and the Board of Trustees for arranging it so I could share your commencement with you.

I came to SMU in the fall of 1966 as an English major so I was assigned to freshman orientation at the School of the Humanities. I'll never forget the man who welcomed us that first day. He was a terrific speaker. He told us that this is where we were to begin our life's work - the thing we were the most passionate about. The thing we loved to do.

The more he talked the more excited I became and the more I started thinking. Now that "love" had entered the picture it was a whole new ball game. Now it was easy.

I loved to act. I had done a lot of plays in high school, but I hadn't realized you could study acting in college. I thought it had to be something serious, like Math or Science or English. But I knew in my heart that for me, being onstage had always felt like coming home. So I raised my hand and started asking him questions like, "Well then, can I be in plays if I want to?" and "Can I really major in acting?"

Finally, he got so exasperated with my interrupting him, he said, "You're in the wrong school. Here's your folder. I want you to go down the hall, last door on the left, that's the art school that's where you belong." I'd really love to know that guy's name because without him I probably wouldn't be standing here talking to you today.

The theater department in those days was like any other university drama department. Except for one thing - it was made up of a large number of unusually talented and innovative theater students and professors. If they had been first picks in an NFL draft it couldn't have been more advantageous.

We all had big dreams so we were lucky to have countless benefactors and alumni from the Dallas-Ft. Worth community and beyond, who dearly loved the arts and took our dreams seriously. Their generous contributions built us a beautiful arts complex at the Meadows School.

By the time I left, the Margo Jones Experimental Theatre and the Bob Hope Theatre were completed and the theater department had been transformed into a professional conservatory to rival any in the country.

Dr. Burnet Hobgood ran the department - we called him. Hob. He told us first year students that it would take us 15 to 20 years to accomplish our professional goals. And he was right -almost to the day. After I graduated from college in 1970 and moved to New York it took me five years to start working full time in the theater and another ten or twelve years to fully develop my "instrument."

For a musician, of course, the instrument is his violin or a piano. For an actor, the instrument is herself her mind, her body and her voice. It takes a long time to build up the stamina required to sustain a characterization through eight performances a week. It takes even longer to learn how to interpret the words on the page so that they disappear and a human being takes their place. Then it takes years to become known and develop an audience and get good parts. During those years the discipline and the passion for the craft I was taught here at SMU and the lifelong friendships I made here, got me through the lean times, the doubtful times.

Later on as I began to have the opportunity to work with actors whose work I had always admired, like Jessica Tandy or Dustin Hoffman or Jack Nicholson, I was always pleased to find that they had the same work ethics as I was taught. More than that they had an insatiable curiosity about human nature. And the passion for reflecting that humanity was a life force burning bright within them.

Before last September 11th I led a pretty self-involved existence. I spent 90 per cent of my time impersonating other people. My main goal in life was to make myself a blank slate and then transform myself completely into my characters. I'm fortunate to make a comfortable living doing what I love to do. But at times it can seem like a pretty self-aggrandizing profession on the surface. So when I asked myself, "Does it have any relevance?" I had to dig deep to find an answer.

What I've discovered is that in bringing all those characters to life as whole human beings, I've had the opportunity to duplicate life from inside many different skins - to empathize with various ways of approaching life. In trying to humanize the characters I played, I had to have compassion for them whether they were heroes or villains - to walk in their shoes. In fact, one of the first things we're taught as young actors is to rehearse in our character's shoes so we can learn from the very beginning how it feels - how it changes us.

When we take part in a great play or a film as an audience member or as an actor, we have the chance to experience what it's like to grow up in an environment or a society that may be far different from our own. Sometimes very special performances draw us in and we find ourselves empathizing with every emotion the characters are feeling until finally the secret walls we've built inside to conceal our pain from ourselves and from the world come crashing down. Our hearts open in profound understanding - what the Greeks called catharsis - and in this empathic state of grace we forgive and are forgiven. We leave the theater with more compassion for human kind and that is priceless.

The world we knew is gone forever. Realizing that has taught me, is teaching me on a daily basis where my humanity is and where I've fallen short. I'm trying hard now to turn my eyes outward and to delve more deeply into understanding other cultures. Not to take things at face value. but rather to think for myself and look at life with greater insight. Whether its the person in the car in front of me who's driving me crazy in traffic or an argument between two actors on a movie set or the war in the Middle East, I want to try to put myself in their shoes so I can understand them and how they perceive their predicament. I want to act out of curiosity and compassion instead of anger and fear.

That's hard. It takes a lot of work. And sometimes I get tired and say what's the use? What difference does it make if I just stay in bed and pull the covers over my head? And I reserve the right to do just that at some future date, but for now I find myself standing here in front of you.

I've been lucky enough to be invited to come and talk to you on one of the most important days of your life. That invitation has forced me to reexamine who I have been and what I want to become. So I thought I'd try to tell you what's in my heart - appeal to your humanity with my own.

Whatever you've chosen to do with your lives and some of you may still be figuring that out even as we speak, but whatever it is, be it lawyer, teacher, minister, artist or businessperson, what's most important is who you are as a human being. In fact who you are as a human being will decide who you become as a professional. Evolving your humanity is a job that never ends. In fact, you can think of it as your life-long homework assignment. This new and different world we find ourselves in needs fully evolved human beings who live with compassion and courage.

Once we start living with compassionate hearts, empathizing with others and realizing how they feel, it's easy to see how taking responsibility for our own actions is a given - a sort of natural law. And in the process of becoming honest and accountable we are given a gift. We discover our true selves, our authentic selves.

Having the courage to stand up and be fully authentic is sometimes very difficult. Especially when we are in the minority. The peer pressure we endured during our school years becomes as we grow older a pressure to conform to society - more subtle perhaps, but no less powerful. As adults we are told, "Relax, don't buck the system." or "We've been doing it this way for years, it's company policy." But in the end we are, each of us, responsible for who we are and what we do, whether we admit it to ourselves or not, whether we are the employees of a large corporation, or a church. or a school, or a post office.

And gradually we are learning a more difficult lesson, that as citizens of this great nation, we are each of us in the end held responsible for the decisions our government makes. Because the policies we hold abroad are our calling cards and like it or not, that's often all the inhabitants of another country have to judge us by.

Some days I'm afraid. I think it's too late for us to change. Some days I'm hopeful like today because I see your faces and your eyes and I feel your amazing energy and your optimism and I believe your generation - you - might make a difference in this world.

I believe you're smart. Smarter and savvier than we were at your age because you had to grow up a little faster. Because the world you've grown up in is smaller than the world we knew, you're more aware of countries and peoples.

The Internet has put it all at your fingertips. The news of what really goes on in the world is yours almost the minute it happens, so that you can decide for yourselves how to feel about it. Please don't let anyone ever tell you what to think. And above all, don't let them scare you into looking the other way just to throw you off the track of what you know in your heart is right.

And by the way, don't be overly impressed with someone just because they are older than you or make a lot of money. You can be respectful of someone else's age and experience - maybe even learn something from them, but older and richer doesn't necessarily mean older and wiser.

Always think for yourself and make your own decisions. You're on your own now and you're calling the shots for your future. Follow your instincts, lead from your heart and decide for yourself who you will be and how you will live your life.

And it is true what they told me, and I didn't believe them either, but I am here to tell you, life is short, the young vibrant healthy part of it, that is. It goes mighty fast. So enjoy every minute of it. Every hour. Every day.

God bless you all and thank you.

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