

Oprah Winfrey's Commencement Address
Wellesley College
May 30, 1997

My hat's off to you! My hat's off to you!

[crowd cheers: Go Girl!]

You all have "gone" girls! I want to say thank you, Dr. Walsh and to the esteemed faculty, to those of you parents--what you have been through, God Bless you--and to the greatest class that has ever graduated from Wellesley. I must say--you are my heart, Dr. Walsh is right. I saw you walking in and I started to weep, and I don't consider myself a weeper, but I guess I must be if I started to weep, because I know what it takes to get through here and I am so proud of all of you for getting through.

Thanks for inviting me to this party, this celebration. I told Dr. Walsh as we were walking in, my graduation was nothing like this. Nobody was having this much fun. When Wendy, Stedman's daughter (Stedman is my beau, my fiance, don't ask me when we're going to get married) when Stedman's daughter, Wendy, was looking for a school four years ago, no doubt I was far more delighted than she when she chose Wellesley `cause I knew what she was in for. I had wanted to come to this school. I wanted to be here but I could get no scholarship. I wanted to be here and have lived these past years vicariously through her. I was, as Dr. Walsh said, here with Wendy's father, Stedman, and Wendy's mother, Glenda, on Parents' Day and I was in awe of this place because, see, you all seem to have so much fun, without a keg or anything, and yet you all seemed so serious, so committed to this place with guts and with grace and I saw your sense of integrity and felt your intellect and realized that this was a very special, giving place. Wellesley is a gift to any woman who is willing to open her mind and her heart to it. It is! You are so blessed to have had this, although I know your first year you maybe didn't think it was such a gift because I was there for a lot of those phone calls that Wendy made home. "Daddy [in small girl's voice], this is hard, they just want you to study all the time." Yes, they do. That was the Freshmen Year. About mid-Sophomore Year, though, I think she had several epiphanies and realized what all of you had come to realize here, that you do this for yourself, you don't do this for anybody else and that everything you heard about this institution is true--it is a prestigious and powerful place that will wear you out, but what happens is something--that Woman Thing starts to kick in around mid-Sophomore Year. We saw it kick in with Wendy, that Woman Thing that happens. She came here a naive girl from Dallas and Stedman and Glenda, I, and all of those who loved Wendy, are grateful to you Wellesley for the woman in process that you gave us back. We are grateful for that.

You could feel the change about a year and a half after her being here because she went from "Daddy [small girl's voice], this is hard," to "Daddy [adult voice], I won't be able to go on the trip to Africa because I have to study, Daddy." That Woman Thing!

You all know this, that life is a journey and I want to share with you just for a few moments about five things (aren't you glad they aren't ten) five things that have made this journey for me exciting. Five lessons that I've learned that if I had gone to Wellesley I could have not made as many mistakes, but five lessons that I've learned that have helped me to make my life better.

First of all, life is a journey. I've learned to become more fully who you are and that is what I love about this institution, it allows women to come to the fullest extent of their possibilities who they really are and that's what life does--teach you to be who you are. It took me a while to get that lesson, that it really is just about everyday experiences, teaching you, moment in, moment out, who you really are. That every experience is here to teach you more fully how to be who you really are. Because, for a long time I wanted to be somebody else. I mean growing up I didn't have a lot of role models. I was born in 1954. On TV there was only Buckwheat, and I was ten years old before I saw Diana Ross on "The Ed Sullivan Show" with the Supremes and said I want to be like that. It took me a long time to realize I was never going to have Diana Ross' thighs, no matter how many diets I went on, and I was not going to have her hair neither unless I bought some. I came to the realization after being in television and having the news director trying to make me into something that I wasn't and going to New York and allowing myself to be treated less than I should have been--going to a beauty salon, you all know there is a difference between Black hair and White hair. That is the one thing you learn the first week at Wellesley: how did you get your hair to do that? What I learned going to a beauty salon and asking them, after the news director told me that my hair was too thick and my eyes were too far apart and I needed a makeover, sitting in a French beauty salon, allowing them to put a French perm on my Black hair and having the perm burn through my cerebral cortex and not being the woman that I am now, so not having the courage to say, "this is burning me," and coming out a week later bald and having to go on the air. You learn a lot about yourself when you are Black, and a woman and bald and trying to be an anchor woman. You learn you are not Diana Ross and that you are not Barbara Walters who I was trying to be at the time.

I had a lot of lessons. I remember going on the air many times and not reading my copy ahead of time. I was on the air one night and ran across the word "Barbados," that may be Barbados to you but it was " Barb-a-does" to me that night and telling the story as an anchor woman about a vote in absentia in California, I thought it was located near San Francisco. This is when I broke out of my Barbara shell, because I am sitting there, crossing my legs, trying to talk like Barbara,

be like Barbara, and I was reading a story about someone with a "blaze" attitude which, if I had gone to Wellesley, I would have known it was blasé and I started to laugh at myself on the air and broke through my Barbara shell and had decided on that day that laughing was OK even though Barbara hadn't at that time. It was through my series of mistakes that I learned I could be a better Oprah than I could be a better Barbara. I allowed Barbara to be the mentor for me, as she always has been, and I decided then to try to pursue the idea of being myself and I am just thrilled that I get paid so much every day for just being myself, but it was a lesson long in coming, recognizing that I had the instinct, that inner voice that told me that you need to try to find a way to answer to your own truth was the voice I needed to be still and listen to.

One of the other great lessons I learned taught to me by my friend and mentor, Maya Angelou and if you can get this, you can save yourself a lot of time. Wendy and I have had many discussions about this, particularly when it comes to men, although she has a very nice one right now. Remember this because this will happen many times in your life:

When people show you who they are, believe them, the first time. Not the 29th time! That is particularly good when it comes to men situations because when he doesn't call back the first time, when you are mistreated the first time, when you see someone who shows you a lack of integrity or dishonesty the first time, know that that will be followed by many, many, many other times that will at some point in life come back to haunt or hurt you. When people show you who they are, believe them, the first time. Live your life from truth and you will survive everything, everything, I believe even death. You will survive everything if you can live your life from the point of view of truth. That took me a while to get, pretending to be something I wasn't, wanting to be somebody I couldn't, but understanding deep inside myself when I was willing to listen, that my own truth and only my own truth could set me free.

Turn your wounds into wisdom. You will be wounded many times in your life. You'll make mistakes. Some people will call them failures but I have learned that failure is really God's way of saying, "Excuse me, you're moving in the wrong direction." It's just an experience, just an experience.

I remember being taken off the air in Baltimore, being told that I was no longer being fit for television and that I could not anchor the news because I used to go out on the stories and my own truth was, even though I am not a weeper, I would cry for the people in the stories, which really wasn't very effective as a news reporter to be covering a fire and crying because the people lost their house [pretending to cry as she said this]. And it wasn't until I was demoted as an on-air anchor woman and thrown into the talk show arena to get rid of me, that I allowed my own truth to come through. The first day I was on the air doing my first talk show back in 1978, it felt like

breathing, which is what your true passion should feel like. It should be so natural to you. And so, I took what had been a mistake, what had been perceived as a failure with my career as an anchor woman in the news business and turned it into a talk show career that's done OK for me!

Be grateful. I have kept a journal since I was 15 years old and if you look back on my journal when I was 15, 16, it's all filled with boy trouble, men trouble, my daddy wouldn't let me go to Shoney's with Anthony Otie, things like that. As I've grown older, I have learned to appreciate living in the moment and I ask that you do, too. I am asking this graduating class, those of you here, I've asked all of my viewers in America and across the world to do this one thing. Keep a grateful journal. Every night list five things that happened this day, in days to come that you are grateful for. What it will begin to do is to change your perspective of your day and your life. I believe that if you can learn to focus on what you have, you will always see that the universe is abundant and you will have more. If you concentrate and focus in your life on what you don't have, you will never have enough. Be grateful. Keep a journal. You all are all over my journal tonight.

Create the highest, grandest vision possible for your life because you become what you believe. When I was little girl, Mississippi, growing up on the farm, only Buckwheat as a role model, watching my grandmother boil clothes in a big, iron pot through the screen door, because we didn't have a washing machine and made everything we had. I watched her and realized somehow inside myself, in the spirit of myself, that although this was segregated Mississippi and I was "colored" and female, that my life could be bigger, greater than what I saw. I remember being four or five years old, I certainly couldn't articulate it, but it was a feeling and a feeling that I allowed myself to follow. I allowed myself to follow it because if you were to ask me what is the secret to my success, it is because I understand that there is a power greater than myself, that rules my life and in life if you can be still long enough in all of your endeavors, the good times, the hard times, to connect yourself to the source, I call it God, you can call it whatever you want to, the force, nature, Allah, the power. If you can connect yourself to the source and allow the energy that is your personality, your life force to be connected to the greater force, anything is possible for you. I am proof of that. I think that my life, the fact that I was born where I was born, and the time that I was and have been able to do what I have done speaks to the possibility. Not that I am special, but that it could be done. Hold the highest, grandest vision for yourself.

Just recently we followed Tina Turner around the country because I wanted to be Tina. So I had me a nice little wig made and I followed Tina Turner because that is what I can do and one of the reasons I wanted to do that is Tina Turner is one of those women who have overcome great obstacles, was battered in her life, and like a phoenix rose out of that to have great legs and a great sense of herself. I wanted to honor other women who had overcome obstacles and to say

that Tina's life, although she is this great stage performer, Tina's life is a mirror of your life because it proves that you can overcome.

Every life speaks to the power of what can be done. So I wanted to honor women all over the country and celebrate their dreams and Tina's tour was called the Wildest Dreams Tour. I asked women to write me their wildest dreams and tell me what their wildest dreams were. Our intention was to fulfill their wildest dreams. We got 77,000 letters, 77,000. To our disappointment we found that the deeper the wound the smaller the dreams. So many women had such small visions, such small dreams for their lives that we had a difficult time coming up with dreams to fulfill. So we did fulfill some. We paid off all the college debt, hmmm, for a young woman whose mother had died and she put her sisters and brothers through school. We paid off all the bills for a woman who had been battered and managed to put herself through college and her daughter through college. We sent a woman to Egypt who was dying of cancer and her lifetime dream was to sit on a camel and use a cell phone. We bought a house for another woman whose dream had always been to have her own home but because she was battered and had to flee with her children one night, had to leave the home seventeen years ago. And then we brought the other women who said we just wanted to see you, Oprah, and meet Tina. That was their dream! Imagine when we paid off the debt, gave the house, gave the trip to Egypt, the attitudes we got from the women who said, "I just want to see you." And some of them afterwards were crying to me saying that "we didn't know, we didn't know, and this is unfair," and I said, that is the lesson: you needed to dream a bigger dream for yourself. That is the lesson. Hold the highest vision possible for your life and it can come true.

I want to leave you with a poem that I say to myself sometimes when I am feeling a little down, although I really don't get down a lot because I know that every experience when it happens, something difficult comes into my life, I say what is it you're here to teach me and what I try to do in my life is to get God on the whisper. He always whispers first. Try to get the whisper before the earthquake comes because the whisper is always followed by a little louder voice, then you get a brick I say, and then sometimes a brick wall, and then the earthquake comes. Try to get it on the whisper. But Maya Angelou wrote a poem and I don't know a poem more fitting than "Phenomenal Woman" for this crowd because you are and these words are for you.

She says:

"Pretty women, honey, they wonder just where my secret lies
`Cause I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model size
But when I start to tell them,
They say, Girl, you're telling lies

And I say, no, honey,
It's in the reach of my arms,
It's in the span of my hips,
It's in the stride of my stepping,
It's in the curl of my lips,
`Cause I'm a woman, honey,
Phenomenally, phenomenal.
Phenomenal woman.

Sometimes I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows either stand up or
Fall down on their knees.
And then they start swarming all around me
Like a hive of honey bees
And I said
Whoopcha must be this fire in my eyes,
Could be the flash of my teeth
Or the swing of my waist
Or just the joy in my feet.
All I know is I'm a woman, you're a woman, we are women, honey
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal women.
Now you understand
Why my head's not bowed.
You won't see me dropping about
Or when you see me coming,
It ought to make you proud, sister girl.
I say,
It's the bend of my hair,
It's in the palm of my hands,
The need for your care.
`Cause I'm a woman, you're a woman, we just women,
We phenomenal, phenomenally phenomenal.
Phenomenal women."*

That's you, Wellesley, that's you. God Bless You!

*Adapted from the poem "Phenomenal Woman," by Maya Angelou.

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