

Montgomery College Commencement Address
Suzanne Malveaux, CNN White House Correspondent

May 22, 2009

HOW GREAT IS THIS? MONTGOMERY COLLEGE. HOME! WHAT A THRILL TO SHARE THIS MOMENT WITH YOU!

I'M HONORED TO BE HERE AT MONTGOMERY COLLEGE TO MARK THIS INCREDIBLE OCCASSION WITH YOU---COLLEGE FACULTY, THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND OF COURSE---THE GRADUATES, THE CLASS OF 2009. TO SHARE THIS STAGE WITH THESE WOMEN, THEIR WORDS WERE SO INSPIRING. THEY'RE GOING TO BE A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW. THIS IS A TREMENDOUS ACCOMPLISHMENT. I'D LIKE TO GIVE A SPECIAL THANKS TO YOUR PRESIDENT DR. BRIAN JOHNSON FOR INVITING ME, TO HIS WIFE LIBRA.

NOW I'VE GOT A CONFESSION TO MAKE-----MANY OF YOU MAY ALREADY KNOW THIS. BUT I'VE GOT A SPECIAL PLACE IN MY HEART FOR MONTGOMERY COLLEGE.

YOU SEE, YOU GUYS ARE LIKE FAMILY TO ME. ACTUALLY YOU ARE FAMILY TO ME. MY BROTHER GREG, IS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE MONTGOMERY COLLEGE COMMUNITY. HE'S A PROFESSOR HERE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS AND AS STUDENT ABROAD DIRECTOR HAS BEEN TAKING STUDENTS ON TRIPS OVERSEAS TO PLACES LIKE VIETNAM, THAILAND, TURKEY, ENGLAND, AND ITALY. HE'S GOING TO SENEGAL THIS FALL, I HOPE TO JOIN HIM. SO IF YOU HAVEN'T SIGNED UP THERE'S STILL TIME.

SO WHEN THE COLLEGE ASKED ME TO SPEAK TODAY---I KNEW IF I EVER WANTED TO BE INVITED TO GREG'S HOUSE FOR HIS DELICIOUS THANKSGIVING DINNER GUMBO---I'D HAVE TO SAY YES.

BUT HONESTLY, IT IS JUST SO EXCITING TO BE ABLE TO SPEAK AT A COLLEGE THAT MY FAMILY HAS HELD IN SUCH HIGH ESTEEM FOR SO LONG, AND HAS BEEN SUCH AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR EDUCATION AS WELL

BEING A GRADUATE OF MONTGOMERY COLLEGE IS A SPECIAL DISTINCTION.

NEARLY HALF OF ALL AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATES TODAY ATTEND COMMUNITY COLLEGES. AND OF COURSE, THEY PREPARE STUDENTS FOR BETTER JOBS, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND GIVE WORKERS THE SKILLS NEEDED TO ADAPT TO OUR EVER CHANGING MARKET.

BUT YOU, GRADUATES OF MONTGOMERY COLLEGE ARE UNIQUE IN WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED HERE.

YOU COME ALL OVER THE WORLD---MORE THAN 170 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES!
INCLUDING CAMEROON---48. ETHIOPIA---43. CHINA---42. SOUTH KOREA---25. BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA---22. AND THE LIST GOES ON.

YOUR AVERAGE GPA IS 3.09. AMAZING! MORE THAN 200 OF YOU OF ARE RECEIVING MORE THAN ONE AWARD TODAY.

BUT MANY OF YOU IN THE STUDENT BODY OVERALL---DON'T COME HERE FOR THE CREDIT AT ALL. WHILE 34 THOUSAND ARE IN A CREDIT PROGRAM---MORE THAN 26 THOUSAND ARE GETTING A VALUABLE EDUCATION FOR THE PURE SATISFACTION OF ENRICHING YOUR LIVES.

60 PERCENT OF YOU ARE WOMEN. YOUR AVERAGE AGE IS 27 YEARS OLD. THE OLDEST OF YOU (OR SHOULD I SAY MOST MATURE) IS 71, BORN IN 1937. (DON'T WORRY, WE WON'T SAY WHO YOU ARE--- YOU DON'T LOOK A DAY OVER 50)

MORE THAN 150 OF YOU ARE BABY BOOMERS, INCLUDING 6 WHO WERE BORN BEFORE MONTGOMERY COLLEGE EVEN OPENED. THE YOUNGEST OF YOU JUST TURNED 18 THIS MONTH.

MANY OF YOU ARE ALSO PARENTS----SO I'D LIKE TO GIVE A SPECIAL SHOUT OUT TO YOUR CHILDREN. ANY OF THE KIDS WHOSE PARENTS ARE GRADUATES TODAY, THANKS FOR PUTTING UP WITH MOM AND DAD'S ABSENCE SOMETIMES. WE KNOW YOU MISSED THEM, AND THEY REALLY, REALLY MISSED YOU. BUT THIS IS FOR YOU TOO. (I'D ALSO LIKE TO THANK MY PARENTS FOR BEING HERE---SITTING IN THAT ROW THERE---NOTE TO GRADS---20 YEARS LATER, STILL THERE. YOU NEVER GET RID OF THEM. AND IN THE FUTURE YOU'RE HAPPY FOR IT. ALSO---MY SISTER IN LAW LISA, THERE.)

HERE AT MONTGOMERY COLLEGE YOU'VE BROUGHT YOUR OWN LIFE EXPERIENCES INTO THE CLASSROOM, AND HAVE BEEN AN EQUAL VOICE IN YOUR EDUCATION. YOU'VE NOT BEEN LECTURED TO, BUT RATHER BEEN A PARTNER IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS. YOU'VE HELPED SHAPE THE CURRICULUM AND DEFINE THIS SCHOOL.

YOU ARE CHANGING LIVES AND MINDS.

AT AN INSTITUTION WHOSE EDUCATION IS ON PAR WITH MANY 4 YEAR INSTITUTIONS---WHAT MAKES MONTGOMERY COLLEGE UNIQUE IS THERE IS NO PRESSURE TO CONFORM. HERE YOU CAN BE YOURSELF.

SO FIRST TODAY I ENCOURAGE YOU TO EMBRACE THAT OUTSIDE THIS INSTITUTION. TO FOLLOW YOUR OWN UNIQUE PATH---HOWEVER UNCONVENTIONAL OR ROUNABOUT IT MAY BE.

I CAN RECALL THE UTTER WORRY MY OWN PARENTS HAD WHEN I ANNOUNCED TO THEM MY SENIOR YEAR OF COLLEGE I WAS TAKING TIME OFF. THEY BLANCHED AT THE THOUGHT OF THE THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS THAT MIGHT HAVE GONE DOWN THE DRAIN ON MY EDUCATION IF I DIDN'T RETURN TO GET MY DEGREE.

FURTHERMORE I ANNOUNCED I WAS TRAVELING---NOT DO JUST DO AN EXCHANGE PROGRAM AT ANOTHER UNIVERSITY, BUT ALSO TO GO OVERSEAS---TO KENYA WHERE I SPOKE SWAHILI AND LIVED WITH THE MASAI. THEY WERE RELIEVED WHEN I RETURNED AND DID FINISH WHAT AS A FAMILY WE BEGAN.

BUT SOON AFTER I GRADUATED COLLEGE I PRESENTED THEM WITH MY EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS. TWO JOURNALISM INTERNSHIPS....ONE IN CAIRO, EGYPT. THE OTHER IN BAHRAIN. MY PARENTS JUST SHOOK THEIR HEADS AND ASKED ME---WHY COULDN'T I GET JOB, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, A LITTLE CLOSER TO HOME? IRONICALLY, LATER MY PARENTS, ALONG WITH MY BROTHER GREG, CAME TO VISIT ME IN EGYPT, AND ALL CAUGHT THE TRAVEL BUG LATER ON. SO WHILE YOUR PATH MAY NOT BE

TRADITIONAL, IT WILL TAKE YOU TO WHERE YOU BELONG.

IT IS FOR THIS REASON----THAT **SECONDLY---I URGE YOU TODAY. A DAY THAT MARKS BOTH AN END AND A BEGINNING IN YOUR LIVES TO LISTEN TO YOUR HEART.**

LIFE IS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE BETWEEN YOUR HEAD AND YOUR HEART. OUR HEAD TELLS US TO PLAY IT SAFE. IT TELLS US TO SETTLE. DO WHAT PAYS THE BILLS AND MAKES OTHER HAPPY. BUT THERE ALMOST ALWAYS IS SOMETHING DEEP WITHIN US THAT BECKONS US TO ANOTHER CALLING. EVEN, DURING THESE HARD ECONOMIC TIMES WHEN JOBS AND OUR FUTURES ARE UNCERTAIN, YOU WILL LIKELY NEVER BE AS UNBURDENED AS YOU ARE TODAY----TO TRULY PURSUE YOUR DREAMS.

FOR MYSELF----I DEBATED BETWEEN PURSUING MEDICINE OR JOURNALISM. MY HEAD WAS FOCUSED ON THE POSSIBILITY OF BECOMING A DOCTOR, BUT MY HEART WAS IN TELLING STORIES. I'M NOT SURE MY PARENTS OR MY FIRST TV BOSS WERE CONFIDENT I'D MADE THE RIGHT DECISION.

MY FIRST BIG BREAK CAME WHEN I'D JUST GOTTEN OUT OF GRADUATE SCHOOL FROM A FORMER PROFESSOR WHO WAS STARTING UP A 24 HOUR CABLE STATION. HE OFFERED ME \$18,000 A YEAR. IT WAS A BIG RISK FOR HIM SINCE I HAD NO ON-AIR EXPERIENCE.

MY FIRST LIVE SHOT BORE THAT OUT. WHEN I WAS COVERING A SHOOTING I HAD A NEAR MELT DOWN. I WAS SO SCARED MY BODY WAS SHAKING VIOLENTLY. I COULD BARELY GET THE WORDS OUT. I WAS EMBARRASSED AND HUMILIATED. I RETURNED TO THE STATION THAT EVENING EXPECTING MY BOSS WOULD FIRE ME, BUT TO MY SURPRISE, HE DIDN'T. INSTEAD HE SENT ME OUT THE NEXT DAY TO DO ANOTHER. AND ON THAT SECOND DAY, AFTER THAT INITIAL SHOCK, AND SEVERAL PRAYERS, A CERTAIN CALM WASHED OVER ME AND IT WAS LIKE I HAD BEEN DOING IT FOR YEARS. FROM THAT POINT ON, MY HEART, MY PASSION HELPED ME CONQUER MY FEAR, AND HELPED ME BECOME GOOD AT WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO DO. **SO DON'T BE AFRAID TO FOLLOW YOUR HEART.**

THIRD----I URGE YOU NOT TO LOSE SIGHT OF WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT. TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

SOON AFTER I STARTED MY FIRST REPORTING GIG--- COMING HOME LATE ONE NIGHT FROM A STORY--- I GOT INTO A CAR ACCIDENT, A HEAD-ON WITH A TRACTOR TRAILER IN THE RAIN. MY CAR WAS TOTALED, BUT MIRACULOUSLY, I DIDN'T HAVE A SCRATCH. STRANGELY MY ONLY WORRY AT THE TIME WAS HOW WAS I WAS GOING TO GE TO WORK THE NEXT DAY.

WHEN I DID SHOW UP AND MY BOSS HEARD ABOUT THE ACCIDENT HE IMMEDIATELY DEMANDED I GO TO THE HOSPITAL.

AND AFTER HE REALIZED I WAS FINE. HE HELPED ME FIND TRANSPORTATION BY LETTING ME BORROW ONE OF THE LIVE NEWS TRUCKS TO DRIVE BACK AND FORTH FROM WORK UNTIL I COULD GET A CAR.

NOW, I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN IMAGINE JUST HOW COOL I FELT, BEING 22 YEARS-OLD AT THE TIME AND PULLING UP TO THE GROCERY STORE OR MALL PARKING LOT,OR THE CLUB, IN A NEWS VAN WITH A BIG SATELLITE DISH ON THE TOP. I'M SURE NOW IT WOULD DEFINITELY BE FODDER FOR A LAWSUIT. BUT BACK THEN, IT JUST SEEMED COOL.

BUT COOL OR NOT COOL----LOOKING BACK ON IT NOW---I WAS SO INTO WORK THAT I HAD LOST

PERSPECTIVE AND, INDEED, LOST SIGHT OF THE FACT THAT IT WAS ALSO IMPORTANT TO TAKE CARE OF ONE'S SELF. SOME TIMES WHEN WE EXCEL WE FORGET THAT WE ARE NOT INVINSIBLE. BUT YOUR OWN WELL BEING IS PARAMOUNT.

FOURTH---KEEP TABS ON WHAT YOU BECOME:

AS YOU EMBARK ON YOUR CAREER, I'M SURE YOU'LL CONTINUE TO BE CURIOUS, SKEPTICAL, AND EAGER TO SEE WHAT LIFE'S NEXT STEPS BRING. TO BE SURE, IT WILL BE A STRUGGLE SOMETIMES TO REMAIN THE PERSON WHO YOU ARE IN YOUR CORE. BUT IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU NOT SUCCUMB TO THE PULL THAT YOU'LL SOMETIMES FEEL TO BECOME SOMETHING THAT YOU ARE NOT. **YOU MUST BE CAREFUL TO WATCH OUT FOR WHAT YOU BECOME.**

I REALIZED THIS VALUABLE LESSON WHEN I TURNED TO COVERING CRIME AS THE NIGHTTIME REPORTER IN DC. I WAS THE ONE WHO OFTEN WALKED UP TO THE DOOR TO TALK TO THE PARENT WHO'S CHILD HAD JUST BEEN MURDERED. I HAD JUSTIFIED IT BY PRODUCING MEMORIAL PIECES ABOUT THE INNOCENT VICTIMS CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE.. BUT EVERY NIGHT I'D GET THAT PIT IN MY STOMACHE AND CATCH MY BREATH BEFORE I'D KNOCK ON ANOTHER DOOR. IT'S WHEN I GOT PRETTY GOOD AT IT, THAT I REALIZED I DIDN'T WANT TO BECOME THAT PERSON WHO STARTED TO GET COMFORTABLE WITH THE JOB. SO I TURNED MY FOCUS TO POLITICS. IT IS IMPORTANT TO CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF FROM TIME TO TIME --TO KEEP TABS ON WHAT YOU BECOME. WHILE YOUR FAMILY OR JOB MAY DEMAND EVERYTHING OF YOU SOMETIMES YOU MUST NOT TURN INTO A ROBOT, OR A WORK HORSE, YOU MUST PRESERVE WHO YOU REALLY ARE----SOMEONE WHO IS EVOLVING, AND GROWING IN YOUR NEW ROLE----WHETHER IT'S THAT OF PARENT, TEACHER, CAREGIVER OR RETIREE.

FIFTH ----CONTINUE TO SEEK OUT YOUR COMMUNITY. RECOGNIZE YOUR POWER COMES FROM BEING A PART OF THAT COMMUNITY.

FOR MOST OF YOU---UP TO NOW---THAT COMMUNITY HAS INVOLVED YOUR PARENTS, SIBLINGS, EXTENDED RELATIVES, FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS, AND SCHOOL.

THIS COMMUNITY AT MONTGOMERY COLLEGE IS DEEPLY A PART OF YOU. YOU CAN ALWAYS DRAW ON THE POWER OF YOUR COMMUNITY.

SOMETIMES WHEN I FEEL THE WEIGHT OF THE MOMENT OF NEED THAT EXTRA STRENGTH--- TAKING MY SEAT IN THE WHITE HOUSE ROOSEVELT ROOM --READYING TO ASK THE PRESIDENT A QUESTION, I THINK OF SOME OF MY GRANDPARENTS WHO NEVER GOT PAST A 5TH GRADE EDUCATION. I THINK OF MY PARENTS WHO WERE FORCED TO GO TO SEGREGATED SCHOOLS IN THE DEEP SOUTH. I THINK OF MY COUSINS WHO LOST EVERYTHING IN HURRICANE KATRINA. I THINK OF ALL OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO CAN'T BE IN THAT SEAT.

THEY ARE NOT IN THAT SEAT. BUT THEY ARE WITH ME. I DRAW POWER FROM THAT -- FROM THE COMMUNITY THAT I HAVE BEEN A PART OF AND THAT IS A PART OF ME.

IN DRAWING FROM THAT COMMUNITY, I REALIZE THAT I AM NOT ALONE. I REALIZE THAT, AS A MATTER OF FACT, IT'S DOWNRIGHT CROWDED, WITH ALL OF US IN THAT SEAT.

I URGE YOU TO REMEMBER THE COMMUNITY THAT YOU ARE A PART OF AS YOU TAKE ON YOUR NEXT BIG STEPS. FOR THAT IS WHERE YOUR POWER WILL COME FROM.

AND FINALLY----SEEK INSPIRATION FROM THOSE AROUND YOU. TRY TO DRAW ON THEIR FAITH, BECAUSE THERE WILL BE TIMES YOUR OWN FAITH IS TESTED.

ONE OF THE GREATEST REMINDERS OF THE POWER OF FAITH THAT I HAVE ENCOUNTERED OCCURRED WHEN I WAS COVERING A TRIP PRESIDENT CLINTON MADE TO RWANDA.

WHEN AIR FORCE ONE LANDED FLEW OVER THE LUSH GREEN COUNTRYSIDE I REMEMBER THINKING HOW BEAUTIFUL A PLACE---IT WAS HARD TO BELIEVE SUCH ATROCITIES COULD HAVE HAPPENED.

BUT IT WAS THERE I MET A WOMAN WHO'D SURVIVED THE GENOCIDE IN THAT COUNTRY WHO WAS ALSO THE VICTIM OF GANG RAPE. SHE HAD A MACHETE SCAR ACROSS HER SCALP AND FACE. WE SAT DOWN ACROSS FROM EACH OTHER IN TWO FOLDING CHAIRS FOR AN INTERVIEW, AND I ASKED HER WHAT GIVES YOU STRENGTH? SHE SAID FAITH.

I LEARNED SOMETHING THAT DAY. I GAINED STRENGTH AND INSPIRATION FROM HER.

WHILE ALL OF US WILL BE TESTED WITH TRAGEDY DURING OUR LIVES, FEW OF ANY OF US WILL BE CALLED UPON TO ENDURE THE HORRORS THAT THIS WOMAN FACED. BUT SURELY, HER FAITH IS A LESSON TO ALL OF US THAT WE CAN SURVIVE JUST ABOUT ANY HARDSHIP AND OVERCOME JUST ABOUT ANY BURDEN IF WE KEEP OUR FAITH.

SO TODAY----

SOME OF YOU WILL LEAVE THE NEST, TO CONTINUE YOUR EDUCATION AT SOME OF THE BEST INSTITUTIONS IN THE COUNTRY. OTHERS, OF YOU, RETIREES WILL ENJOY THE KNOWLEDGE YOU BRING TO YOUR COMMUNITY GROUPS AND SOCIAL CLUBS, HAVING ENRICHED YOUR OWN LIFE EXPERIENCE. OTHERS WILL RETURN TO WORK, AND MAKE YOUR BUSINESSES RUN BETTER. AND SOME OF YOU WILL GO BACK TO YOUR HOME COUNTRIES AS LEADERS, TO APPLY WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED HERE.

THOSE WHO PROUDLY ATTEND HERE---I'VE HEARD SAY----WE ARE THE COMMUNITY'S COLLEGE.

YOU DON'T CLOSE YOUR DOORS TO ANYONE----YOU OFFER OPPORTUNITY, THE PATH TO ONE'S DREAMS. IT'S NOT ABOUT STATUS, BACKGROUND, RACE, OR AGE. YOU HAVE PhD CANDIDATES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, STUDENTS WHO CHOOSE THE NUTURING ENVIRONMENT OF A COLLEGE CLOSE TO HOME, THOSE WHO ARE ON WORK VISAS, AND RETIREES. YOU TAKE LIT CLASSES, STUDY ABROAD, WORK IN FOOD PANTRIES, AND INVITE THE HOMELESS ON TO CAMPUS TO LEARN TOGETHER.

MONTGOMERY COLLEGE GRADUATES----YOU GIVE THIS SCHOOL ITS CHARACTER TAKE THAT CHARACTER WITH YOU TO MAKE YOUR UNIQUE IMPACT ON THE WORLD. BE FEARLESS IN YOUR PURSUITS. KNOW YOU ARE PREPARED FOR THE HARD WORK AND IMMENSE JOY AHEAD.

THANK YOU MONTGOMERY COLLEGE----FOR THIS GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS YOU TODAY. I CONGRATULATE YOU ON YOUR EXTRAORDINARY ACHIEVEMENT. NOW GO COMMENCE!

THANK YOU.