

Thank yous:

The Hon. Deputy Senate President, Sen. Ike Ekweremadu

Former Nigerian President Gen. Ibrahim Babangida

(represented by his son, Mohammed Babangida)

Barrister Kenneth Imansuanbong & his lovely wife, Kate

. . . and all the distinguished ladies & gentlemen in the front rows whom I had the honor and pleasure to meet today or last night at the dinner. All protocols duly observed.

Principals, teachers, staff, parents and other distinguished guests:

To each of you I extend my deep appreciation for being asked to share this special day with you and being allowed to offer a few words on the occasion of the Pace Setters Academy Graduation and Prize Giving. The U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, Robin Sanders, also sends her greetings but was unable to be here today.

However, it is to the Graduates themselves, mostly the 12th graders, but also the 6th graders and yes, even the Kindergartners, that I will direct most of what I am going to say.

Dear Graduates. These remarks are billed in the program as a Graduation Lecture, but don't worry there isn't an exam planned.

Which is good, because you probably have no idea what this day is about. Not really.

Oh, it happens every year to yet another class, and so it is a "normal" part of school life. You've been seeing it approach for most of the years you been at Pacesetters, and now it is here, a sign that you are grown-up, finally now longer a child. You've also been told -probably more than once- by teachers, parents,

relatives, neighbors and total stranger just exactly how important this occasion is. And today, here we are - all dressed up and shiny in a big hall full of honorable's and distinguished's. Seems awful important, doesn't it?

But why exactly are we here? What sort of encounter across generations is this supposed to be?

First, you have, no doubt, been told to expect wise words and good advice from me and the others who will speak today. And we, for our part, certainly know what is expected of us. The remarks we have prepared are full of what we hope passes for wisdom.

Whenever I come to a graduation event, I try think back to what little I can recall or imagine of my own feelings when I sat where you are sitting.

I ask myself what would I like to have heard, sitting so long ago where you are now? What would have been really useful to have been told about the decades then lying so wide open in front of me? What could the principal have told us on that day, that could really have changed my life from what it has been to something even better? What should the distinguished speaker, whose name I long ago forgot, have told us about being alive and growing older and living happily?

The story is told that Winston Churchill once gave what is famously - and quite incorrectly - remembered as the shortest graduation speech on record: just three words, repeated three times, "Never Give Up, Never Give Up, Never Give Up."

Nice sentiment, but it is not quite the truth. The famous Prime Minister of Great Britain did give a speech in October 1941 to students at the Harrow School; and it was a brief speech, no more than five minutes in all, and it included the following lines --

"Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never--in nothing, great or small, large or petty--never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

Good advice, especially for a wartime speech by a great leader to young men he might soon be sending into battle - and he wanted them to be strong, resolute, brave.

My own High School Counselor - one Mr Homer Hightower - was no Winston Churchill, but he stunned all of us with his graduation advice. Now, Mr. Hightower was a funny guy to us. A bit odd-looking. Wore his trousers pulled up way high and kind of waddled when he walked. Probably good at his job of telling us how to apply for college and jobs, but not someone we especially admired or liked. Not cool in the least.

-How many of you 12th graders are heading off to university? A show of hands, please. Good. Quite a few of you. Well, this is especially for you.-

Mr. Hightower leaned over the microphone and told us in his thick, dry voice that when we were in college there would be times, there would be times, when the project assignments would be very, very large and very hard, when we would find ourselves past midnight, dead tired, but still with chapters to read, reports to finish, and the world pressing in from all sides. And what do you then, Mr Hightower asked and then told us. . . .

You go to bed, you go to sleep! Start over again in the morning!

Astonishing! Nothing about bearing down harder, about being tough, about hanging in there, meeting your responsibilities, finishing what you started, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. No. Just close your eyes, sleep and start fresh in the morning.

It was very good advice; I took it more than once in college and in the years after. It keeps you sane and balanced. It probably kept some of us from going over the edge. And today, over forty years after graduation I still remember his name. Not our distinguished speaker, not even our Principal, just Mr Hightower and his wise words about the deep beauty and strength of sleep.

When a graduation speaker asks himself what he should say to the graduates, he is actually asking - what have I really learned since I left school? What really counts? What's really important? And, am I really sure of that? Can I convince, for example, someone young and skeptical, full of spit and fire and nonsense, that this particular old guy still has something worth listening to?

A person talking to graduates is asking to be judged by them.

No one wants to be ordinary and forgotten, and we would all like the future to think kindly of us and what we have done with our lives.

And what looks more like the Future than all of you, than a sea of young faces? Like the Future, you want to move on, move past wherever you are, leave the Past behind and move into that very scary unknown out there in front of you, challenge it and win! You may not know exactly what you are going to do, but you want to take the world away from us who are trying to give you advice - and you will. It is inevitable. And you should. That is how the world works, when it works right.

I don't really have advice, I guess. I barely know myself how I made it passed the steel mills, refineries and warehouses of my hometown, and into this line of work. I know you are probably concerned about what you will do for a living, whether you will succeed in your ambitions, whether you can pay the rent, take a trip or buy a house for your family. But you all have different talents and I don't know you at all, so I can't tell you much about how to turn your special qualities into lucrative professions and happy lives.

However, I do know that in this world what is rare is usually (though not always) rewarded. You know, like a diamond, like gold. And I know that people who can reach out to other people, who can communicate, who can write clearly and passionately and honestly - these are very rare human beings. Like the kids who won the writing awards last night or Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, from Enugu State, who I met on Thursday in Abuja at her book reading. The easiest way to be smart, by the way, is to read good writers. And writing itself is always an in-demand job skill.

Another rare skill in any human enterprise is judgment, the ability to say this is the right way to proceed, and the other option is not, that this is the right decision and that is the wrong one. Judgment is ultimately the ability - exactly when things are complicated and confusing - to know the difference between right and wrong. That is another rare quality in people, worth its weight in gold - and it sometimes pays well, too. The most useful course I ever took in college, the most practical one, turned out to be ethics. It taught me how to make up my mind and how to make good decisions.

One of my favorite American thinkers is a gentleman named W.E.B DuBois, an American sociologist, perhaps the most important black leader in the United States during the first half of the 20th century and a co-founder in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

He was born February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts and died August 27, 1963, in Accra, Ghana.

When Du Bois left Atlanta University, where he had established the Department of Sociology, to go to New York and begin his work with the NAACP, he wrote a special prayer for his students. It was a little like his own private graduation advice. Dubois wrote:

"God give us grace to realize that education is not simply doing things we like, studying the tasks that appeal to us, or wandering in the world of thought whither and where we will. In a universe where good is hidden

underneath evil and pleasure lurks in pain, we must work if we would learn and know. It is the unpleasant task, the hard lesson, the bitter experience that often leads to knowledge and power and good."

I take this to mean that if it hurts, listen real tight: You're probably learning something important.

Each of you will also discover eventually that most of the really old lessons and simple wisdoms - like the one from DuBois or like Igbo proverbs in Adaobi's book - are probably true.

Finally, if you can learn to read poetry, understand and enjoy it, you are probably on the right track. It is among the rarest of human gifts.

So, let me close with a poem. It's about childhood, growing up, and looking back, which is pretty much what we are here celebrating today.

What I Understood

by Katha Pollitt

A reading of :

"What I Understood" by Katha Pollitt, from *The Mind-Body Problem*. © Random House, 2009.

Thank you for listening. Now have fun and go find out where life takes you.