

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach
Southern Utah University Commencement Speech
May 3, 2013

Honored faculty, parents, families, above all else, students and graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

A rabbi, a cantor, and the president of a synagogue are traveling through Africa when they are suddenly captured by cannibals. And as they are put into a giant pot being made into a roast for that night's dinner, the chief cannibal says, "One last wish for each of you before you die."

The rabbi says, "All I want is to give one last speech, just one last oration, it won't last more than three or four hours, I promise."

And the cantor says, "Just one last aria, just one last beautiful melody—six, seven hours at most before I die."

And the president says, "For the love of God, my request is, please, kill me first."

This high honor that you have conferred upon me today is truly humbling, and it represents a milestone. Not just in my own life but especially in the esteemed friendship I share with President Michael Benson, a man of unique humility, humanity, grace and total commitment.

And I have promised him, so as not to embarrass him, not to go over the *ninety* minutes allotted to me...

When President Benson was a student at Oxford, what most impressed each and every one of us who, indeed, had never met another Mormon in our lives, was his commitment to his faith. And it is that subject – faith – which I would like to address today.

In just 13 days the world will commemorate the end of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, where a group of impoverished, decimated and diseased, starving Jewish fighters—men and women—sought to push back the Nazi onslaught amid the greatest Jewish rebellion of the Holocaust.

The Israeli writer Zvi Kolitz tells of the story of Yossel Rakover, a rabbi who had eleven children but they had all died already and perished in the war. He had just one left, and he told this son to raise his head above the parapet to see where the heavy artillery were being brought by the Germans. His son fell back with a bullet between his eyes and, now, Yossel Rakover had lost all. In the last moments of his life, knowing that his own doom was impending, he picked up a pen and a paper and wrote what came to be known in Kolitz's story as the last will and testimony of Yossel Rakover.

In that letter he wrote in essence, “Lord God, I have been stripped of love when I watched my wife die of typhoid. I have been stripped of hope when I watched my last child die before my very eyes. I have been stripped of human dignity, incarcerated and caged like an animal in this dilapidated, ruined ghetto. But the one thing that you will never take from me: you will never take *my faith in you*. You have done everything in your power to try to get me to cease believing in you, but I die as I have lived, man of faith. I believe there is a God who created me and I believe that I have been endowed with a special gift to share with humanity regardless of how much others have sought to strip me of that gift. I die as I have lived: a believing Jew.”

My friends, as you graduate today, you must know that leaving the confines and the comforts of academia, the world will seek to strip you of the single most important belief that you must always hold on to. It will seek to strip you of that one last article of faith without which you cannot live. It will seek to strip you of *the belief that you are special*. That you are unique, that there is no one like you and that you have a gift to share with the world that has never preceded you and will never be replaced by any other than you.

That if you waste your life comparing your gift to others, if you always live competitively, you will have squandered your potential to make the world a richer place. There is room for competition. There is room for competitiveness in making money. There is room for competition in sports. There is room for competition in life, my friends, but only in *what you do* and never in *who and what you are*. You must never allow that competitiveness to breach your soul.

But as you live life, you will discover that you will do favors for people, and they will forget you.

Joseph saves the life of Pharaoh’s butler in interpreting his dream so favorably, yet the Bible immediately says, “And the butler did not remember Joseph and he forgot him.” Sometimes no good deed will go unpunished.

To the majority of the women who are graduating today—brilliant women using their minds to succeed and accomplish—you will sometimes give your heart to a man who appears to be a gallant knight in shining armor, and he will restore it to you in tiny, shattered pieces. You will, God willing, grow to be parents and sometimes your kids will pick up the phone from the university to treat you like you are an ATM—not that any of the parents here know what I’m talking about, of course. You will, at times, feel like you are a commodity and at that moment, you must remember: do not allow the world to pry from you the certainty, the faith, and the conviction that *you are special*.

You may not see your name on the *Forbes* 400 list or your picture on the cover of *Vogue*, but it makes no difference because you are unique and you are special. And the world gains control over you whenever it makes you feel like you are *not* special. They make you feel at work that if you don’t work harder and ignore your family that you will remain someone undistinguished.

I don't want to give another corrosive commencement speech before a group of graduates that makes it sound like unless you go out there and succeed—unless you go out and follow all the rules we hear so commonly in commencement speeches: love your work, follow your passion, work hard, be disciplined— that you will remain anonymous. All of this is based on the idea that you're a nobody who might just be lucky enough to become a somebody.

And do you believe that even if you achieve all that money and fame that you are going to somehow internalize any kind of self-esteem?

You didn't come to this university to gain the tools by which to succeed. You came to this university because you were born with an infinite gift, you were endowed with an indelible contribution, and your faculty gave you the tools by which to contribute that gift. You have *nothing* to prove.

President Benson is a man who has always been in love with the Holy Land, the Promised Land. He named one of his children, Truman, after the president who recognized the State of Israel in 1948. He wrote his doctoral thesis about that recognition. And there are two kinds of a Promised Land: there's a Promised Land of hills and valleys and there's a Promised Land of soul and spirit. Your Promised Land is the place where your gift is acknowledged and appreciated.

When Moses first sends the Israelite spies to conquer the Promised Land, they come back and they famously say, "It's unconquerable."

Listen to their words. For the Bible says, in the Book of Numbers, that they said to Moses, "We saw giants there. And in our eyes, we were like cockroaches and so we appeared to them."

They looked at people who were giants, people who had more money, who were more distinguished, and they felt like they were miniscule. They felt that they were locusts. They weren't ready to conquer *any* land. They couldn't find a promised land.

Contrast that with a black man who, 45 years ago last month, got on a plane from Atlanta to Memphis. And he had to get off that plane because there was a bomb scare—some assassin trying to blow him to smithereens—but he got back on the plane, to go to a strike for garbage workers, sanitation workers who, just to have a little bit of dignity had to wear a sign that said, "I am a man."

That night this same man had laryngitis, and he sent his best friend to give a speech to thousands of people in Mason Temple who were waiting to hear him. His friend, Ralph Abernathy, called him and said, "Martin, there's going to be a riot if you don't turn up."

So with no notes, and utterly unprepared, he went before those people. There was a torrent, almost a hurricane outside, and the rain was so loud that it almost drowned out his words. And yet he belted out one of the most memorable speeches of all time that night. It's called the

“Mountaintop Speech.” And on April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King said that he had seen the Promised Land.

He said, “Tonight I am fearing no man. Longevity has its place but I am happy tonight, because the Lord has taken me over the mountain and I have seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you, but you as a people will get to the Promised Land.”

As I sit sometimes and shiver, and shudder, listening to his immortal words, I ask myself: “Why wasn’t he afraid?” So many white racists wanted to kill him, and he would be dead just 20 hours later, felled by an assassin’s bullet on the patio of an inexpensive motel.

Do you know why he wasn’t afraid? Because the mother of all human fears, what undergirds and underlies every fear is just one: the fear that we don’t matter, the fear that we are not special but ordinary.

That’s why men fear failure—it proves that, all along, you never had the goods. It’s why women fear rejection—it proves that you were never loveable to begin with. It’s the reason we all fear death—all these people who tell you they cannot live without you, God forbid, were you to exit the planet, guess what? The earth would continue to spin on its axis, and the people who said they couldn’t live without you will somehow muster on.

But Martin Luther King wasn’t afraid. Because he had no fear that he was ordinary. No racist could make him feel like he didn’t have a gift. He caused little black children to march before Bull Connor’s dogs. He caused little black children to march in Selma in front of fire hoses. He had bestowed dignity upon others, and he had found his gift. And when you know your gift, you become indestructible. And seven days after he died, Ralph Abernathy put up a slab outside the hotel where he was killed—it was a verse from the Book of Genesis about the Joseph and it said: “Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Come, let us slay him and let us see what shall become of his dreams.”

Today you will go forth and prosper, and we will see what will become of *your* dreams, of *your* unique gift, and *your* unique ability to bestow dignity on others so that no one feels like they don’t matter.

I was walking with my children through Jackson Square in New Orleans just a few weeks before Hurricane Katrina. And there was a man sitting on the corner and he had a paper bag with can in it and he said, “Brother can you spare some change?”

I put a dollar in his hand and I said to him, “You’re too special to buy alcohol with this. Tell me you’ll do something good with it.”

And he said, “I promise I will.”

And I said to him, “God bless you sir,” and he said, “God bless you too, sir.”

And I walked on.

My eldest child looked at me and said, “Tatty, Are you really that foolish? Do you not know that he will just go out and buy another beer?”

And I said, “Baby girl, do you think that I’m some great philanthropist giving a man a buck? Do you think I’m going to change his life with a dollar? I gave him a dollar because it was the best deal I did the whole day. For one dollar I made that man feel like I *saw* him. That he made an impression on me. That we can’t always be guilty of what Bob Dylan says, ‘And how many times does a man close his eyes and pretend that he just doesn’t see?’ That the reason he is sitting there wallowing away his pain in alcohol is because he feels like he has nothing to contribute, that he has no gift. He has been stripped of all dignity and I dare not walk by him and pretend that I don’t see him.”

There was a Mormon missionary, one of my dearest friends, Brock Oaks, who was introduced to me 20-years ago by President Benson at Oxford. He pulled out the Book of Mormon and asked me, “Would you like one?”

And I said, “How much does it cost?”

He said, “It’s free.”

I said, “I’ll take two.”

I said to him, “Brock, you need to understand: if I convert to Mormonism, I am *paid* to be a Jew—I’m going to be unemployed. So unless you have a better financial offer?”

But I said, “I’ll tell you what. I know there are many people who don’t appreciate you being here at Oxford, a world class university, and you’re a religious missionary. When they mistreat you, you come and see me.”

He started visiting me nearly every day and became one of my closest friends. Two years later, he said he had to go home. And I said to him, “Where are you going Brock?”

“I’m going to the Air Force Academy.”

“But why?”

“Well my father is the commander in chief of NATO air forces in Europe.”

“You mean all along these people who spit on you and kicked you and abused you, you could have ordered an air strike?”

But you know what I remember about that Mormon missionary? I remember that no matter how much abuse he took—and he took a lot, Oxford was a really tough town—he never allowed anyone to pry him of the faith that he had something to contribute. Never.

Contrast that with a Jewish student who called me one Sunday afternoon at five o'clock and said, "I have to see you immediately."

"But why?"

He said, "It's an emergency."

He walked into my office and said, "My father's not Jewish, my mother is. I've discovered that you Jews claim me as a Jew and I wasn't even raised Jewish."

And I said, "Speak to your mother; I had nothing to do with this."

And he said to me, "I am not leaving your office until you excommunicate me."

I said, "Excommunicate you? No Jew has been excommunicated since the great philosopher Spinoza in 1656."

He said, "But I'm not gonna leave."

I said, "Look, it's Sunday afternoon and it's late. We rabbis charge \$100 for circumcisions; we charge \$200 for bar mitzvahs; we charge \$300 for weddings, and \$400 for excommunications."

He said, "Why so steep?"

I said, "It costs more to get out than it does to get in."

He then said to me, "Do you have a student discount?"

I said, "Forget it. That'll open the flood gates. Tomorrow every Jewish student is going to want to be excommunicated."

I typed out a certificate and said, "I, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, hereby excommunicate you and your progeny from the Jewish people for now and evermore."

I gave him this worthless piece of paper, and as he walked out I said, "I didn't even charge you in the end, so you have to answer this one question."

And he turned around and said, "I know the question: why? Why don't I want to be a Jew?"

I said, "Yes, why?"

And he said, “I study history at this university and I have studied how the Greeks philosophized, how the Romans ruled and how Genghis Khan’s hoards conquered. And how the Jews died and died and died.”

And I knew I would never see him again, and I never did. This was my only chance to leave an impression on this student so I said, “You are correct. You have studied about how the Greeks philosophized, and the Romans ruled, and how Genghis Khan’s hoards conquered, and how the Jews died. But you *read* about the Romans and the Greeks. You had to look them up in one of your history books. But when it came to meeting a Jew, you picked up a phone because *I’m still here*. Because no one can strip me of my dignity. Because no one can make me feel like I don’t matter. Because all the hatred in the world will never be internalized. Because I know that God placed me on this earth for a purpose. And you want to strip yourself of your dignity and identity based on other people’s rejection—and that, we dare never do.”

So as I conclude, ladies and gentlemen, on this august milestone in your lives, I bless you, as I was blessed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe when I was a boy who was crushed by his parents’ divorce and felt worthless and felt like I had no dignity. That the two people who brought me into this world didn’t even want to talk to each other—maybe I was a mistake? And this rabbi looked in my eyes, and I saw in his eyes an infinite sea of kindness, and he said to me, “You are too young to be a cynic. For you will grow to be a source of joy, inspiration, pride and light to your family, your school, and the entire world.”

May each and every one of you grow to be a source of joy, inspiration, pride and light to your parents, to this incredible school, Southern Utah University, and, indeed, to the entire world.