

Commencement Address

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Boston University

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Remarks

Thank you so much President Brown and Chairman Feld.

It's been nearly thirty years from the moment I first set foot on campus until today, so I think it would be fair to say that I've taken an unconventional route to this degree.

To all of the graduates today - no matter what path you have followed to get here - good afternoon, and congratulations!

Congratulations, as well, to my fellow honorary degree recipients - Noubar Afeyan and Catherine D'Amato, who have made such important contributions to our community - both locally and globally.

And to your student speaker, Archelle Thelemaque. From Howard Thurman to Meek Mill to Breonna Taylor and Atatiana Jefferson - may they rest in power - that was a WORD. I am so proud of you.

And I am so grateful for the opportunity to join *with all of you* today and, after the events of the past year, even more thankful that we can be here together in community and in celebration.

And when I say "all of you," I'm addressing not only the graduates and the esteemed faculty, but the administrators, the adjunct professors, the teaching assistants, the custodial staff, the food service workers, and of course the caregivers, family members, and friends - thank *all of you* for the support you have provided and the sacrifices you have made to bring us to this day.

The story of what has brought ME here begins - as so many parts of my life do - with my mother, Sandy Pressley, the woman who gave me my roots and my wings.

From the day I was born, my mother made sure I knew I was being born into a struggle, and that her expectation was that I would play a role in that struggle - the fight for justice and collective liberation.

And, in ways big and small, my mother made sure I had the opportunity to step into myself, to stand in my own power, fully.

Instead of traditional bedtime stories, she read me the speeches of Barbara Jordan and Shirley Chisholm, she worked multiple jobs so that I could attend one of the best schools in Chicago, and she constantly reminded me that *I was enough*.

After high school, she encouraged me to come here to Boston, and seek the opportunity afforded by this University.

When I arrived on campus, it was as the embodiment of all the hopes, dreams, and fears my mother had for me. I knew not a soul, but I threw myself into the University community. Like so many of you here today, I used work study and a number of temporary jobs to make ends meet.

And it was as a student here that I gained an internship in the office of Congressman Joseph P. Kennedy II. I knew about Representative Kennedy because of my mother, who talked often about the work he was doing to address redlining in Boston.

Through my internship with Congressman Kennedy, I gained a deeper and more profound understanding of the community that Boston University calls home.

As an intern in the Congressman's Roxbury office, I worked with people and families experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and unemployment. I helped veterans access healthcare, supported seniors navigating their social security benefits, and met new immigrants putting down roots in Boston. As a 20-year-old, with the full weight of a Congressional office at my back, I saw first-hand the impact of policy. My consciousness was stoked and my purpose made more clear.

The experience broadened my horizons beyond the bounds of BU's campus, and it's a lesson that has served me well throughout my life: do not allow yourself to be confined by the four walls around you. Go beyond what is comfortable and known. You will always find more understanding, more inspiration, more joy *in* community than you will *apart* from it.

Even after my mother fell ill and I left school to care for her, I held on to that role with Congressman Kennedy and was eventually hired as a full-time staff person in his office.

In 2018, when I was elected to represent Massachusetts' 7th Congressional District in the United States Congress, it felt like coming full circle -- because the seat I now hold in Congress is the same one where I began as an intern all those years ago.

The experiences I had at BU - both good and bad - shaped me in important, long-lasting ways -- just as I know that your experiences here have shaped you.

What you have learned and experienced, the passions you have nurtured, the people you have come to know, and the community you have built over the past several years have brought you all - collectively - to this moment. And that deserves celebration.

This is one of the most diverse graduating classes in the history of Boston University.

In this stadium today are graduates from dozens of different states and even more countries. There are graduates who are the first in their families to attend college. There are graduates who grew up in single-parent households or the foster system, who are active duty military, who are immigrants, and many who likely thought - at one moment or another - that they wouldn't see this day. Wouldn't sit in these chairs or walk across this stage.

And in the past year, you have all weathered unprecedented challenges.

COVID-19 has introduced brand new challenges while worsening existing hardship and inequity. It has strained our normal ties to one another, but at the same time made clear the vital importance of community. And, for too many, it has meant an empty seat at the dinner table, or an empty chair next to the friends and family gathered here today.

There may be a desire to move on as quickly as possible from the pandemic - to put the pain and hardship behind us and not look back. But there is much to be said for taking a moment to think and reflect.

For some, this experience has provided greater clarity - about what matters to you, what your purpose is, what you are called to contribute. Don't lose that.

For others, the pandemic may have been less profound, but no less impactful.

I'm a list maker. Every day, I make lists of the things I want to accomplish. But there have been many days in my life - including as a student - when the only thing on my list was to "get up."

Just getting out of bed some days was a victory. Each and every day for the past 16 months, you have all “gotten up.”

And for everyone, as we start on the long road to recovery, the Work of healing is a journey not only for each of you as individuals. Your reflection, your healing also helps to create space and heal those around you - the village that has carried you here, and the broader community of which you are a member.

At the same time, we cannot romanticize and be content with a return to a pre-pandemic normal that was unjust and inequitable to begin with. Individually and together, we must learn the lessons of the pandemic, and act accordingly.

As we recover, as we begin our collective healing, we are all called to do our part.

Among the many lessons my mother taught me is this one: there is a difference between your job and your Work. Your job is what you do to pay the bills. Your Work is the work of justice-seeking, of community upliftment and building.

And when I look out at all of you, I see thousands of values engineers, social architects, table shakers, and trailblazers.

Sixty years ago, one of my favorite authors, James Baldwin was reflecting on the nature of majority and minority rights in America. It's a quote I've come back to often this commencement season, and one I think carries particular weight in this moment.

In defining the majority, Baldwin said, “...majorities [have] nothing to do with numbers or with power, but with influence, moral influence” and “this majority is you. No one else can do it. The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.”

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Baldwin was speaking at the height of what is traditionally thought of as “the civil rights movement” - the monumental struggle for racial, social, and economic justice in the 1950s and '60s.

But make no mistake: that movement isn't confined to the past -- it's still happening all around us, every day. And the challenge Baldwin raises is just as urgent today as it was six decades ago.

Baldwin was right. He *is* right. You need not take the world as it is, as you inherited it.

In fact, you CANNOT. We need each and every one of you to meet this moment, to imagine a better world, and to work for it.

You are graduating into a country and a world grappling with challenges that are breathtaking in their scope but, at the same time, each of you embodies the potential for transformative change - person-to-person and community-to-community.

Recently, I've seen online images from the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s that have been colorized. When we see those same images in grainy black and white, it's easy to consign them to a different era, a long, long time ago.

But when we see them in color, it imparts a recency, a reminder that it wasn't - in fact - all that long ago, and that much work remains to be done.

When I look at those images, I'm struck how young everyone was.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. may be one of this institution's most revered alums, but it was Coretta Scott King who said "Freedom is never really won - you earn it and win it in every generation."

Now it is your turn. You are today's freedom riders, today's organizers, today's justice-seekers.

It may be at a protest or a march, or it may be through the lens of a microscope or the inside of a board room. Whether you are a chemist or a computer engineer; a businessperson, an aspiring educator, a dancer, a nonprofit leader, a poet, a pastor, or any of the other dreams and ambitions represented here today, there is a place in the movement for everyone - and the movement needs you.

Over the past year, in addition to the trauma caused by the pandemic, our country has been rocked by gut-wrenching moments that have shown the depth of racism, white supremacy, and profound injustice in our communities.

But racial, social, and economic injustice are not present only in momentary spasms of violence and hatred - they are codified, they are *systemic*.

Dismantling those systems, building a more just and equitable world, requires collective determination and collective action.

As BU's own Dr. Kendi has challenged us, it takes a commitment to be anti-racist.

It requires tackling problems that are small enough to solve and big enough to matter.

It requires each of us to take a stakehold in our communities and to, as Baldwin tells us, to exert "moral influence," and refuse to accept the world as we've inherited it.

Make no mistake, another world is possible.

Another world is possible, where racial, social, economic, environmental, and healthcare injustice is the exception, rather than the rule.

Another world is possible, where Black and brown folks needn't put our very lives at risk to demand our humanity be seen, affirmed, valued.

Another world is possible, where women are seen, their lived experiences respected, and their bodily autonomy protected.

Another world is possible, where LGBTQIA people do not have to struggle every day to safeguard their most basic rights and freedoms.

Another world is possible, where no one is burdened with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt, where everyone has the right - and the ability - to vote, and where everyone who wants one has a good job that pays a living wage.

Another world is possible.

When I first ran for Congress, I said "change can't wait." It still can't.

So go now, beyond these walls. Take what you have learned, take the village you carry and that's carried you, take your lived experience and build the world you want to see.

The future belongs to all of us and, Boston University Class of 2021, when I look out at all of you, I know that change is on the way. Congratulations!