

# The New York Times

## Message to Graduates: Times Are Tough, but You Can Make It

If commencement speeches reflect the times we live in, then this year's entries point to struggles ahead. Still, there's reason for hope.

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Thousands of college graduates across the nation have gathered with families and friends over the past few weeks to mark not just receiving their degree, but a symbolic crossing from childhood to adulthood. Commencement speakers gave them their marching orders.

If commencement speeches reflect the times we live in, then this year's entries suggest the times are bleak. The common themes are almost biblical. Among them are resilience, overcoming adversity, not fearing failure and taking risks.

But wait, graduates! Take heart, this year's commencement sages go on to say. Just because you are leaving college in an uncertain job market during one of the most angry and unpredictable presidential election seasons in memory, and are quite possibly destined to return home to live with your parents, it does not mean that you will not ultimately profit from your experience of hardship and self-doubt. Do not give in to the forces of darkness and despair, the speakers urged the Class of 2016, for you will emerge stronger in the end.

—ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS AND STEPHANIE SAUL



Daniel Terna/Pratt Institute

“It’s the rest of your life I want to really talk about. With a little luck you folks will probably live for another 70 or so years. Enjoy them, for God’s sake! Don’t bore yourself to death with a dull job or a dull partner. Take some risks — I don’t mean speeding at 90 or doing heavy drugs, but take risks to find an interesting, challenging, perhaps difficult profession. Don’t let money be the primary goal but rather interesting, enlivening activity. ... **Learn to take a hit now and then, and brush it off.**”

Kay WalkingStick  
Landscape artist  
Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y.



Rogelio V. Solis/Associated Press

We also know that the shadows of the past have not completely disappeared. Despite all the progress we've made, I know that so many of you still see these shadows every single day. ... Maybe it's when the store you enter into, folks seem to keep an extra close eye on you as you shop. Maybe it's when you walk down the sidewalk and folks cross the street when they see you coming. ... Maybe it's all those schools that, despite the laws, are still very much separate and unequal, or the criminal justice system that still doesn't provide truly equal justice for far too many. ...

I wish I could say otherwise, graduates, but the question isn't whether you're going to come face-to-face with these issues; the question is how you're going to respond when you do. Are you going to throw up your hands and say that progress will never come? ... Or are you going to take a deep breath, straighten your shoulders, lift up your head, and do what Barack Obama has always done? As he says, 'When they go low, I go high.'"

Michelle Obama  
First lady  
Jackson State University, Jackson, Miss.



Oberlin College

I remind you, dear graduates, with all that is before you, that you decide to strive to live artfully. It is simpler than you think and is not to be left only to those classmates of yours who have chosen the arts and humanities as their fields of study and proficiency.

You see, art brings us together as a family because it is an individual expression of universal human experience. It comes from that part of us that is without fear, prejudice, malice or any of the other things that we create in order to separate ourselves one from the other. Art makes each of us whole by insisting that we use all of our senses, our heads and our hearts, that we express with our bodies, our voices, our hands, as well as with our minds.”

Jessye Norman  
Opera singer  
Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio



## Spelman College

As you prepare to leave here today, I urge you to draw strength from your inheritance. Never doubt that the smallest step can create the most sweeping change. Go forth into the world and explore the sciences that expand our world, the economies that keep it running and the laws that set us free. But never lose sight of our comrades in humanity on whose behalf we are called to work or the faith that will sustain us through it all. This is my call to you: to find your change and live it.”

Loretta Lynch  
Attorney general  
Spelman College, Atlanta



Matt Rourke/Associated Press

“In a year when politicians traffic in anti-immigrant rhetoric, there is also a Broadway musical reminding us that a broke, orphan immigrant from the West Indies built our financial system. A story that reminds us that since the beginning of the great unfinished symphony that is our American experiment, time and time again, immigrants get the job done.”

Lin-Manuel Miranda  
Creator of “Hamilton”  
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia



Steven Senne/Associated Press

And I want to be clear that your intuition is different from your conscience. They work in tandem, but here's the distinction: Your conscience shouts, 'Here's what you should do,' while your intuition whispers, 'Here's what you could do.' Listen to that voice that tells you what you could do. Nothing will define your character more than that."

Steven Spielberg  
Filmmaker  
Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.