

## ADDRESS TO THE GRADUATION CEREMONY

University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus

By

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Chancellor, Chief Justice, Vice-Chancellor, Members of Cabinet, Principal and other Members of the platform party, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Graduating Class of 2014, Specially invited guests, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen. May I first salute Sir Hilary on his elevation to the high office of Vice-Chancellor. Sir, please accept our best wishes for success in your new appointment.

I am greatly appreciative of the conferment upon me of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws this afternoon and wish to convey my deep gratitude to the Senate and the Council of the University of the West Indies.

It is a signal privilege to be invited to be the Guest Speaker at this Graduation Ceremony.

I offer my warmest congratulations to all of the Graduands. You have worked hard, you have stayed the course, you have made your parents, guardians, families and yourselves proud and now armed with knowledge and your dreams you look to the future.

Distinguished Graduands, you are the future. The future is you. This is the time when you take full responsibility for yourself, if you have not already done so, the time when you have to justify your existence every day, the time when you hone your sense of purpose as you plan the way forward.

I believe that there is a good inter-generational mix among you. The majority of you maybe millennials, sometimes referred to as Generation Y, born between the early 1980s and the turn of this still relatively new century and millennium. There will be some who are of Generation X, born between the early 1960s and 1980s and even a few of my generation, called baby boomers (really a most undignified

nomenclature), born between the ending of World War Two and the early 1960s. You will soon be joined by the Digitals or Generation Z, those born in this century, familiar with information technology since childhood and said to be ‘possibly the most diverse of any generation’. In fact they are also a part of the largest generation of adolescents the world has ever seen.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are living in a time of great transition – transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, from the second to the third millennium, from a bi-polar to perhaps a multi-polar world. We are living in a time of rapid transformation driven by the new technologies which are rendering place and distance almost notional. Some world leaders are calling for reform of multilateral institutions in the face of global recession and the collapse of financial markets. Many countries are having to face reform of governance both in the public and private sectors.

We are living in tumultuous times – of wars and rumours of wars, delusions of empire and violent climate change. The earth’s crust is moving with powerful and destructive force and so are the tectonic plates of economies and development. These are but some of today’s realities.

I do believe that we are living in a time of profound and extraordinary change.

Your overarching task must be to bring post- modern Barbados and the wider Caribbean fully into the twenty-first century, with the courage to jettison much of the twentieth century baggage. At the same time you must be able to distinguish and hold fast to the enormous legacy which you have inherited from those brave forefathers and mothers and grandparents who went before you. The Caribbean is a relative zone of peace which is a positive foundation on which to be standing in today’s world. The deeply troubling escalation of crime and violence in our communities is high on the list of issues already under discussion by our leaders and political and social actors of every persuasion. There are no standing armies to be found in our region except the army of the poor and we know that poverty alleviation and eradication are among the first order of business of all governments and Non- Governmental Organisations. The Caribbean is still second only to Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of HIV/AIDs prevalence rates. I am really describing here only some of the challenges of our time.

In the Caribbean region this University of the West Indies is the leading institution of civil society, engineering innovative strategies which will enable you to respond to new imperatives as they arise. As my old school song puts it, you have been “handled and made for the service of right. You shall carry the light.” “A Light Rising from the West” as this University’s motto puts it.

It will be expected of you to bring new thinking not only to the old ways of doing things but also new thinking to some of the new ways of doing things. In other words be ready to question, adapt, create, innovate, re-invent and pioneer. There are priorities which should be under active consideration now in preparation for and as part of the process of working our way out of recession. You may ask how seriously are we examining the skills gaps both in the private and the public sectors in this region? Is our post-secondary education system positioned to produce the talent needed to improve competitiveness? Are our governments paying serious attention to reforming training programmes? Can the business community play a more active role in building stronger systems of workforce development? Our countries need to be in on the ground floor and ready to take advantage of the opportunities, not only of recession, and they do exist, but also of recovery. You will need to be visionary, prescient indeed.

On your way forward it is best if you know where you want to go and what you want and need to do in order to get there. You must be prepared to work hard, very hard, because you must always strive to give of your best.

Only offer your very best work.

You will be fortunate if you have recognized what is your passion. Sometimes it will be revealed later rather than sooner. The beauty of this is that if your passion can inform your work then you will be a happy person, enjoying what you do, helping others, bettering the national effort and making a positive and beneficial difference. My father taught me that.

Be careful not to be inflexible about what job you may take to begin and be open to learn lessons not only from those who reach out to mentor, help and guide you but to learn lessons also from those who stand in the way and would dispute the passage through this life with you. Sometimes being at the right place at the right time or taking a particular course of action over another can make all the difference. So keep watching for opportunities and make the most of them when they present themselves to you. They may never come again. There will be occasions when you are blown off course. So always, always have a Plan B in your back pocket or better yet, to hand. Try to be a 'here it is' person rather than a 'where is it' person. You know the kind...where did I put it? Why did I not think of that? What is it that I am looking for?

Remember that there must be times to stop and evaluate and do not be too proud to examine self. It is so easy to become very busy doing your best work with enormous output but at the end of the day there is no discernible outcome.

The human condition means that we all make mistakes. Move on from them quickly and organize victory out of mistakes. Pace yourself. Life is about choice and change. Things are not always what they seem therefore you should consider very carefully the choices you make, they tend to inform the changes which come to all of us. My mother who was a trained nurse advised me that in the face of overwhelming odds one must stay focused and be prepared to act. She would say panic, cry or faint tomorrow but today when the moment requires it, you make a decision and you act. This has stood me in good stead over the years.

When I was called to the Bar of Barbados on the first Monday morning of 1969 I became the only woman practising law at the private Bar and continued in that situation for the next eight years until I became the first woman to be a Minister in the Cabinet of Barbados. In 1969 there may have been no more than about one hundred lawyers registered to practice. Today there at least one thousand attorneys-at-law registered to practice with another forty-five added within the last forty-eight hours. I verily believe that there are considerably more women than men. I hope that many among them are looking at specialities such as the environment and in fact the economic, social and scientific elements of a broad range of disciplines. During my time it was either criminal or civil practice. There were next to no specialities then. I started to build a civil practice and found myself doing a lot of the kind of work in which the men were not interested, particularly matters concerning the family, women and children. Today it is called a family practice.

I also became involved in a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), mostly associated with the empowerment of women and girls. The early 1970s were the years of the growth of the Women's Movement worldwide and Barbados was very much a part of it, bringing the perspective of women to the development process on all issues, not only women's issues. The whole had been impoverished without it. My passion was becoming my job. In those days there was no Family Law Act, no Protection of Children Act, no Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act nor Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act. This body of legislation and a great deal more passed Parliament after 1976 where I was a sitting and vocal Member of Parliament. It was led by a prolific Attorney General, Henry Forde, (now Sir Henry), who was a champion of the work of the Women's Movement. I was the only woman in the House of Assembly for the next ten years before another woman arrived.

I have made several references to NGOs and wish to speak about the importance of them in our communities and our system of governance. In every community, little

or large, there are always small groups of people who come together to commit their time, their skills, their talents, sometimes their wealth, their compassion and occasionally their lives to a cause, an ideal, a need. It matters not whether a volunteer is wise or simple, gifted or slender in knowledge, in the world's gaze or in hidden paths, high or low; there is always something to give back to the community which nurtured you. I encourage each one of you to find a way to do just that. There is a broad range of issues which civil society is highly motivated to undertake in order to raise public awareness and involvement. Non- governmental organisations do crucial work and are often better placed than governments to do a more efficient and effective job precisely because they are the ones working in and at the frontlines of communities. This is how truly participatory democracy can work – the community taking responsibility for itself.

This is about self-help and self-care. This is how we become our brother's keeper. By itself democracy is only an ideal which cannot succeed without strong institutions underpinning it. I speak here about a stable participatory parliamentary and governance process, adherence to the rule of law and an independent judiciary, a relevant and engaged labour movement, involved civil society, the churches and much more. Government and NGOs are two different entities and one ought not to try to imitate the other. NGOs should never lose their independent networking trademark which is what distinguishes them from government. There are great skills to be learned there and experience that no school can teach. It is where I began my life of public service and where I returned in the years in political opposition and now in retirement. I recommend it highly.

I am constrained to caution you to be wary of a lot of what is passing for so-called conventional wisdom nowadays, particularly in respect of the idea of a prescriptive right to entitlement. The reality is that in every generation we pay back AND we also pay forward, in labour, money, time volunteered and the gift of love. In my generation we helped to pay back and pay off the debt very properly incurred in building the infrastructure which modernised Barbados and likewise the rest of the Caribbean. We were the immediate beneficiaries of it and so were succeeding generations.

At the same time we paid forward, not only for ourselves but also for those coming after us. The National Insurance Scheme and the new pillars added to the economy of Barbados are topical examples of that. It is the continuum of life. At the beginning of my remarks I made reference to the intergenerational mix of today's graduating class of 2014. And I return to it as I close.

In your turn you must pay back and pay forward.

The enormous lifetime work upon which you are now embarked may sometimes appear overwhelming but even though you may not be expected to complete the task in your time, may I say to you, neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.

God's speed on your journey and be well.

Thank you for your attention.