

AYLEEN PERRY

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY STUDENT COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

May 4, 2018

We are the best dreams our parents ever dreamt.
And I know that I was meant
to create tomorrow at my fingertips,
because my parents did not leave their *barrio*
so that I could live trying to die in one.
So I try not to forget,
that the first language I spoke was Spanish,
learned from my mother's lullabies whispered in
my ear.
See, my mother holds her accent like a shotgun
with two good hands.
Her voice is one size better fit all.
There is no telling my momma to be quiet.
She waited too many years for her voice
to arrive in this country to be told it needed housekeeping.



This is an excerpt from a spoken word piece that I shared at a Southern Utah University open-mic night. I have been writing poetry since the age of seven, exactly three months after I arrived to the United States with nothing but a pink backpack around my shoulders and my mother's grip around my left hand. Picking up my things and moving to the U.S. was the hardest change I have ever experienced. The culture shock and inability to understand the English language made it nearly impossible for me to feel like I belonged.

When I enrolled in school, my mother was notified that I would be held back a grade level if I didn't pass an English fluency exam over the summer. Determined, for

three months straight, I devoted my entire life to the English language; perhaps that's why I fell in love with her. That summer I spent every single day reading and writing. When I was able to finally write coherent sentences, the feeling of liberation overwhelmed me. English became my passion, my motivation, my freedom, and is now, with no surprise, the degree that will be carefully scribed on my diploma.

When I began my journey at SUU in 2015 as a Freshman, my Creative Writing professor, Dr. Ferguson, stood at the front of the classroom and told me to write. *Easy enough*, I thought. I'd fought that battle, and won, several summers ago. Then she said, write about *yourself*. Truth be told, from middle school to high school, I kept my narrative of being multiracial-- and an immigrant-- hidden. Nevertheless, my professor stated, "Tell me who you are, what you are afraid of, where you are from-- and turn it into a story. So I did. For the first time in my life, I shed my history on paper for another person to absorb. I will never forget Dr. Ferguson's words, "Someone out there needs your story."

This university has taught me the power of narration. I learned that the guy in my Literature class with brown glasses left the church at the age of 13 and still continues to be shamed by his family, but is now slowly creating a life of his own with his partner, Michael. I learned that the girl with blonde hair in my Geology class has a son that struggles with Down Syndrome and she is passionate about fairness in special education. I learned that being a Muslim female in college is difficult, especially when people fail to understand your culture, and I learned that my friend Diana is a DREAMER, fighting for a future in the land of opportunity. I've had the privilege to discover the countless narratives of my peers-- from every race, ethnicity, religion, and economic background-- and for that, I am eternally grateful.

During my time here at Southern Utah University I have seen immense growth in this institution and its students. I have seen the strides towards diversity and inclusion that this college has made. In my courses, I have engaged in meaningful dialogue and explored my research interests. I have felt not only welcomed, but loved by professors

and advisors who have held their door open for me. They were the ones who made me believe that if I only worked hard and stayed focused, I could achieve my dreams. They were the ones who made real goals that once felt impossible.

I never understood the meaning of the quote, “Success is the sweetest to those who never thought they’d see it,” until today. I am not in this country out of luck. I am not a first-generation college student out of luck. I am not an Afro-Latina who finished college in three years--with Honors and a 3.9 GPA-- out of luck. I was somebody’s vision. I was somebody’s dream-- specifically my mother’s.

My mother is a hotel maid, and nights when she worked 10 hour shifts she would come home and take off her shoes, bone tired from cleaning. Her feet were bruised and stung with arthritis. Through a stream of tears, she crawled into bed with me and whispered, “This right here *chikis*, this is why you need to stay in school. This is for you.” My mother sacrificed the humble life she lived in a different country for me to be here. When there was a drive-by at our house and we needed to move, my mother found a way. She always found a way, making something out of nothing. Rescuing us from homelessness and lifting me from the hands of institutionalization. See at school award ceremonies, for as long as I could remember, I asked my mother to sit in the back because she wore her work uniform and I was embarrassed. This is shameful for me to admit in front of hundreds of people, but the message I hope to relay is that that you do not know where you are going, if you do not know where you are from. I have stood on the shoulders of the strongest woman I know in order to be who I am today, in order to be standing behind this podium wearing this cap and gown-- how dare I be anything but great.

You, too, are not here out of luck. Every single one of you in this room were somebody’s vision. There is something magical about the power of manifestation-- speaking truth into existence. Your success is the result of someone declaring that it will happen-- and it did. This moment is for the people that marched in the heat, scrubbed

floors, and made sacrifices for you to be here. By honoring you, this University is also honoring them. So now I ask: How dare *you* be anything but great?

We all have stories that illustrate our journey; in fact, our stories are ladders that make it easier for us to touch the stars. So climb and grab them. Keep climbing and keep reaching.

As we ascend from this pivotal point in our academic careers, it is our responsibility to serve as game-changers in society. Now is your chance to create a vision, and to see the potential in others. To serve as *someone's* inspiration. To tell those little boys and girls who are systematically written as another statistic that no one can hold them back, that the world is theirs. You have been entrusted with the one thing in the world no one can ever take away from you-- an education. I never thought I would be in America, let alone go to college, let alone graduate. I imagine all of you have accomplished goals in your time at SUU that you never thought possible, so take pride in how far you have come, and have faith in how far you can go.

Thank you for listening to my story, and I hope that as we leave here today, we all remember the importance of a narrative; one person's story can serve as a pebble in a pond, capable of creating tides rippling the distance. We must continue to live and learn beyond the halls of SUU, and use the wind of the Thunderbird as momentum to untangle a world of change. Our story does not end here, this is just the beginning. It is now time for us, Class of 2018, to turn the page, for there is so much more to your book that is still unwritten. Congratulations.

Thank you.