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## Your Purpose

"You would rather find purpose than a job or career. Purpose crosses disciplines. Purpose is an essential element of you. It is the reason you are on the planet at this particular time in history."

Address by Chadwick Boseman, Actor, Writer

Delivered as commencement speech at Howard University, Washington, D.C., May 12, 2018

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It is a great privilege, graduates to address you on your day, a day marking one of the most important accomplishments of your life to date. This is a magical place, a place where the dynamics of positive and negative seem to exist in extremes. I remember walking across this yard on what seemed to be a random day, my head down lost in my own world of issues like many of you do daily. I'm almost at the center of the yard. I raised my head and Muhammad Ali was walking towards me. Time seemed to slow down as his eyes locked on mine and opened wide. He raised his fist to a quintessential guard.

I was game to play along with him, to act as if I was a worthy opponent. What an honor to be challenged by the GOAT, the greatest of all time, for a brief moment. His face was as serious as if I was Frazier in the Thrilla in Manila. His movements were flashes of a past greater than I can imagine. His security let the joke play along for a second before they ushered him away, and I walked away floating like a butterfly. I walked away amused at him, amused at myself, amused at life for this moment that almost no one would ever

believe. I walked away light and ready to take on the world. That is the magic of this place. Almost anything can happen here. HU!

(crowd) You know!

Howard University, I was riding here and I heard on the radio, somebody called it Wakanda University. But it has many names, the Mecca, the Hilltop. It only takes one hour, one tour of the physical campus to understand why we call it the Hilltop. Every day is leg day here. That's why some of you have cars. During my junior and senior years, I lived in a house off campus at Bryant Street. For those of you... That's right, Bryant Street. For those of you who don't know what that means, that's at the bottom of the hill where the incline gets real. Almost every day I would walk the full length of the hill to Fine Arts, where most of my classes were, carrying all of my books, because once you walked that far on foot, you are not walking back home until it's time to go home for good.

But beyond the physical campus, the Hilltop represents the culmination of the intellectual and spiritual journey you have undergone while you were here. You have been climbing this academic slope for at least three or four years. For some of you, maybe even a little bit more. Throughout ancient times, institutions of learning have been built on top of hills to convey that great struggle is required to achieve degrees of enlightenment. Each of you had your own unique difficulties with the hill. For some of you, the challenge was actually academics. When you hear the words magna cum laude, cum laude, you know that's not you. That's not you. You worked hard. You did your best, but you didn't make A's or B's, sometimes C's. You never made the dean's list, but that's okay. You are here on top of the hill.

I want to say something to that. You know, sometimes your grades don't give a real indication of what your greatness might be. So, it really is okay. For others it was financial. You and your family struggled to make ends meet. Every semester of your matriculation you had to stand in one line to get to another line, to get to another line for somebody that might help you. You had to work an extra job, or two, but you are here.

For a lot of you, not all, but a lot of you, your hardest struggle was social. Some of you never fit in. You were never as cool and as popular as you wanted to be, and it bothers you. So, your social struggles here became psychological. Even though you made it up to hill, you carried the baggage of rejection with you, but you are here.

Some of you went through something traumatic. You made it to the top of the hill but not without scars and bruises. Some of you fit in too much. You were on the yard rapping on your frat block when you were supposed to be in class. Or you got caught up into DC party life. I know how that is. I mean, we are right here in the midst of the city. Sometimes you forgot you were in school. You probably could have graduated with honors, but instead you are getting an "Oh yeah" degree today. Oh yeah, I have class. Oh yeah, I have that paper due. Oh yeah, I have a final. You were literally too cool for school. You waited until the last minute to do your best work and it's a wonder that you made it up the hill at all because you carry the baggage of too much acceptance.

Most of you graduating here today struggled against one or more of the impediments or obstacles I've mentioned in order to reach this hilltop. When completing a long climb, one first experiences dizziness, disorientation and shortness of breath due to the high altitude, but once you become accustomed to the climb, your mind opens up to the tranquility of the triumph.

Oftentimes, the mind is flooded with realizations that were, for some reason, harder to come to when you were at a lower elevation. At this moment, most of you need some realizations because right now you have some big decisions to make. Right now, I urge you in your breath, in your eyes, in your consciousness — invest in the importance of this moment and cherish it. I know some of you might've partied last night. You should, you should celebrate, but this moment is also a part of that celebration. So, savor the taste of your triumphs today. Don't just swallow the moment whole without digesting what has actually happened here. Look down over what you conquered and appreciate what God has brought you through.

Some of you here struggled against the university itself. This year, students protested and took over the A building, formulated a list of demands and negotiated with our president and administration to determine the direction of our institution. It's impressive. Similarly, during my years here at Howard, we also protested and took over the A building in order to preserve Howard's alum, in order to preserve Howard's annual appropriations from Congress. President H. Patrick Swygert decided to reduce the number of colleges at the university. By his plan, engineering would need to merge with architecture. Nursing would

merge with allied health and the fine arts, my school, will be absorbed by arts and sciences. That's how we saw it, absorbed.

For many of us in fine arts, this signaled to us that our curriculums, all the curriculums of students following us, might become watered-down concentrations. This undermined the very legacy we were proud to be a part of and aimed to continue. The fine arts program had produced Phylcia Rashad, Debbie Allen, Isaiah Washington, Richard Wesley, Donny Hathaway, Roberta Flack, just to name a few. We felt that... Yes, yes. You could go on and on. You can go on and on. You can go on and on. We felt that we could compete with students from Juilliard, NYU and Carroll Arts as long as we continued to have a concentrated dosage that rivaled a conservatory experience, but without it...

Although we took over the A building for several days and presented our arguments to President Swygart and the administration, the schools were still merged. Thus, the current collection or formation of schools exists. That's why I view your recent protest as such an accomplishment for both sides of the debate, student and administration. I didn't come here to take sides. My interest is what's best for the school.

A Howard University education is not just about what happens in the classroom, students. In some ways, what you were able to do exemplifies some of the skills you learned in the classroom. It takes the education out of the realm of theory and into utility and practice. Obviously, your organizational skills were unprecedented. I'm told that you organized shifts so that you could at least continue some of your classes. We missed all our classes. We were in the A building. I'm told that through donations, there was always an ample helping of food. I probably ate a slice of pizza during the entirety of our three-day protest.

Your organization and planning was impeccable. You received the majority of your demands, making a significant impact on those who came after you. As is often the case, those that follow most often enjoy the results of the progress you gained. You love the university enough to struggle with it. Now, I have to ask you that you have to continue to do that even now that you received your demands. Even if you are walking today, you have to continue to do that. Everything that you fought for was not for yourself. It was for those that come after. You could have been disgruntled and transferred, but you fought to be participants in making this institution the best that it can be. But I must also applaud President Wayne Frederick and the administration for listening to the students.

Your freedom of speech was exercised in a way where you can contribute to this place. It also shows that you can contribute to the democracy. The administration and the campus police at the time when I was protesting were not nearly as open-minded as this current one. I know this was a difficult time, but because of both of you, I believe Howard is a few steps closer to the actualization of its potential, the potential that many of us have dreamed for it. Students, your protests are also promising because many of you will leave Howard and enter systems and institutions that have a history of discrimination and marginalization. The fact that you have struggled with this university that you love is a sign that you can use your education to improve the world that you are entering.

I was on a roll when I entered the system of entertainment, theater, television and film. In my first New York audition for a professional play I landed the lead role. From that play, I got my first agent. From that agent, I got an on-screen audition. It was a soap opera. It wasn't Third Watch. It was a soap opera on a major network. I scored that role, too. I felt like Mike Tyson when he first came on the scene knocking out opponents in the first round. With this soap opera gig, I was already promised to make six figures, more money than I had ever seen. I was feeling myself. But once I got the first script, with soap operas you very often get the script the night before and then you shoot the whole episode in one day with little to no time to prepare.

Once I saw the role I was playing, I found myself conflicted. The role wasn't necessarily stereotypical. A young man in his formative years with a violent streak pulled into the allure of gang involvement. That's somebody's real story. Never judge the characters you play. That's what we were always taught. That's the first rule of acting. Any role played honestly can be empowering, but I was conflicted because this role seemed to be wrapped up in assumptions about us as Black folk. The writing failed to search for specificity. Plus, there was barely a glimpse of positivity or talent in the character, barely a glimpse of hope. I would have to make something out of nothing. I was conflicted. Howard had instilled in me a certain amount of pride and for my taste this role didn't live up to those standards.

It was just my luck that after filming the first two episodes, execs of the show called me into their offices and told me how happy they were with my performance. They wanted me to be around for a long time.

They said if there was anything that I needed, just let them know. That was my opening. I decided to ask them some simple questions about the background of my character, questions that I felt were pertinent to the plot. Question number one: Where is my father? The exec answered, "Well, he left when you were younger." Of course. Okay. Okay. Question number two: In this script, it alluded to my mother not being equipped to operate as a good parent, so why exactly did my little brother and I have to go into foster care? Matter-of-factly, he said, "Well, of course she is on heroin."

That could be real, I guess, but I didn't want to assume that's what it was. If we are around here assuming that the Black characters in the show are criminals, on drugs and deadbeat parents, then that would probably be stereotypical, wouldn't it? That word stereotypical lingered. One of the execs pulled out my resume and began studying it. The other exec wore a smile and was now trying to live up to what they had promised me only a few moments before — "If there is anything you need, just let us know." She said, "As you have seen, things move really fast around here, but we are more than happy to connect you with the writers if you have suggestions."

"Yeah," I said, "that would be great." I said, "because I'm just trying to do my homework on this. I didn't know if you guys have decided on all the facts, but maybe there are some things we could come up with, some talent or gift that we can build. Maybe he is really good at math or something. He has to be active. I'm doing my best not to play this character like a victim."

"So, you went to Howard University, huh?" the exec holding my resume interrupted, peeking over the pages. "Yes," I said proudly. He slid my resume back in his desk and said, "Thank you for your concerns. We will be watching you."

I left the office. I shot the episode I had come in to shoot on that day. Probably the best one I did out of the three because I got one that was bothering me off my chest. I was let go from that job on the next day. I got a phone call from my agent. They decided to go another way. The questions that I asked set the producers on guard and perhaps paved the way for less stereotypical portrayal for the Black actor that stepped into the role after me.

As the Scripture says, "I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God kept it growing." God kept it growing. Yet and still, when you invest in a seed, watching it grow without you, that is a bitter pill to swallow, a bitter pill. Anybody that has ever been fired knows what I'm talking about. Even if you really don't want the job, when they let you go, it's like any break-up, you act like you don't care. I didn't need that damn job anyway. I didn't need them.

But when you have those moments alone, you start to wonder if there was a better way to handle it. If you could have handled it better maybe you could help your family. Then before you know it, you are broke. You find yourself scraping together change just so you can ride the subway, so that you could get the next job. Maybe if you could book something else that would eclipse the feeling of doubt that's building, but it seems like you can't pay them to hire you now.

My agents at the time told me it might be a while before I got a job acting on screen again. Well, that was fine because I never wanted to act in the first place. And I definitely didn't want to be caught dead going after a fake Hollywood pipe dream. I'm more of a writer, director anyway, so forget their stories. I can tell my own stories. But am I actually blackballed? "We are hesitant about sending you out to some people right now because there is a stigma that you are difficult." As conflicted as I was before I lost the job, as adamant as I was about the need to speak truth to power, I found myself even more conflicted afterwards. I stand here today knowing that my Howard University education prepared me to play Jackie Robinson, James Brown, Thurgood Marshall and T'Challa.

But what do you do when the principle and the standards that were instilled in you here at Howard closed the doors in front of you? Sometimes you need to get knocked down before you can really figure out what your fight is and how need to fight it. At some point, my mind reverted back to my experiences here, to the professors that challenged me and struggled against me, Professor Robert Williams, Doctor Singleton, George Epstein, to name a few, the ones that will fail you out of the goodness of their hearts.

This may be hard to grasp for some of you right now, but I even considered President Swygert and how negotiating with him was practice for a world that was considerably more cruel and unforgiving than any debate here, one that had no interest in my ideals and beliefs. How would I maneuver through all of this?

Finally, I thought of Ali in the middle of the yard in his elder years, drawing from his victories and his losses. At that moment I realized something new about the greatness of Ali and how he carried his crown. I realized that he was transferring something to me on that day. He was transferring the spirit of the fighter in me. He was transferring the spirit of the fighter to me. He was transferring the spirit of the fighter to me. Sometimes you need to feel the pain and sting of defeat to activate the real passion and purpose that God predestined inside of you. God says in Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Graduating class, hear me well on this day. This day, when you have reached the hilltop and you are deciding on next jobs, next steps, careers, further education, you would rather find purpose than a job or career. Purpose crosses disciplines. Purpose is an essential element of you. It is the reason you are on the planet at this particular time in history. Your very existence is wrapped up in the things you are here to fulfill. Whatever you choose for a career path, remember, the struggles along the way are only meant to shape you for your purpose. When I dared to challenge the system that would relegate us to victims and stereotypes with no clear historical backgrounds, no hopes or talents, when I questioned that method of portrayal, a different path opened up for me, the path to my destiny.

When God has something for you, it doesn't matter who stands against it. God will move someone that's holding you back away from the door and put someone there who will open it for you if it's meant for you. I don't know what your future is, but if you are willing to take the harder way, the more complicated one, the one with more failures at first than successes, the one that has ultimately proven to have more meaning, more victory, more glory then you will not regret it.

Now, this is your time. The light of new realizations shines on you today. Howard's legacy is not wrapped up in the money that you will make but the challenges that you choose to confront. As you commence to your paths, press on with pride and press on with purpose. God bless you. I love you, Howard. Howard forever!