

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

BY

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PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA, FLORIDA

ST. PETE TIMES FORUM (DOWNTOWN TAMPA)

MAY 9, 2009

President Ronald L. Vaughan
Members of the Board of Trustees
Faculty, staff and students
Members of the Graduating Class of 2009
Parents, Family and Friends
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I thank you, most kindly, President Vaughan, for inviting me to deliver this Commencement Address to the 2009 Graduates of the University of Tampa. It is a distinct honor for me to be at UT, this institution of academic excellence which, under your leadership, has experienced growth and expansion unseen in its history, and which has attracted students from all over these United States and some 100 other countries.

Permit me to acknowledge Mr. David Straz, a UT Trustee and Honorary Consul of Liberia, who was very instrumental in making my presence here today possible.

The University's website pointed out, in its story about me, that I have received "seven honorary doctorate degrees from universities around the world". What the story didn't mention is that no matter how many awards and honors a person receives in his or her lifetime, each one is unique, each one has special meaning, and each one holds a singular place in one's heart. I am therefore elated that this esteemed University of Tampa has bestowed upon me an honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters. I shall cherish, always, this institution's recognition of what I have accomplished in my life to make our world, especially my little corner of it, a better place. I thank you most sincerely.

Today, at this University of Tampa, across the state of Florida, and throughout these fifty United States, it is graduation season. You, the Graduates, having earned your Bachelor or Master degree, will now fan out across this vast country and abroad, ready and eager to join the workforce, to embark upon successful careers, and to make your respective mark in the world. You have studied hard, and played by the rules, expecting that, at the end of the day, society will offer the kind of job you studied and prepared for, for so long.

But it will not be so easy because these are not normal times, not here in Florida, or elsewhere in America, not in the world. Pick up any newspaper, turn on the radio or television, or surf the Internet, and the news is grim. Headlines report, in addition to a possible H1N1 flu pandemic, speak of recession, contracting demand, government bailouts, bankruptcies of banking and manufacturing giants, frozen credit facilities, massive job layoffs, unprecedented income losses, rising unemployment, plummeting home values and foreclosures – the list goes on. And this is happening in America, the richest country, which leads the world in all important indicators. The American economy now in hiccups has sent shivers throughout the world.

In this gloomy economic climate, I have pondered over what words of hope and inspiration I could impart to this Graduating Class of 2009. How can I give words of assurance that would help guide you through this rough patch as we await a global upswing and better days. After all, I should be an expert in positive thinking. I am President of a country which having experienced economic free fall for a decade engaged in total self destruction over the course of the following 14-year civil war. Today against all odds, we are emerging from this dark past with clearly visible signs of economic reconstruction and national renewal. In similar manner, I was an avowed optimist to have believed, in 2005, that as a woman I could run for President of Liberia and win. But against all odds, I did, becoming Liberia's and Africa's first democratically elected woman President.

I therefore believe that this global financial storm will pass. For those among you who have found a job, I congratulate you because you've worked hard and you deserve to be rewarded. Not all of you would have landed that perfect job, but that will come if you're willing, at this juncture, to accept what's available, and to build upon your skills while positioning yourself for that dream job for which you will be better prepared when the global economy rebounds, as surely it will.

Don't be deterred in looking for work merely because it's not in the area you studied. Look upon such positions as stepping-stones that will get you to that great job.

Among the many things you might consider are: to continue to utilize the University's career counseling center in your search for a better job; to network to learn about job openings and other opportunities; to attend seminars and workshops to enhance your skills; to volunteer; to consider public service and what you can do for your country. For

example, I urge you to consider working overseas in a developing country, such as my own, for a time, to share your knowledge and experience with people who need so much and have so little. You too would be enriched and more informed by such experience.

Ultimately, though, what is important is to do something that you enjoy – a job you won't mind getting out of bed each morning to go to, and where the hours fly by so fast you don't notice the time and keep on working. I believe that you can find that kind of personal satisfaction in your work, and you will.

It is also encouraging that, even during this recession, there are certain industries that continue to hire, among which are the health care and teaching professions. I read that major universities are proving to be recession-proof. My hunch is that many young people, finding the job market tight, have opted to continue with their education to make them more marketable down the road. We hear more and more that having only a Bachelor's degree is no longer sufficient in a competitive global job market, and so getting a Master's is deemed essential. That is one option.

Let me say to you proud parents a big congratulation for a job well done in supporting your child's education up to this point. For those of you who thought you could now turn that extra bedroom into a workspace, hold up a minute, especially if your Graduate has to move back home because he or she has not yet landed that job that will enable them to leave home. But that day will come, with your help and steadfast support, and until then, hang in there!

Ladies and Gentlemen, In addressing this Graduating Class of 2009 today, I hope that my own life can serve as an example and inspiration to you, to never, never give up on your

dreams, to stand up for what you believe in, and to persevere through good times and bad.

By the time I was the age of many of you undergraduates, I was already married – straight out of high school – and was well on my way to becoming the mother of four young sons, with no future in sight.

As my more affluent friends went abroad to study, many to this country, I had to go to work, in order to make ends meet, first as a secretary, and then as an accountant's assistant at a garage. I worked, and raised my sons, and was depressed about my future. Surely, this could not be the end for me, I thought. I had always believed in my own potential, and I knew it did not lie in a dead-end job or simply raising children, however much I loved my boys.

My first chance to change the course of my life came when my husband was awarded a government scholarship to pursue his Master's at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I applied for one too, so that I could accompany him and further my own studies. My mother and I pleaded and begged for a scholarship until, finally, one was granted, and I was able to study business at the Madison Business College, starting in the fall of 1962. We struggled. I waited on tables, kept records in a muffler sales outfit to make ends meet, then returned home and took a job to which I committed everything to succeed. A few years later another door opened for me-the chance to earn a masters degree in Public Administration at Harvard Kennedy School of Government. More positions, more difficulties and more milestones followed.

As the records show, early 2005 when I ran for president, the odds were solidly against me. But, undaunted, I threw my hat into the ring, one woman against a slew of men, some of them very well funded, yet convinced that this time around, things would be different.

I polled second in the voting on Election Day 2005. With no clear winner, a runoff was held on November 8, and I won, receiving over 60 percent of the vote, and was subsequently declared the twenty-third President of the Republic of Liberia, at my Inauguration on January 16, 2006.

In Liberia today, things are looking up, and the bad news is beginning to change. We are well on the path to fulfilling some of our promises, having launched a four-pronged Poverty Reduction Strategy covering Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance and the Rule of Law, and Infrastructure and Basic Services. We are well on the path to removing from the backs of this and future generations the hefty \$4.9 billion twenty years unserviced external debt which we inherited.

So you see, Dear Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen, I rose from a “desperate housewife” to become President of my country. Do you see what I mean about never giving up on your dreams? Persistence and perseverance paid off in my case; you, too, can achieve your highest goals. Mine has been a remarkable journey, in a country and a continent where no woman had ever succeeded to such a height. I had a dream, my Dear Graduates, and I did not, indeed I could not, give it up. That, in essence, is my message to you.

One of my greatest commitments as President is to provide decent education to the children of Liberia, especially the neglected girl child, and to encourage more young women to postpone motherhood and complete their education. In looking out at this

2009 Graduating Class, I see as many young women as men among you, which is so wonderful. That is a statistic which we, in my part of the world, can only dream about, pray for, and aspire to. We remain hopeful that someday, in the not too distant future, that dream will also come to fruition.

You, the 2009 Graduates of the University of Tampa, are blessed and fortunate to live in a country of bounteous wealth and boundless opportunities. Always remember that, even when times seem tough! A revolutionary change is taking place in your lives. After today, some of you may no longer be classified as students. As you move from the classroom and into the real world, as you transition from student to employee, it is important that you continue to expand your knowledge and horizons that you get involved because life is not a spectator sport. It is important that you remain competitive by embracing innovation. I hear that "Green" is the next big industry; so on your road to success, think of ways you can use your creative energies to tap into that field. And, above all, and in all things, be true to yourself and to your values.

To the faculty and staff of this great university, I say thank you for educating and preparing this fine corps of graduates to take their place in the world.

To the proud parents, grandparents, family and friends, bravo for a job well done, in providing the financial and emotional support your children have needed these many years to reach this highpoint in their educational journey. I know exactly how you feel today, and can empathize because, as a parent and grandparent, I, too, have been there!

Finally, I salute you, the 2009 Graduates of the University of Tampa, and I wish you a successful and productive life in your chosen career path. Congratulations!!!

I thank you.