

Words

Commencement Remarks

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Good morning. On this wonderful day, let me add my own heartfelt greetings to parents, family members, Trustees, members of the faculty, and honored guests in attendance at this celebratory event: Skidmore College's 103rd Commencement.

Above all, to the members of the Skidmore College Class of 2014 both undergraduates and those receiving Master's degrees today, congratulations!

The seventeen national flags arrayed on either side of the stage represent the homelands of those graduating seniors who have traveled far to learn with us and who, in turn, have enriched the Skidmore community with their presence and their perspectives.

We cloak important transitions in symbolism: The bagpipers who led the majority of you into the Opening Convocation in September of your Freshman year today reappear to herald your final moments as Skidmore students and then, at the end of this ceremony, to take you out into your new lives as Skidmore alumni. Four years ago, at that Opening Convocation, those of you who then were first-year students wore your red class t-shirts, representing the bonds you would establish with your classmates. Today you have made friendships that will remain with you for the rest of your lives.

Your academic robe and accompanying flourishes serve as outward signs of your hard won academic accomplishments. I hope that each of you is proud of what is represented by what you wear today. And by the way, your gowns are made of recycled materials, as one more symbol highlighting our commitment to environmental sustainability.

The ornate regalia in evidence here today connects each of us to the rich and abiding history of higher learning. This particular form of dress hearkens back to the medieval university, representing a continuity of experience extending across nine centuries. It also reminds us that yours is one of many generations of young people who have come to the academy seeking both wisdom and preparation for productive and meaningful lives. Those of us on stage wear our own academic robes to signify that we too have made a similar journey. This is *your* moment of transition, triumph, and (no doubt, some) trepidation, but you can take a measure of encouragement in the fact that we and countless others have traveled this path ahead of you.

Before we send you out into the world wrapped in the hopes and dreams of your parents, other family members, and good friends, let me offer just one hope of my own for your future: I hope that, in your time at Skidmore, the comments of your professors, along with your own work in traversing our curriculum, have impressed upon you the power of language. If you were to take just one primary lesson from your liberal education this realization would be a very good one: Words have meaning. Meanings do evolve over time in living languages, but words nonetheless carry with them the sedimentation of past usages that can be discovered and invoked, and that should not be lightly ignored. We are creatures who make sense of things through the narratives we construct about our world and our lives. It is simply not possible to overstate the importance of this aspect of human affairs.

Consider the following fable that is embedded in Marcus Zusak's lyrical and poignant novel *The Book Thief*¹, which tells the story of Liesel, a young girl growing up in Nazi Germany during World War II who falls in love with reading and writing. It is written by her friend Max, who is a Jew hiding from the Nazis.

There was once a strange, small man. He decided three important details about his life:

1. He would part his hair from the opposite side to everyone else.
2. He would make himself a small, strange mustache.
3. He would one day rule the world.

The young man wandered around for quite some time, thinking, planning, and figuring out exactly how to make the world his. Then one day out of nowhere, it struck him – the perfect plan. He'd seen a mother walking with her child. At one point, she admonished the small boy, until finally, he began to cry. Within a few minutes, she spoke softly to him, after which he was soothed and even smiled.

The young man rushed to the woman and embraced her. "Words!" He grinned.

"What?"

But there was no reply. He was already gone.

Yes, the Führer decided that he would rule the world with words. "I will never fire a gun," he devised. "I will not have to." Still, he was not rash. Let's allow him at least that much. He was not a stupid man at all. His first plan of attack was to plant the words in as many areas of his homeland as possible.

¹Marcus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

He planted them day and night, and cultivated them.

He watched them grow, until eventually, great forests of words had risen throughout Germany. ... It was a nation of farmed thoughts.

That is the end of the fable.

The words planted by Adolf Hitler (and many others) did indeed grow until their shadow threatened to occlude the sun across the entire world. The vision those words described was opposed by many courageous Germans and by people of other nations as well – the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the British political leader Winston Churchill come immediately to mind. But such critical perspectives were too often drowned out by the voices of too many others who either were indifferent or simply failed to understand the implications of what the Nazis' were saying.

In the end, the narratives of anti-Semitism and unbridled nationalism that took hold in Nazi Germany led to horrific actions that had to be opposed not only by words but also by actions. Millions of lives and much treasure were sacrificed before the rest of the world overcame the effects of those words. And unfortunately, they still hold sway over too many minds even today.

I apologize for dwelling, on this day of celebration, upon an unhappy example of the power of narrative to affect human lives. So let us also be reminded of the power of words to inspire us to make our world a brighter place. Consider the following sentences:

We hold these truths to be self-evident

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.

I have a dream today.

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. (Nelson Mandela)

When you know better, you do better. (Maya Angelou)

Because of the explosive growth of social media – from Facebook to Twitter to Tumblr to Pinterest (yes, your President knows what these are) – and other electronic means of

communication, our capacity to create and disseminate narratives has increased exponentially. As a result, today words of all kinds are being planted across the world at an unprecedented rate:

- words about climate change,
- words about who gets to shape our political discourse and who gets to vote,
- words about the kind of education your children will receive in their schools,
- words about the fundamental principles that should guide the formation of a government in those parts of the world undergoing massive political change,
- words about what constitutes the good life for a human being,
- words that ultimately will define the kind of world you, and your children, and your grandchildren will inhabit as the years go forward.

Your Skidmore education should help you understand the importance of what we say about these and other topics of note, especially in our political discourse.

On a more personal scale, as the young man in Zusak’s fable discovered, words can hurt or soothe. This past year, some of you graduates participated in projects such as “On the Record” and “I Too Am Skidmore,” pointing out, yet again, that words spoken on the Skidmore campus can help to build up our community or tear it down. Words have power. And through *your* words, you students who created these projects have reminded us of our deepest values as an educational community – principal among them, the requirement always to treat one another with respect, even when we disagree or approach the world from different perspectives. I applaud you for your efforts and for your attention to the narratives that define the Skidmore community.

So, members of the Class of 2014, as you chart your paths toward the realization of your own dreams, pay attention to the words *you* choose to plant along the way – what you say to your friends, to those you love, to your colleagues at work, to total strangers. Words have meaning. Arguments have logical (or illogical) structure, and they depend upon factual claims that can be verified or refuted. These meanings and structures need to be interrogated and, in many instances, challenged. Our political leaders – and ultimately all of us as citizens of a democracy – need to be held accountable for what we say. As beneficiaries of a liberal education, you possess the intellectual tools to do this crucial work. My hope is that, in your lives as informed responsible adult human beings, you will use those tools and pay close attention to the words that you and others are planting across our land and across the globe.

Winston Churchill once remarked that “we build our buildings, and then they build us.” My point is that we construct great structures of words in which we also dwell. These linguistic structures can be as invisible to us as the air we breathe. Or we can choose to see them – to make them visible, to understand how profoundly they shape our lives, and take full responsibility for our own role in creating our own narratives and contributing to the greater human story. Plant and cultivate your own words carefully. And notice what others are sowing as well. Words have meaning. Words have power.

Thank you for your kind attention.