

Address by

By

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia

at the

8th Commencement Convocation

Of the

African Methodist Episcopal University

Monrovia, Liberia

Friday, 23rd November 2007

Honorable Members of the Legislature here present;
Honorable Members of the Judiciary here present;
Honorable Cabinet Ministers and Officials of Government;
Traditional Leaders;
Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Bishop David Daniels;
Members of the Board of Trustees;
President Jean Bell Manning;
Members of the Faculty and Staff of AMEU;
Distinguished Graduates;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to by your invitation and pleased to participate in this 8th Commencement Convocation of the African Methodist Episcopal University – and to serve as Commencement Speaker. I am even more honored to have been selected as one of those to receive an Honorary Doctoral Degree today.

My remarks will concentrate on the theme, “the Pursuit of Excellence”, your University’s motto.

Excellence is the quality of being excellent. Therefore, anything that is excellent is exceptionally good; it is first-class, it is first-rate, it is great, it is superb, it is superior, it is unsurpassed. I think you have the picture. When something is excellent, it is simply unbeatable. So to be excellent is to be in a class by yourself, uncommon, unequalled in any arena of human endeavor.

Excellence is the exceptional or first-rate feat, achievable through conscious and determined efforts in the various stages of intellectual, academic or professional endeavor.

Excellence is a timeless and cherished virtue that each generation of human civilization strive to achieve in the Sciences, Arts, Technology, as well as in the conduct of human affairs. Excellence is a principle that each of us aspire to attain. Excellence is a self-imposed goal that is indispensable for the achievement of greatness.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

With these brief comments and for the purpose of this occasion, let me share some of my personal experiences to make these remarks meaningful and

relevant, especially for the graduates as they prepare to enter the world of work and family life.

Many of you, especially the young ladies who will soon receive diplomas, see me stand before you – and maybe marvel: How did she achieve this height? Excellence and Greatness come with a high price: they require dedication; they require focused determination and sacrifice; they require discipline; and they require commitment; they require an unwillingness to settle for the mediocre, to settle for second best; and to be confounded and unyielding to challenges or obstacles. I have told the story many times, but I will tell it here for the benefit of the young female graduates. I left high school at age 17 and became a young mother who bore and raised four wonderful boys before obtaining the opportunity to pursue undergraduate and graduate education. In many instances this implied combining the chores of motherhood with the responsibilities of work in an environment dominated by men. It was never easy, but I also never quit. I also never listened to those who tried to convince me that there were easy paths to choose in life.

I therefore learned, as I look back on my life, that one cannot cultivate the values of excellence and greatness without an uncommon and strong determination to overcome adversities and failures. I learned that adversity and failure rather than weakening us, should strengthen our resolve to persist and to excel.

Yet, there are factors or situations that often intervene to make the attainment of excellence and greatness difficult. And I will identify a few of these factors:

- If we lack the means to pursue our life's goal and consider such lack of means as a permanent condition.
- Our inability to control our impulse, especially the impulse that leads us to engage in habits to retard or stunt our growth and fulfillment of our individual dreams.
- Complacency that makes us gullible and willing to leave our destiny to fate, to chance.
- A self-defeating spirit that makes us surrender ourselves to feelings of fear, loneliness, depression, and despair, because of the confluence of events in our environment that makes everything seem hopeless and meaningless.

Yet, these are only life's challenges meant to test our will to survive and to succeed. They never cause us to give up the challenge of pursuing and achieving excellence and greatness in life.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The attainment of excellence and greatness requires the capacity to exercise self-control in everything we undertake to do. Often, our passions, left unchecked and unregulated, overwhelm us and our reason and our capacity to achieve excellence and greatness. For one to be excellent and great, we must learn and practice the virtue of empathy. We must also learn and practice the virtue of eschewing the vices of hate and racism and envy and bigotry.

To attain excellence and greatness, we must individually and collectively work to positively impact our communities and our societies right here, beginning now.

When we eventually attain excellence, we must learn and practice the virtues of humility, a strong sense of commitment to social justice, and empathy to the plight of the least.

In my own life, as I have tried to pursue and attain excellence in my family, academic, professional, and political life, to reach the level where I find myself today, I have never lost sight of my focus—that is, to pursue and succeed at each leadership opportunity until I became the President. My overarching objective in this regard is to rescue our country from years of ruthless exploitation, political repression, and economic and social decay. But even as I pursued the presidency of Liberia, I always knew and was committed to the fundamental principle that this would be a challenge for purposes greater than myself, that it would be for the country, and for the young women and young men who for more than 25 years have neither known peace, security and happiness, nor have been allowed to live lives as we knew life: enjoying childhood innocence, going to school and having normal school day activities and real classroom learning, being children and sharing love and happiness with parents and grandparents.

Pursuing the presidency in a post conflict environment was not without challenges and risks and dangers. It was struggle against powerful and dangerous forces. But I was fearless and persisted, because ultimately, I believed that the sacrifice was worth making for the good and the future of

the many children who cried daily for redemption and freedom and opportunity. Here, the lesson is that the pursuit of excellence and greatness neither flinches nor is it cowed by adversity regardless of its magnitude and scope.

Throughout my life, I have sought to achieve excellence in everything I have undertaken to do. I have sought to bring commitment. I have sought to bring sincerity and dedication. I have sought to give my best.

Let me speak to the distinguished members of the graduating class. Your generation is especially challenged because of the state of the nation. Some of you will go directly in to the work force and some will seek further education. Whatever you decide to do, do it excellently and with determination. It will not be easy.

We are faced with the challenge of rebuilding this nation which will require that you give your best. Be willing to work hard and to make sacrifices to achieve your goals. Nothing in life is easy. Keep in mind the four pillars upon which our reconstruction and development efforts are built: Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance and the Rule of Law and Infrastructure and Basic Services. We need you to join in the process with a new attitude - patriotism, hard work, perseverance, sacrifice - and I can assure you that we will succeed. I appeal to all of you to bring your best to the table and join in restoring Liberia to its true potential. You are our leaders of tomorrow, our hope for the future. We want to use your strengths your creative minds for national renewal. This will add meaning and impetus to our process.

In each person's journey of life, commencement convocations are among the most memorable of occasions, representing achievement of great milestones, critical turning points, and a future of promise and challenge.

As you leave AMEU, I urge you to pursue excellence in all that you undertake to do, in small things, and in big endeavors. But remember, never give up; never yield; always have faith in yourself and in your ability to overcome adversity; never allow anyone to set limits for how much you can do and achieve, and how far you can grow; always remain focused and determined and committed. If you remain persistent and focused with a clear goal, you will achieve excellence. And your community and society and our country will be better because you refused to yield.

Go out from AMEU and achieve your potential. Reach for the highest you can obtain. Strive for excellence in all that you do.

I thank you.