

Keynote Address

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A Care for Particulars

African Diaspora Student Graduating Class of 2018

Center for Cultural Diversity

Joe Crowley Student Union

University of Nevada, Reno

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Prelude –

[Walk to stage, –place Address on the podium. Then walk to front center stage facing the students, faculty, parents, and colleagues; take pause to see all of them, eye to eye; hold the moment. Ritual: kneel, gently touch forehead then ground with right hand open palm; stand and repeat the gesture facing all four corners of the Earth: South, West, North, East. Return to honorees; brief dance].

Amidst indigenous cultural practices around the globe, the *Dance, dancing*, is traditionally understood to signify and mark the momentous occasions of life. Dancing, in fact, is one of the most notable ways of rising to such occasions and acknowledging the moment with honor: at times of birth and at times of death; on becoming 12 or 13 years of age, 15, or 16. The dance commemorates unions made in marriage; it also punctuates times of peace following the ravages of war. And it is most certainly a way in which to honor the occasion of graduating. *Not to*

dance is not to rise to the occasion. And so we rise,—and I dance for you—the graduating students of 2018.

When I graduated with my classmates, we were all expected to dance across the stage before taking hold of our diplomas. That was quite a while ago, and it was in California, and as we know, California is a different country. So not to worry—I will not expect you to dance here today. But for me, dancing across that stage always held a certain kind of meaning, a kind of *gravitas* in my consciousness, and I found myself revisiting its meaning as I began to prepare what I wanted to share with you today.

When we danced across and through the space between our chairs and the professor holding our degrees, we entered an in-between place where *what was* was no longer, and *what was to be* could only be anticipated. We danced into that place of *transition*; in fact, the dancing itself became the concrete manifestation of the transition making us.

This day signals that in-between place. We are here together gathered, that we may, all of us, take pause alongside each of you,—and

like Yanūs, or Janus, the Roman god of entrances and exits, endings and beginnings, we hold this existential moment with honor so that you may look back to where you've been and, simultaneously, imagine the steps you wish to take ahead. This in-between place harbors a time for mixing it up, not for decision-making, but rather for internalizing and integrating not only *what* your teachers and mentors offered you, but *how* they functioned for you,—*how* they were your witnesses, your watchers. And just like dancing across that stage, you now make your transition into becoming your own witnesses, your own watchers.

In this pausal place, you are made anew: from student to learned citizen, you are dancing your selves into the teacher within, becoming witnesses to your selves as citizens of this world to which you belong. And those of us who have functioned as your witnesses from a distance see the full spectrum of an awakening process taking place. Likewise, it is in such transitional moments, inspired by *you*, that the University itself remembers its own name and its *raison d'être*.

Transitions: dancing in the pauses, in the time *between* the beats,— where grace notes punctuate the main melody; here, a different kind of knowledge abides, a different kind of knowing,—what author Toni Morrison calls "deep knowing."

In the pause, one is made a bit more malleable, a bit more flexible, and made sensitive for the less crude edges of things; where one is brought perhaps to being a little off-balance for the uncertainties of shifting ground. But it is here you will continue to return in order to achieve an unusual kind of balance,—a balance of unique stride and aplomb which will be the maintenance of your relationship to this world.

With its less crude edges and its less vertical stance, the pausal place is both generative and constitutive. It comes with certain values that cultivate human consciousness toward a *care for particulars*: to note the *how* of your knowing; to discern the *conditions* that will yield your best self. Here in the pause you are able to consider how to engage *all* of your intelligences, to harness and ignite the rich and integrated complex of

your bodies, minds, *and* your souls,—that indwelling, most animated part of your selves.

And yes,—you will *want* to return to this place time and again, because it is from here that the seeds planted become the fertile ground on which *you will rise* and will find the resolve to rise again when you fall. From this rarefied place is where you find the whisperings of a vital language all your own, of your own being, and it is this language alone that comes with the capacity to imagine a future. This is why we are here today: to occupy and hold this place as no other, for each of you are the occasion for whom we rise.

Lastly, I wish for you the care it takes to be responsive to how *your* dance will change, and alter, given the rigors and tempers of its time; that you become clear and more nuanced along the way; that you cultivate your moves on this Earth with joy and camaraderie and share it with dignity and grace. And may you take even greater care to lift the souls of those you meet along the way, for if we do not try to lift the soul, we cannot imagine how to transform it. After all, is this not the task before

each of us? –to transform this, our shared world, with the most magnanimous consciousness within our capabilities?

This is my wish for you–the *endurance* to live with a care for particulars throughout the whole of this life-time given you.

CONGRATULATIONS GRADUATING CLASS OF 2018 –