

Katie Washington **2010 Valedictory Address**

Good morning, Mr. Williams, Mr. Gioia, Fr. Jenkins, distinguished faculty and guests, family, friends and loved ones. Thank you all for being here with us to celebrate our commencement. To my fellow classmates, congratulations, again, for making it to this momentous occasion. Our accomplishments during the last four years give us ample reason to celebrate.

But at some point during the next few months, the excitement surrounding our commencement will wane, and many of us will be forced to confront challenging realities. What happens after the applause stops? The spotlight fades, the crowd clears, and there are moments of complete silence. While applause is accompanied by feelings of safety and security, this silence can bring vulnerability and uneasiness. Through my experiences at Notre Dame, I've found that these silent, uneasy moments usually spring up right after I get comfortable with self-praise and appreciating my own accomplishments.

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Earlier this year, the Notre Dame Voices of Faith Gospel Choir spent our Spring Break touring the East Coast. Although our thirty-four choir members came from many different cultural and religious backgrounds, our unique style of worship originates from African-American Christian traditions. I was a student director this year, and as the week started, I was ready and excited to give my all to an organization that has been part of my college experience since freshman year. During our first concerts, as we sang and worshipped with loud and exuberant praises to God, we met all kinds of people who were willing to sing, clap and worship with us.

Then, during a concert at a church in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, the applause stopped.

There were at least 150 people at the concert, but somehow, no sound or movement seemed to come from the pews. Apparently, the congregation had never experienced a musical ministry quite like ours. We continued with our concert, in spite of the silence, but I wasn't sure that our rehearsals had prepared us for that moment.

Now, I can reflect upon a conversation that I had with a tearful parishioner after the concert. Had Voices given up when the applause stopped, we might have been gone when the woman arrived late, after sitting for hours at her sick mother's bedside. She told me that, while we were singing, it seemed like we were talking directly to God. She was so grateful that we were there to pray with her through song.

Over the last four years, I hope that all of us have taken the opportunity to step outside of our own comfort zones to build relationships with people from different places and backgrounds. Through service, time spent abroad, and our experiences with each other right here on campus, we've had the chance to find unity in the diversity of gifts with which God has blessed us. We've been given many opportunities to let self-acceptance blossom, and to develop mutual respect and understanding for all members of the Notre Dame family. In doing so, we've learned to build relationships in light of our differences and in spite of our fear.

After today and beyond the applause, we can continue to escape normative ideals and find the freedom to understand the unique and special qualities that make all of us human. We can put solidarity into action, for love of all our neighbors, near and far.

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Last December, after a year and half working in Dr. David Severson's laboratory, I saw my study of mosquito population genetics in Haiti in its published form, for the first time.

Through the collaborative efforts of the members of Dr. Severson's lab and the Notre Dame Haiti program, we were able to demonstrate that human activities are likely responsible for the distribution of infectious mosquitoes throughout Haiti. Each year, mosquitoes transmit diseases that kill more than 1 million people, mostly in impoverished countries. I was pleased to know that I had made an important contribution to the global health community.

But on January 12, after only a few weeks of celebration, an earthquake hit Haiti, and the applause stopped.

At first, it was exciting to know that my work could help solve problems that many people don't even know about. However, the earthquake reminded me that I had done so from the safety, security and comfort of a lab here, at Notre Dame. The cities that I wrote about in my paper have been reduced to rubble, and many of the lives that I hoped to protect were claimed by immediate and overwhelming tragedy.

Now, I can reflect on conversations with my research advisor and other outstanding scientists at Notre Dame. Over and over again, they have reminded me that our work is not about being celebrated and rewarded. Instead, it gives us an opportunity to add value to a world that has given us much more than our fair share. To do science at a place like Notre Dame, a University where our sense of faith informs everything we do, is to commit to innovation and discovery because of our personal moral convictions. In the College of Science and throughout the entire University, our faculty has committed themselves to the mission statement. And our learning has become service to justice. We learn, we think, and we work in our different disciplines to address tough problems because we all know that it's the right thing to do.

After today and beyond the applause, we will experience the freedom to challenge the conventional. We can engage in strokes of genius, enlightened moments, and great ideas that will

improve planet Earth and heal her inhabitants. Together, we can pool our knowledge to define the undefined, and combine our efforts to prepare for the unexpected.

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I started Fall Break of this year in anticipation of all that I hoped to learn during my CSC seminar on Youth Violence. My friend Jeremy and I spent weeks helping Kim, the director of the Indianapolis Peace Institute, to plan our weeklong immersion. I was excited to work with ten other students, and to learn about innovative approaches to address youth and violence. At first, the experience was transformative. I was proud of the work Jeremy and I had done.

Then, on the day our group visited a juvenile re-entry program, the applause stopped.

I realized that I had grown up in the same neighborhood as one of the young men in the program. He had been sent to a juvenile detention center after participating in a series of illegal activities. He'd joined the re-entry program in hopes of building healthier relationships and pursuing goals that would help him to avoid further involvement with the judicial system.

In any other situation, his story of redemption might have left me feeling hopeful for other youths. Instead, my heart ached. All of my reading on urban poverty, structural violence, and peace building seemed meaningless in light of the real obstacles that he faced. At one point during our childhood, I called him my little brother. Meeting again in adulthood, it felt like our lives were worlds apart.

Now, I can reflect upon conversations that I had with him after the seminar was over. If he and the workers at the juvenile re-entry program had given up when the applause stopped, he could have been just another offender, lost in the judicial system. Instead, he is now in college and working to help other young men overcome the challenges that he, himself, faced. I can also reflect upon talks with my fellow seminar participants – my friends. We were 11 Notre

Dame students, from different backgrounds with different majors and personal interests. Yet, the young man we met, from my neighborhood, touched each of our lives in a way that we couldn't have imagined.

After today and beyond the applause, we can continue working to understand our own privilege. We can use real empathy to recognize violence and injustice. We can build relationships with people who are confined to the margins of society. And maybe one day, each and all persons will be able to participate in every dimension of life as they wish.

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Throughout my time here at Notre Dame, I've grown a bit wary of moments of accolades and applause, because of the unnerving silences that often follow. But our commencement is a momentous occasion worth celebrating. The applause and praise from our friends, family, mentors confirms the value of our hard work, dedication and sacrifice. We have done many things of which we can be proud.

So after all of the applause is over today, I hope that we embrace the silence as much as we've embraced our senior week and commencement weekend celebrations. Instead of being afraid, we can cherish the examples set by our often unapplauded heroes: our parents and siblings, professors who have pushed us to do more than we've ever dreamed, and you, the members of the Class of 2010 who have set the standard for excellence in and out of the classrooms at the University of Notre Dame.

Thank you and God bless you all.