

University of Connecticut  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Commencement Address  
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Dr. Narissa Ramdhani

President Hogan, the Board of Trustees, staff, honored parents and graduands, all protocol observed. Good afternoon. May I say how pleased I am to be here and to be considered worthy of such an honor by the University of Connecticut. Being honored by one's alma mater is clearly such a memorable moment in one's lifetime.

Life is full of challenges but none rivals that of writing a Commencement speech. It is pretty difficult to write. Right now I see before me a sea of young faces intent on getting through today's proceedings and impatient to start their new lives. And I have my own daughter in the audience, who also graduated yesterday. Her instruction to me was "to keep it short and funny Mom." So I scrapped the first draft of this speech on her advice. But while I am not too good at 'funny', I think I am pretty good at 'short'.

I have read and sat through many commencement addresses in my lifetime. But none impressed me more than that by *the* American columnist, author, humorist, 2 time Pulitzer Prize winner and political satirist, Russell Baker who in 1995, addressed the Class of 94, at Connecticut College New London on "10 Ways to Avoid Mucking Up the World Any Worse Than It Already Is." His insight then as to what graduates would relate to is just as apt today. So I make no apology to poaching some of his words and tweaking them a little.

Baker started off by commenting that most commencement speeches are "a ridiculous waste of time". The graduates never take the advice, as he learned from his long experience. The best advice he explained, he could give anybody about going out into the world is this: "Don't do it. I have been out there. It is a mess". This arose from his concern that when he gave a graduating class this homily as far back as 1967, they did not listen. Expressing his disappointment, he explained that "they went forth anyhow, and look what happened. Within a year Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were murdered. Nixon took us all to Watergate. Draft Riots. Defeat in Vietnam. John Lennon killed. Ronald Reagan and his trillion dollar deficit.

All this seems like a long time ago, the mess he referred to were your parents' or even grandparents' problems. You think today's issues are greater – the recession, 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq... very real issues that shape our lives and careers. So looking through Baker's 10 Commandments, they are Today's Top 10 List.

But for the purposes of my address I will focus on what I considered to be the top five.

Point Four: "Don't go around in clothes that talk. There is already too much talk in the world. We've got so many talking people there's hardly anybody

left to listen. With radio and television and telephones we've got talking furniture. With bumper stickers we've got talking cars. Talking clothes just add to the uproar. If you simply cannot resist being an incompetent klutz, don't boast about it by wearing a tee shirt that says 'underachiever and proud of it.' Being dumb is not the worst thing in the world, but letting your clothes shout it out loud depresses the neighbors and embarrasses your parents.

How ironic is that statement from Baker? Today we don't have our names on our clothes, we have designers' – the clothes talk, we talk on mobile phones, and we talk on Skype, on Face book, Twitter. But let's go on.

"Point five: Turn off the TV once or twice a month and pick up a book. It will ease your blood pressure. It might even wake up your mind, but if it puts you to sleep you're still a winner. Better to sleep than have to watch that endless parade of body bags the local news channel marches through your parlor.

I think we can add to this by saying – get off the computer! Stop Tweeting. Stop texting. Have a technology – free day at least once a month. TALK to people face to face & HEAR what they say. And even if it's a Kindle or an iPad, READ a book & read a newspaper every day.

"Six: don't take your gun to town. Don't even leave it home unless you lock all your bullets in a safe deposit box in a faraway bank. The surest way to get shot is not to drop by the nearest convenience store for a bottle of milk at midnight, but to keep a loaded pistol in you own house. What about your constitutional right to bear arms, you say. I would simply point out that you don't have to exercise a constitutional right just because you have it. You have the constitutional right to run for president of the United States, abut most people have too much sense to insist on exercising it.

"Seven: learn to fear the automobile. It is not the trillion-dollar deficit that will finally destroy America. It is the automobile. Congressional studies of future highway needs are terrifying. A typical projection shows that when your generation is middle-aged, Interstate 95 between Miami and Fort Lauderdale will have to be 22 lanes wide to avert total paralysis of south Florida. Imagine an entire country covered with asphalt. My grandfather's generation shot horses. Yours had better learn to shoot automobiles.

With our carbon emissions eating up the planet, how true was this?

"And finally, point 10: smile. You're one of the luckiest people in the world. You're living in America. Enjoy it. I feel obliged to give you this banal advice because, although I've lived through the Great Depression, World War II, terrible wars in Korea and Vietnam, and half a century of cold war, I have never seen a time when there were so many Americans so angry or so mean-spirited or so sour about the country as there are today.

"When they come at you with that , ladies and gentlemen, give them a wink and a smile and a good view of your departing back. And as you stroll away, bend down to smell a flower.

So having shared snippets of Baker's wisdom with you, you can understand why I would re-endorse Baker's heritage as one of the best Commencement speeches I have read. Yet in the same breath, I would hesitate to take his "best advice." I have also been out there in the world. It is a mess and has been for many decades. But this mess has provided for me, as it will for you, the unstinting desire to want to succeed.

Like me, you will turn to your heritage and your dreams to overcome adversity for strong dreams will certainly break strong chains. I often hear young people being somewhat impatient about history, heritage and culture. In today's world of Google, Face book, Twitter and the internet, we seem focused on the now, this instant, and maybe – if we are lucky – tomorrow. The experiences and activities of past days appear to be happily ignored and forgotten. But what is ignored is the sense and understanding that what happens today is tomorrow's history. What we do today, tomorrow and what we experienced yesterday and in the past all serve to shape our futures, our opinions, our lives.

When you look at me, what do you see? A woman of an 'interesting' age, of Asian lineage, but from South Africa? What let me tell you how I see myself. I speak to you today as a South African. As an African. As a Black person in a race conscious South Africa. As a person of Indian origin born and reared in a specific cultural milieu. I represent a generation of South Africans of Indian origin that was confronted by race, racial discrimination, inequality and political oppression-not just disenfranchisement. I represent a generation that in the 1970's and 1980's had made a conscious choice to confront the degrading and painful system of apartheid or racial segregation and its political manifestations in South Africa. Maybe you didn't know that there is a population of over 1.25 million South African citizens of Asian heritage – nearly 3% of the total population? Does it matter, you might ask? It matters to me, has shaped my thoughts, actions, education, marriage, and my career. And furthermore, But being "Indian" in terms of South Africa's race classification was no help. We received inferior education, were deprived of skilled occupations, treated as third class citizens and who, like other Black South Africans were stripped of any sense of dignity and any human right. Race permeated every once of our being.

Simply put, apartheid placed many brick walls on all spheres of our existence in South Africa, from educational opportunities to areas of residence to access to facilities and to career opportunities. Like my late father, I learned that these were temporary setbacks and that brick walls were there for a reason. He taught me that these walls were not there to obstruct us but to allow us to demonstrate how badly we wanted something. Let me recount a personal story. My dad was a horticulturist in South Africa and tried to establish his first

horticultural nursery in our town. The obstacles placed in his path were horrendous. In this regard I recollect accompanying my dad to various white owned businesses where he was verbally abused, treated in a manner that clearly affronted his dignity especially in his young daughter's presence, and in many instances was driven off the business premises of white business individuals. My mum who is in the audience today will I am sure, recall these turbulent times with a great deal of bitterness.

This treatment of my father is a memory that has remained etched in my memory forever. Given his view on brick walls, he remained determined to overcome the adversities created by the system. White South Africa had failed to break his dreams and his spirit. He persevered until he forced this constituency to recognize his skills and hence support his work. In so doing he grew his business to the extent that his horticultural enterprise in apartheid South Africa grew into the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the Southern hemisphere. This was a phenomenal legacy that he left to his family-the lesson that brick walls are merely placed there for individuals who really do not want something bad enough.

Therefore I implore you graduands including my daughter who is here today to expect the appearance of these brick walls in all of your endeavors through life and to cherish them for they will act as the gateway to the success you so desire. Without them you have surely missed something.

Having been the inheritor of such a worthy legacy, I ventured out into the world anticipating these obstacles, developed the necessary mechanisms to navigate them and hence I have, like my father before me, used them to reach unprecedented success. After all, one cannot place value on the power of the mind. As they say in South Africa today, for everything else there is MasterCard. But seriously, racial segregation failed to break my mind and my spirit. I recall during my years at an Indian University in South Africa, my history grades never ventured even onto the borders of respectable. In spite of my numerous attempts to improve on these grades, I did not succeed. Upon trying to establish the reason for this unsatisfactory state of affairs, I was told that in writing of my history essays, I demonstrated intellectual independence. This was not acceptable to apartheid education. What, I asked my history Professor, do you require me to do. She advised that I was merely expected to regurgitate what we were literally fed in class notes and lectures. Any deviation from this was tantamount to political opposition to the system. She went on to coldly point out that Indians "are not allowed to think". But I refused to cave into the system by resolutely maintaining my intellectual independence-with the result that I moved rapidly to earn four more degrees in history including a Ph.D.

Besides the legacy, how did I achieve all this. Ladies and Gentlemen, I had good tailwinds. This was a term coined by Warren Buffet who when questioned about the secret to his success, attributed them to the great tailwinds he was fortunate to have. Before I explain I am going to ask graduands to stand

up and applaud your parents. Now applaud your professors and friends. Thank you. You may be seated. Like you I had the same tailwinds, many of whom are present here today and who were responsible for catapulting me in a world of success and resilience. Because you cannot do it alone. In South Africa we use the term UBUNTHU which means "I am because of you." It is a concept we have even built into every facet of our lives to teach young South Africans that personal and professional successes cannot be obtained in isolation to the community around you.

Hence let me caution you that once you attain success, you need to remember those tailwinds that got you there in the first place. You did not get there on your own. And once you do it you should prepare for the next phase of your life-that of the Enabler. As others have enabled your dreams, so should you do the same for others. Leave a legacy for generations that come after you-a legacy that will undo the mess you inherited in the first place. As I consider myself having reached that phase of my life, I continue to devote much work and personal time devoted to enabling the dreams of other young South Africans. Let me tell you one final story in this regard-that of young Michael Selekane who lived with his family in the remote village of Mabopane in South Africa. Abandoned by the father, Michael and his siblings were sustained though the meager salary of his mother who was a domestic. Young Michael was an art student who I mentored in the course of my development work. But given the impoverished nature of his existence, I learned that even the travel allowance I allocated to him was used to buy the daily bread for his family. Simply put- his was a dead-end existence. But I was strongly of the view that allowing Michael to draw upon my life's lessons, I could fulfill part of my responsibility as the enabler. Today Michael Selekane is South Africa's budding Picasso who has shown his art collections in many parts of the world. As he enjoys a thriving arts career he has succeeded in educating his siblings as well as providing training and employment for other young artists. And more importantly he now works to enable the dreams of other young South Africans.

As a graduate who has benefitted from the tailwinds provided by the UCONN experience, as an academic and as a human being has overcome enormous adversity in difficult times, I implore you as a fellow husky to embrace the challenges you will face after today, to cloak yourselves in it and to celebrate it. This will surely guarantee you the success you desire while at the same time strategically placing you in position that will ensure that you play your part in undoing the mess of this world.

Nelson Mandela, with whom I worked for many years, has been my greatest mentor, enabler and my inspiration. The following words articulated by him clearly emphasize much of what I have said today.

"The working youth is critical to our future. The economy depends on you. Hand-in-hand with the many able professionals in all sectors, you have the

energy to lead the nation in achieving this goal. I pay tribute to the endless heroism of youth the world over. You have energized our entire struggle. Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm-workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another. Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

As I now leave you, I thank the University of Connecticut once again for this great honor I am receiving today and I dedicate it to you-our new graduates as my own small legacy.