**OPRAH WINFREY SPEECH AT HARVARD: MANUSCRIPT**

Oh my goodness! I’m at Harvard! Wow! To President Faust, my fellow honorans, Carl, that was so beautiful, thank you so much, and James Rothenberg, Stephanie Wilson, Harvard faculty, with a special bow to my friend Dr. Henry Lewis Gates. All of you alumni, with a special bow to the Class of ’88, your $115 million. And to you, members of the Harvard class of 2013! Hello!

I thank you for allowing me to be a part of the conclusion of this chapter of your lives and the commencement of your next chapter. To say that I’m honored doesn’t even begin to quantify the depth of gratitude that really accompanies an honorary doctorate from Harvard. Not too many little girls from rural Mississippi have made it all the way here to Cambridge. And I can tell you that I consider today as I sat on the stage this morning getting teary for you all and then teary for myself, I consider today a defining milestone in a very long and a blessed journey.

My one hope today is that I can be a source of some inspiration. I’m going to address my remarks to anybody who has ever felt inferior or felt disadvantaged, felt screwed by life, this is a speech for the Quad.

Actually I was so honored I wanted to do something really special for you. I wanted to be able to have you look under your seats and there would be free master and doctor degrees but I see you got that covered already. I will be honest with you. I felt a lot of pressure over the past few weeks to come up with something that I could share with you that you hadn’t heard before because after all you all went to Harvard, I did not.

But then I realized that you don’t have to necessarily go to Harvard to have a driven obsessive Type A personality. But it helps. And while I may not have graduated from here I admit that my personality is about as Harvard as they come. You know my television career began unexpectedly. As you heard this morning I was in the Miss Fire Prevention contest. That was when I was 16 years old in Nashville, Tennessee, and you had the requirement of having to have red hair in order to win up until the year that I entered.

So they were doing the question and answer period because I knew I wasn’t going to win under the swimsuit competition. So during the question and answer period the question came *“Why, young lady, what would you like to be when you grow up?”* And by the time they got to me all the good answers were gone.

So I had seen Barbara Walters on the *“Today Show”* that morning so I answered, *“I would like to be a journalist. I would like to tell other people’s stories in a way that makes a difference in their lives and the world.”* And as those words were coming out of my mouth I went whoa! This is pretty good. I would like to be a journalist. I want to make a difference.

Well I was on television by the time I was 19 years old. And in 1986 I launched my own television show with a relentless determination to succeed at first. I was nervous about the competition and then I became my own competition raising the bar every year, pushing, pushing, pushing myself as hard as I knew. Sound familiar to anybody here? Eventually we did make it to the top and we stayed there for 25 years.

The *“Oprah Winfrey Show”* was number one in our time slot for 21 years and I have to tell you I became pretty comfortable with that level of success. But a few years ago I decided, as you will at some point, that it was time to recalculate, find new territory, break new ground. So I ended the show and launched OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network. The initials just worked out for me.

So one year later after launching OWN, nearly every media outlet had proclaimed that my new venture was a flop. Not just a flop, but a big bold flop they call it. I can still remember the day I opened up USA Today and read the headline *“Oprah, not quite standing on her OWN.”* I mean really, USA Today? Now that’s the nice newspaper! It really was this time last year the worst period in my professional life. I was stressed and I was frustrated and quite frankly I was actually — I was embarrassed.

It was right around that time that President Faust called and asked me to speak here and I thought you want me to speak to Harvard graduates? What could I possibly say to Harvard graduates, some of the most successful graduates in the world in the very moment when I had stopped succeeding?

So I got off the phone with President Faust and I went to the shower. It was either that or a bag of Oreos. So I chose the shower. And I was in the shower a long time and as I was in the shower the words of an old hymn came to me. You may not know it. It’s *“By and by, when the morning comes.”* And I started thinking about when the morning might come because at the time I thought I was stuck in a hole. And the words came to me *“Trouble don’t last always”* from that hymn, *“this too shall pass.”* And I thought as I got out of the shower I am going to turn this thing around and I will be better for it. And when I do, I’m going to go to Harvard and I’m going to speak the truth of it! So I’m here today to tell you I have turned that network around.

And it was all because I wanted to do it by the time I got to speak to you all, so thank you so much. You don’t know what motivation you were for me, thank you. I’m even prouder to share a fundamental truth that you might not have learned even as graduates of Harvard unless you studied the ancient Greek hero with Professor Nagy. Professor Nagy as we were coming in this morning said, *“Please Ms. Winfrey, walk decisively.”*

I shall walk decisively.

This is what I want to share. It doesn’t matter how far you might rise. At some point you are bound to stumble because if you’re constantly doing what we do, raising the bar. If you’re constantly pushing yourself higher, higher the law of averages not to mention the Myth of Icarus predicts that you will at some point fall. And when you do I want you to know this, remember this: *there is no such thing as failure*. Failure is just life trying to move us in another direction.

Now when you’re down there in the hole, it looks like failure. So this past year I had to spoon feed those words to myself. And when you’re down in the hole, when that moment comes, it’s really okay to feel bad for a little while. Give yourself time to mourn what you think you may have lost but then here’s the key: learn from every mistake because every experience, encounter, and particularly your mistakes are there to teach you and force you into being more of who you are. And then figure out what is the next right move.

And the key to life is to develop an internal moral, *emotional GPS* that can tell you which way to go. Because now and forever more when you Google yourself your search results will read *“Harvard, 2013”.* And in a very competitive world that really is a calling card because I can tell you as one who employs a lot of people when I see *“Harvard”* I sit up a little straighter and say, *“Where is he or she? Bring them in.”* It’s an impressive calling card that can lead to even more impressive bullets in the years ahead: lawyer, senator, CEO, scientist, physicist, winners of Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes or late night talk show host.

But the challenge of life I have found is to build a résumé that doesn’t simply tell a story about what you want to be but it’s a story about who you want to be. It’s a résumé that doesn’t just tell a story about what you want to accomplish but why. A story that’s not just a collection of titles and positions but a story that’s really about your purpose. Because when you inevitably stumble and find yourself stuck in a hole that is the story that will get you out.

What is your true calling? What is your dharma? What is your purpose? For me that discovery came in 1994 when I interviewed a little girl who had decided to collect pocket change in order to help other people in need. She raised a thousand dollars all by herself and I thought, well if that little 9-year-old girl with a bucket and big heart could do that, I wonder what I could do? So I asked for our viewers to take up their own change collection and in one month, just from pennies and nickels and dimes, we raised more than three million dollars that we used to send one student from every state in the United States to college. That was the beginning of the Angel Network.

And so what I did was I simply asked our viewers, *“Do what you can wherever you are, from wherever you sit in life. Give me your time or your talent your money if you have it.”* And they did. Extend yourself in kindness to other human beings wherever you can. And together we built 55 schools in 12 different countries and restored nearly 300 homes that were devastated by hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

So the Angel Network — I have been on the air for a long time — but it was the Angel Network that actually focused my internal GPS. It helped me to decide that I wasn’t going to just be on TV every day but that the goal of my shows, my interviews, my business, my philanthropy all of it, whatever ventures I might pursue would be to make clear that what unites us is ultimately far more redeeming and compelling than anything that separates me.

Because what had become clear to me, and I want you to know, it isn’t always clear in the beginning because as I said I had been on television since I was 19 years old. But around ’94 I got really clear. So don’t expect the clarity to come all at once, to know your purpose right away, but what became clear to me was that I was here on Earth to use television and not be used by it; to use television to illuminate the transcendent power of our better angels.

So this Angel Network, it didn’t just change the lives of those who were helped, but the lives of those who also did the helping. It reminded us that no matter who we are or what we look like or what we may believe, it is both possible and more importantly it becomes powerful to come together in common purpose and common effort.

I saw something on the *Bill Moore Show* recently that so reminded me of this point. It was an interview with David and Francine Wheeler. They lost their 7-year-old son, Ben, in the Sandy Hook tragedy. And even though gun safety legislation to strengthen background checks had just been voted down in Congress at the time that they were doing this interview they talked about how they refused to be discouraged. Francine said this, she said, *“Our hearts are broken but our spirits are not. I’m going to tell them what it’s like to find a conversation about change that is love, and I’m going to do that without fighting them.”*

And then her husband David added this, *“You simply cannot demonize or vilify someone who doesn’t agree with you, because the minute you do that, your discussion is over. And we cannot do that any longer. The problem is too enormous. There has to be some way that this darkness can be banished with light.”*

In our political system and in the media we often see the reflection of a country that is polarized, that is paralyzed and is self-interested. And yet, I know you know the truth. We all know that we are better than the cynicism and the pessimism that is regurgitated throughout Washington and the 24-hour cable news cycle. Not my channel, by the way. We understand that the vast majority of people in this country believe in stronger background checks because they realize that we can uphold the Second Amendment and also reduce the violence that is robbing us of our children. They don’t have to be incompatible.

And we understand that most Americans believe in a clear path to citizenship for the 12 million undocumented immigrants who reside in this country because it’s possible to both enforce our laws and at the same time embrace the words on the Statue of Liberty that have welcomed generations of huddled masses to our shores. We can do both.

And we understand. I know you do because you went to Harvard. That people from both parties, and no party, believe that indigent mothers and families should have access to healthy food and a roof over their heads and a strong public education, because here in the richest nation on Earth, we can afford a basic level of security and opportunity. So the question is, what are we going to do about it? Really, what are you going to do about it?

Maybe you agree with these beliefs. Maybe you don’t. Maybe you care about these issues and maybe there are other challenges that you, Class of 2013, are passionate about. Maybe you want to make a difference by serving in government. Maybe you want to launch your own television show. Or maybe you simply want to collect some change. Your parents would appreciate that about now.

The point is your generation is charged with this task of breaking through what the body politic has thus far made impervious to change. Each of you has been blessed with this enormous opportunity of attending this prestigious school. You now have a chance to better your life, the lives of your neighbors and also the life of our country. When you do that let me tell you what I know for sure. That’s when your story gets really good.

Maya Angelou always says, *“When you learn, teach. When you get, give. That my friends is what gives your story purpose and meaning.”* So you all have the power in your own way to develop your own Angel Network and in doing so, your class will be armed with more tools of influence and empowerment than any other generation in history. I did it in an analog world. I was blessed with a platform that at its height reached nearly 20 million viewers a day. Now here in a world of Twitter and Facebook and YouTube and Tumblr, you can reach billions in just seconds. You’re the generation that rejected predictions about your detachment and your disengagement by showing up to vote in record numbers in 2008. And when the pundits said, they said they talked about you, they said you’d be too disappointed, you’d be too dejected to repeat that same kind of turnout in 2012 election and you proved them wrong by showing up in even greater numbers. That’s who you are.

This generation, your generation I know, has developed a finely honed radar for B.S. Can you say “B.S.” at Harvard? The spin and phoniness and artificial nastiness that saturates so much of our national debate. I know you all understand better than most that real progress requires authentic — an authentic way of being, honesty, and above all empathy. I have to say that the single most important lesson I learned in 25 years talking every single day to people, was that there is a common denominator in our human experience. Most of us, I tell you we don’t want to be divided. What we want, the common denominator that I found in every single interview, is we want to be validated. We want to be understood.

I have done over 35,000 interviews in my career and as soon as that camera shuts off everyone always turns to me and inevitably in their own way asks this question “*Was that okay?”* I heard it from President Bush, I heard it from President Obama. I’ve heard it from heroes and from housewives. I’ve heard it from victims and perpetrators of crimes. I even heard it from Beyonce and all of her Beyonceness. She finishes performing, hands me the microphone and says, *“Was that okay?”*

Friends and family, yours, enemies, strangers in every argument in every encounter, every exchange I will tell you, they all want to know one thing: *Was that okay? Did you hear me? Do you see me? Did what I say mean anything to you?* And even though this is a college where Facebook was born my hope is that you would try to go out and have more face-to-face conversations with people you may disagree with.

That you’ll have the courage to look them in the eye and hear their point of view and help make sure that the speed and distance and anonymity of our world doesn’t cause us to lose our ability to stand in somebody else’s shoes and recognize all that we share as a people. This is imperative, for you as an individual, and for our success as a nation. *“There has to be some way that this darkness can be banished with light,”* says the man whose little boy was massacred on just an ordinary Friday in December.

So whether you call it soul or spirit or higher self, intelligence, there is I know this, there is a light inside each of you, all of us, that illuminates your very human beingness if you let it. And as a young girl from rural Mississippi I learned long ago that being myself was much easier than pretending to be Barbara Walters. Although when I first started because I had Barbara in my head I would try to sit like Barbara, talk like Barbara, move like Barbara and then one night I was on the news reading the news and I called Canada “Can-a-da,” and that was the end of me being Barbara. I cracked myself up on TV. Couldn’t start laughing and my real personality came through and I figured out, oh gee, I can be a much better Oprah than I could be a pretend Barbara.

I know that you all might have a little anxiety now and hesitation about leaving the comfort of college and putting those Harvard credentials to the test. But no matter what challenges or setbacks or disappointments you may encounter along the way, you will find true success and happiness if you have only one goal, there really is only one, and that is this: *to fulfill the highest most truthful expression of yourself as a human being*. You want to max out your humanity by using your energy to lift yourself up, your family and the people around you.

Theologian Howard Thurman said it best. He said, *“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”* The world needs — people like Michael Stolzenberg from Fort Lauderdale. When Michael was just 8 years old Michael nearly died from a bacterial infection that cost him both of his hands and both of his feet. And in an instant, this vibrant little boy became a quadruple amputee and his life was changed forever.

But in losing who he once was Michael discovered who he wanted to be. He refused to sit in that wheelchair all day and feel sorry for himself so with prosthetics he learned to walk and run and play again. He joined his middle school lacrosse team and last month when he learned that so many victims of the Boston Marathon bombing would become new amputees, Michael decided to banish that darkness with light. Michael and his brother, Harris, created Mikeysrun.com to raise $1 million for other amputees — by the time Harris runs the 2014 Boston Marathon. More than 1,000 miles away from here these two young brothers are bringing people together to support this Boston community the way their community came together to support Michael.

And when this 13-year-old man was asked about his fellow amputees he said this, *“First they will be sad. They’re losing something they will never get back and that’s scary. I was scared. But they’ll be okay. They just don’t know that yet.”* We might not always know it. We might not always see it, or hear it on the news or even feel it in our daily lives, but I have faith that no matter what, Class of 2013, you will be okay and you will make sure our country is okay.

I have faith because of that 9-year-old girl who went out and collected the change. I have faith because of David and Francine Wheeler, I have faith because of Michael and Harris Stolzenberg, and I have faith because of you, the network of angels sitting here today. One of them Khadijah Williams, who came to Harvard four years ago. Khadijah had attended 12 schools in 12 years, living out of garbage bags amongst pimps and prostitutes and drug dealers; homeless, going in to department stores, Wal-Mart in the morning to bathe herself so that she wouldn’t smell in front of her classmates, and today she graduates as a member of the Harvard Class of 2013.

From time to time you may stumble, fall, you will for sure, count on this. No doubt, you will have questions and you will have doubts about your path. But I know this, if you’re willing to listen to, be guided by, that still small voice that is the GPS within yourself, to find out what makes you come alive, you will be more than okay. You will be happy, you will be successful, and you will make a difference in the world.

Congratulations Class of 2013. Congratulations to your family and friends. Good luck, and thank you for listening.

Was that okay?