

THE GIFTED ONES

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Antilles School Commencement Exercises

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THE GIFTED ONES

It is a very special honor to be invited to speak at this graduation ceremony for the dynamic class of 2011. Very few people have an opportunity to speak at a graduation where one of their children is graduating, so I will treasure this moment for a life time, and I am thankful for this precious gift that this class and this school have bestowed upon me.

I want to congratulate this class and this institution for setting and cultivating a standard of excellence within the Virgin Islands. I also want to thank the teachers and administrators for nurturing the education and lives of my two daughters and that of so many other children over the years. I personally thank Paul Horowitz for reaching out to me when I first arrived as President of UVI. Our conversation and your hospitality meant a lot to me and I wish you well in the next stage of your journey. To the parents, friends and family members, I congratulate you as well and join with you in celebration of this special moment in the lives of our children.

I was sternly warned that if I wanted this speech to be well received, I should keep it short and not spend a lot of time talking about myself. Based on that advice, I have reduced my remarks to just under 2 hours, and only one hour is about me and my life journey with Sakile.

It is quite common for graduation speakers to give graduates sobering advice and charge them to go out into the world and make it a better place. Though I will do some of that, I want to use my words to create a symbolic mirror so that you, the

members of this class, can see yourselves and reflect on your blessings and opportunities.

The theme of my remarks is “The Gifted Ones.” Being gifted is a message about who you are and also about what you have been fortunate to receive. When we reflect upon the challenges that so many students face in educational systems throughout this country, you should understand that you have received a very special educational gift. Your class size, the expertise of your teachers, the quality of the facilities, the absence of so many negative social forces like crime and violence that many students face each day, set you apart from many students in this country and the world.

Though Antilles is not perfect, and I have heard about the flaws and limitations; it is a very special institution that provides a very special education, in a nurturing environment. So you are gifted in that you have received a type of education that many students yearn for but are unable to obtain. This special place has allowed you to have special experiences; go to unique places, and engage in activities that others may never encounter. This is a precious gift for which you should be grateful.

Yet, you are the gifted ones because each of you took advantage of this opportunity. You studied hard, stretched yourselves beyond your safe boundaries and engaged in intellectual and personal explorations that you might never have had if you were at another school. So you have received a very special educational gift and you have used it to transform yourselves into the “gifted ones.”

Yet there is a spiritual principle which says “To whom much is given, much is expected.” You have been given a lot, and therefore as you move to the next stage of your life, there is much that we expect of you and that you should expect of each other.

We expect you to use your gifts and this educational gift to propel you to an even deeper place of knowledge of life and of yourselves. You have learned about more than facts, formulas and theories. You have mastered a part of yourselves, and that journey must continue in a more intense manner.

We expect each of you to be a different type of leader in college and in the world beyond. The gifted ones must lead from a place of humility, integrity and service. Your power should not be based on your scholastic achievement alone. Your power must emanate from the authenticity of your character and the peace that exist inside. We expect you to be the type of leaders who will care deeply about all that is wrong with the world and strive to use your gifts to make it a safer, wiser and more humane world.

We expect you to take care of yourselves and enjoy life in the process. The investment that so many in this room have made in you should not be squandered because of a moment’s lapse of judgment. You will continue to learn from your mistakes, but you don’t have to make mistakes to learn. The gifted ones learn from the mistakes of others, and others learn from how you avoid the pitfalls of life.

Being gifted means that you must now bestow gifts upon others. Though you may not be in a position to bestow material gifts, there is nothing that can stop you from daily bestowing gifts of courage, love, and friendship upon others as you enter the next stage of your life. You must bestow the gift of curiosity upon your college professors,

and be willing to challenge even their most cherished ideals. You must bestow the gift of kindness to those whom you meet and even those with whom you disagree.

Being gifted doesn't mean that you are immune from challenges, discomforts and disappointments. It only means that you will transform the challenges into blessings. The fact that it has rained on every special event of this senior class could be viewed as an omen of how unlucky you are. But the rain did not stop you. It was only a reminder that there will always be those around you who will try to rain on your life's parade. But challenges, like raindrops, only water the seeds of our abundant future. Your challenges are not your problems. They are the fuel for your future growth.

This class is gifted in ways that transcend your intellectual and athletic achievements. I promised Sakile that I would not quote her in my speech or reveal any personal secrets, but I have to make an exception to that promise. During a conversation in her room a few weeks ago, we were discussing her experience at Antilles and her experience with this class. In a very sincere and close to tears statement, she said "I really love every person in my class." She went on to say that if she were forced to spend a day with anyone in her class she would embrace that experience. I asked her if she could say the same thing about the school she had attended before we moved here and she said no. The school she left was a private and very prestigious institution, and thus also included the "gifted ones;" yet everyone in her class there didn't touch her heart in the way each of you has done.

I value my daughter's opinion and I don't think she made the statement because she knew she would be leaving you soon. I sincerely believe that this was a statement of fact in regards to the quality of the people that this school is blessed to have in this class.

So you are the gifted ones, because of your hearts as well as your heads. You are the gifted ones, because a young girl from Boston could come among you and in a very short period of time you made her feel like she belonged and was a part of you. That is a precious gift. Because, so many of the problems that exist in the world are not a product of the lack of ideas or the absence of intelligence, but the absence of genuine compassion and love. We suffer not from diminishing resources; we suffer from a diminishing understanding of each other and ourselves. It is not the beautiful mountains and oceans that we fail to take full advantage of; it is our unwillingness and inability to go beyond ourselves and see and appreciate the beauty that exists in those around us.

So you, the gifted ones with the genuine hearts must not leave this experience and go out into the world and become like the world. You must now recreate this same experience wherever you go. You may not find others as willing to accept, embrace, and respect people as you have; but you must create a new standard, a new paradigm within the midst of their confusion, cliques and gossip. The gift of this experience must not be left here. This was a pop quiz for a greater examination that awaits you.

The kente strips that you are wearing are more than a nice piece of cloth to add color to those bland graduation gowns. It is a testament of your ability to extend yourselves; to embrace the culture of others as your own; to be proud of your own

culture and to embrace a sign of unity that transcends your differences. It is not uncommon at historically black colleges and universities like UVI, or predominantly black high schools throughout the country to have students wearing kente at graduation. But it is not the standard for an entire class of individuals from various ethnic and religious backgrounds to embrace this powerful symbol. I applaud you for your openness and your leadership.

The kente cloth symbolizes royalty, (i.e. the gifted ones). The different patterns and designs woven together denote that differences can be merged into a beautiful garment of unity that can transform the lives of those who wear it, and those around them. By wearing it you are embracing a world of enlightenment and rejecting a world of separation and distrust. By wearing it you are symbolically pledging to have the courage to cross racial boundaries and not be the victims of narrow ideas that prior generations may have passed on to you. By wearing it, you are not only embracing the beauty and genius of African culture, but you are standing for the universal cultural ideals of hope, peace, justice and freedom.

The golden stool that is woven upon it is a sacred symbol of the Ashanti people of Ghana. It represents the soul of the people, and thus the embodiment of all that is good, precious and must be preserved. In your quest for fame, fortune and success never forsake your soul. The soul of this class is your heart that touched the heart of my daughter and allowed her heart to touch yours. Now each of you must continue to touch the hearts of the world.

So gifted ones, as you walk across this stage and receive your diplomas today, walk with pride, humility and joy. You should be proud of what you have accomplished, but humbled by the precious educational gift that has been bestowed upon you. You should be proud of this school, but humbled by the responsibility you have to take the values and experience of this school and class to a grander stage.

Gifted ones, share your gifts with the world, with the people of these Virgin Islands and beyond. Share your gifts with those who are not able to see or touch their gifts, though they have them. Be the gift to the world that we need so badly. Be the light in the life of someone whose candles have not been lit as of yet. Be the voice crying in the wilderness, that leads those who are lost to their sacred river.

You are gifted, because each of you can earnestly say to each other, to this school, and to the people gathered in this room,

“I've had the time of my life
and I've never felt this way before
and I swear this is true
and I owe it all to you!” “Dirty Bit”

I wish each of you all the blessings this world contains and I hope the gift of my words will be a small breeze under your wings as you soar towards your destiny.

Congratulations!