

Becoming Better Versions of Ourselves

By AYANNA NORVILLE



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Ms Ayanna Dominique Norville (Bachelor of Laws, First Class Honours, Faculty of Law) gave the valediction at The University of the West Indies 4:00pm Graduation Ceremony of Thursday, October 25, 2018. This is her speech.

I am humbled to deliver this valedictory speech on behalf of the Engineering and Law Graduating Class of 2018. I would like to thank the Dean of the Faculty of Law for having the confidence and belief in my ability to deliver this speech.

As we reflect on our journey at The UWI, I would like to compare our experience to the 2018 World Cup. Similar to the way 32 teams in the World Cup underwent different qualifying rounds in their respective regions to be eligible for the World Cup, so too have we students undergone similar qualifiers. We successfully completed our CSEC or CAPE examinations, studied at Open Campus or completed first degrees to qualify for the big stage, also known as “The UWI.”

The group stages represent our entry into Year 1, anxious and naïve, most of us believing that this would be a “walk in de park” because of our arsenal of distinctions and Grade 1s. Enter Year 2 and the knockout stages begin. The pressure intensifies, and, just like Germany, Argentina and Portugal, students are being knocked out of the competition by either opting to leave the programme because their passions lie elsewhere, or because of the difficulties associated with the intense workload.

Our final years at The UWI represent the semi-finals and finals of the World Cup as those who make it this far have had to endure a lot of hardship to make it onto this stage. However, unlike the beautiful game of football, The UWI journey allows for more than one winner and those who persevere until the end, go home with the ultimate prize, their degree.

Being awarded our degrees is just like winning our own personal World Cup; it is our moment of glory and achievement. Today we are the French, we are the ones that have defied all the odds, we are the history-makers, and most of all, we are the winners. We have all had to endure different journeys to make it to this point, but today we are united by one thing: WE DID IT!

I know some of my engineering colleagues may be wondering as to my capability to deliver a valedictory address on your behalf. However, Law and Engineering are not as different as

you may think. For one, though engineers follow the laws of the universe and lawyers apply the laws of the land, we are all critical thinkers and problem-solvers that are needed in every facet of society.

And if you think about it, we both need each other. We need you to help build our future homes and offices, and you need us to draft up your future contracts and help you protect your work with a patent if you aspire to be innovative like our Campus Principal Professor Brian Copeland in the making of the G-pan.

Graduating class of 2018, my purpose today is to demystify the misconceptions we have about fear. As humans, we tend to dismiss fear as weakness, but my time at The UWI has taught me how to embrace fear.

Having lost my father at the tender age of nine years old, I became fearful. He was my protector and at times, my strength through life's difficulties. Upon entering The UWI, which was my father's dream for my life being realised, I feared a lot of things. I feared failure, I feared not having a strong support system and I even feared the future.

However, these past three years has helped me to realise that I had been wasting my time and energy letting fear consume me every time an obstacle came onto my path (and trust me, there were plenty).

Through it all, I remembered that I was never alone. God orchestrated my journey in such a way that I was able to use my fear as my motivation to succeed and find creative ways to prepare for my exams and I was able to realise that I was blessed with my immediate family, who were always by my side; teachers, who were constantly praying for me; and friends who entered into my life and supported me along every step of the way.

Your response to life's problems becomes your responsibility. We cannot always control the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but we can certainly control how we react to them, and how we let them affect the goals we set for our lives.

Too often we refer to fear as a bad thing, but it isn't. Fear sharpens you, challenges you and makes you stronger. When you run away from fear and from taking risks, you run away from an opportunity to grow.

It's often been said that a comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing ever grows there. The UWI has been a testament to our growth and as we look down from this peak in our lives, we can reminisce on those low days at The UWI that took us outside of our comfort zones; those days when we failed courses, regretted mistakes made in examinations, lost confidence in ourselves, struggled through financial hardships, through family difficulties, overcame traumas such as being victims to robberies, illnesses and death, lost friendships and relationships, overcame anxiety and depression, lost motivation in our abilities and felt disappointed in the degrees we received.

I am positive that the graduates here would agree when I say that The UWI has shown us our true grit. Being here today in our capacity as the graduating class of 2018 shows that when things went wrong, and adversity struck, we did not succumb to bitterness and give up. Instead, we allowed those experiences to push us closer to the finish line and become better versions of ourselves.

Denzel Washington stated that "When you fall throughout life, fall forward." So, Graduating Class of 2018, I urge you to keep falling! Keep taking risks, keep embracing your fear, because every failed experiment is one step closer to your success.

Graduating class of 2018, each of our stories is unique. We all grow at different rates, so why compare ourselves to others? When we compare ourselves to others, we overlook the fact that being unique is one of our greatest assets.

Your life's journey is about learning to become a better version of yourself daily and fulfilling your truest potential. I urge you to be confident in your own abilities; it is only when we accept who we are and remain focused on our own journey that we are truly able to succeed. Albert Einstein captured it best when he said that everybody is a genius; but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.

There is an African proverb that says, “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” My time at The UWI made me realise that there were times when we needed to go quickly and there were times when we needed to go far. We all had instances where we needed to go fast, like when exams were approaching and some of us had to cram everything in the night before the exam; and times we needed to go far, such as pushing each other on when we felt like giving up during our all-night study sessions.

In the Faculty of Law, the hunger games we experienced while signing up for our lecturer Mr. Affonso’s tutorials online is one prime example of a time when we needed to go fast, so much so that we called upon parents, siblings and significant others or even stayed home to help ensure that the odds could be ever in our favour.

Even though this experience showed the need to move swiftly, it also showed the need to go far, and to go together. For the students who unfortunately did not get in to those tutorials, other students took the time to share materials and resources, explain concepts, principles and cases. This allowed us to abandon our individual desires and form a united front in our mission to pass this course and, by my estimation, we all did.

This is just one of the memories that has been etched in my mind after my three years here. On further reflection, The UWI has left us with a plethora of memories that we will never forget.

Events such as Cocktail Party, Shocktober Party, All Fours Tournaments, Football Tournaments, Mental Health Seminars, Sports Day, Games Night and Year One Challenge where we were able to form lasting bonds with our colleagues and to have fun while pursuing our degrees. Instances where students became team mates with lecturers in the pursuit of greater learning. Life changing moments when we found those lecturers who, so amazing in their ways, humbled us. The stress of pulling All-Nighters in TLC, Undercroft, the library, at home, or some random place in The UWI that you found.

The moments where you found love, your best friend, your passion and even yourself.

Now, accolades, memories and distinctions aside, we now take time out to recognize you, our lecturers, mentors, spouses, mothers, fathers, siblings, family members, friends, well-wishers and last but not least, our heavenly Father. We thank you for supporting us, nurturing us, teaching us, cheering us on, inspiring us and drying our tears. We welcome you to a celebration of your investment. To you who have given so much, we the graduating class of 2018 sincerely hope we have met all your expectations. You deserve as much applause as we do. Graduating class of 2018, please join me in giving our loved ones a round of applause.

Graduating class of 2018, as we step into the next chapter of our lives outside of The UWI, that same fear we felt as Year 1's still looms in our stomachs: the fear of the unknown; the fear of failure; the fear of the future.

However, as my best friend Michael once told me, "To get something you never had, you have to do something you never did." Les Brown, a motivational speaker, made an analogy about this. Imagine you're on your deathbed and standing around your bed are the ghosts representing your unfilled potential; the ghosts of the ideas you never acted on; the ghosts of the talents you didn't use. And they're standing around your bed angry, disappointed and upset. They say, "We came to you because you could have brought us to life. And now we go to the grave together." So, I ask you today, "How many ghosts are going to be around your bed when your time comes?"

Fellow graduates, as we move forward from this season in our lives, let us reflect not only on our achievements at The UWI, but also on our new-found power. As future engineering and law professionals we are now role models, problem-solvers, critical thinkers, agents of change and innovation.

As I close, I wish to leave you with the powerful words of Marianne Williamson:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves: 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be?"