

## Commencement Speaker Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation

To President Sullivan;

Provost Prelock;

Senator Leahy and Governor Scott;

distinguished vice presidents and deans;

faculty and staff;

and—most importantly—to the University of Vermont Class of 2019:

*Congratulations!*

Graduates: I know how hard you've worked to earn the achievement we honor today.

I also know your success required a lot of love, devotion, and commitment from the people in your life, who helped you achieve this major milestone.

So, Class of 2019:

Please join me in thanking your parents—and all of the family, friends and teachers who have helped you on your journey.

This day is about you—but it's also about honoring them.

Today is special for many reasons.

It's a celebration of excellence—and of the promise your future holds.

It's the end of one chapter—and the beginning of another.

But today is also special for an additional reason.

You came to his magical community called Burlington, Vermont, from different places. Different towns, and states and countries around the world.

You came to your degree by different paths. Took different courses in different majors.

Even when you were on the same campus, you spent time with different people, engaged in different activities.

And after today, you will go off in your different directions. To different jobs, different cities and towns, entirely different lives.

And yet, here we are. Together.

And the fact that we are together—at this time, in this place—is remarkable.

It's remarkable because this is a unique, wonderful moment in your lives.

But it's also remarkable because, in this new digital world, we are too often led to believe that our differences are reasons for division, rather than unity.

Class of 2019, this is a defining characteristic of our digital era:

- Whether it's algorithms that segment and select the information we see based on our previous clicks and likes;
- Or media outlets incentivized to confirm our beliefs, rather than deliver facts that help educate us and make us better citizens;
- Or political leaders who rally the extremes, rather than serve a common good.

As a result of all this, we jump to judgement...

...and disagreement too often turns to dehumanization.

We miss opportunities to turn difficult and challenging moments into teachable ones, from which we can learn and grow.

We lose touch with the shared values...

...and shared experiences...

...and shared aspirations that bind us together in this country, and make us who we are.

My message to you today is this:

It doesn't need to be this way—and it hasn't always been.

And I know this to be true, from my own journey.

You see, many aspects of who I am as a person, as an American, might be labeled as “different.”

I am black.

I am gay.

I live in Manhattan, that tiny island moored off the coast and a little unmoored from reality.

And I spend much of my time traveling across the country and around the world... meeting visionary, courageous, resilient people fighting poverty, inequality, and injustice.

All of these things—the things that make me different—define who I am.

And there are parts of my story, that equally define me, that are harder to see, which also make me different.

I was born to a single mother in a charity hospital.

We lived in a shotgun shack in a small, rural community in East Texas.

I attended public schools and colleges.

I was in the first class of Head Start in 1965, received Pell Grants, and private scholarships.

As an African American growing up in the south, I certainly encountered bitter racism.

But I also benefited from enormous generosity—from people who provided me with support, and encouragement, and who believed in my potential.

*You see, in spite of the differences I presented, and the challenges I encountered, I always felt that my country, that America, had my back.*

I had good people of good will cheering me on and pushing me forward.

Indeed, my story is an American story.

A story of what is possible, of what can happen, when “we the people,” live up to our highest ideals.

And when we do fulfill these ideals, the fact of our differences does not hold us back...

...in the very same way that the fact of our differences is *not really* what divides us.

Class of 2019:

The differences among us and the divisions between us:

These are separate things.

One does not inevitably lead to the other.

We are different, yes. But our differences are our strength.

Our division, on the other hand, is a liability—a liability that has been exacerbated and exploited, I believe, because of the corrosive, inequality that today is widening in American society.

More than what we look like, or where we come from, or how we worship, inequality is what is tearing our communities and country asunder.

Economic inequality asphyxiates the very American idea of economic and social mobility.

It creates unprecedented wealth gaps, sorting us into circles where we only engage with people of similar means and perspectives.

Persistent racial and gender inequality cause the sins of our history to infect the present and imperil the future.

Inequality helps explain the gaps between the experience of rural Americans and urban Americans—and entrenches the polarization in our political institutions.

And inequality doesn't just cause our challenges. It also prevents us from joining together to solve our common problems.

It undermines our hope for the future, and erodes our faith in one another.

We are less willing to trust one another. Less willing to extend the benefit of the doubt.

Too often, we rush to judgement, assuming the worst intentions of others.

Now, I'm not naïve.

There are people for whom hate and harm is the intention.

From Charlottesville to Pittsburgh, we have witnessed the painful, pernicious impact of hate.

And while there certainly are racists, anti-Semites, homophobes and prejudice in America today, this is not the character of who we are as a nation.

Most Americans believe in ideals of equality and justice for all.

And in order for these ideas to be realized we must stand up to emboldened bigotry.

And so, graduates:

I ask you... I implore you... not to build walls, but to build bridges and to build relationships.

Because when I reflect on my own story, I know I did not get here alone. None of us have.

It was not the simple fact of my presence, or superficial measures of diversity or inclusion, that led me to the great honor of serving as president of the Ford Foundation...

...or to the great honor of addressing you today.

It was often people who were very different from me extending their humanity, and generosity, and their privilege to help me.

Leaving their comfort zones behind. Spanning a divide.

It was people I didn't know—or came to know only later—who had faith in me, who invested in me, who sustained me on my American journey.

My story is proof of what can happen when people choose to transcend their differences, and build bridges, and build relationships.

You, too, are proof.

And, on its best days, so is this country I love.

America always has been the product of people choosing to bind themselves together. Actively choosing.

We are “We the people.”

We are *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

Because of our differences, we can ascend from cooperation, to collaboration, to innovation.

Out of our differences, there is hope.

Out of difference, there can be unity.

Out of difference, equality and justice.

And it's bigger than the United States. Out of many countries, we are one planet—with one future.

Which brings me back to where I started:

The celebration of difference—and all of the possibility that difference unleashes.

Out of many paths—out of many graduates—you are one class.

And while you have many careers and choices in front of you, I hope you keep one objective in mind:

To make this a more just and fair world.

So, I ask you:

- What bridges will you build?
- What new relationships will you initiate?
- What justice will you serve?
- What will you make possible for someone else?

Many of the bridges you cross will not be physical structures of concrete or steel.

They will be relationships you forge, through hard work and attention, respect and care, listening and love.

And the best relationships are those in which you can be yourself and better yourself.

If my experience is any indication, this is especially true of relationships with graduates of this great university.

My partner in life of 26 years, David Beitzel was a proud member of UVM's class of 1980.

He passed away suddenly in January.

David taught me so much about life, and our common humanity.

We were very different. We hailed from very different places and backgrounds.

But we found each other despite those differences—and enriched each other's lives because of them.

Relationships with other people...

...friendships and family, professional, romantic, incidental and intentional...

...relationships are essential, no matter how different we may seem to be.

They strengthen our empathy, our compassion, our humanity, and widen our perspectives.

And if we build bridges and bonds of connection, then when injustice affects one of us, we know—deeply, personally—that it affects all of us.

When we bind ourselves to others—when we recognize that our fates are bound together—we can put the small things aside.

We can make a world where stories like mine are more probable, more likely, more common.

We can shrink the gaps of inequality, and grow justice in its place.

It will not be easy, class of 2019.

Justice takes time.

It takes work.

It takes love.

And it takes risk.

But I hope you find ways to build these bridges.

I hope you find ways to listen and be curious—to be present and proximate.

I hope you embrace difference—and reject division.

Class of 2019: I know you will answer the call—and I know the future will be much better for it.

It's yours for the taking and the making—as of right now.

Congratulations, Class of 2019.

Good luck and Godspeed!

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