

Cindy Kent

Vanderbilt Owen Commencement 2019:

## **OPEN/INTRODUCTION:**

Hello and good morning everyone. Dean Johnson and all the faculty and staff for such a gracious invitation to deliver the keynote address for the 300+ 2019 graduates across all Owen's programs. As Dean Johnson told you, I have nearly three decades of experience across the healthcare industry and I'm so thrilled and honored to be chosen as your commencement speaker. And twenty years ago, exactly, I was sitting in your chair, likely thinking similar thoughts..."boy, it's hot and I hope that this speaker isn't boring."

While we are here to celebrate you, graduates, we also know that this journey is never done alone. Greetings to the ***friends, families and loved ones.***

Graduates, you've worked hard, you've invested in your education, had sleepless nights, perhaps shed a few tears—tears I hope have been eclipsed by memories of gut-bursting laughter with classmates who will become life-long friends. I only have to look as far as the audience to remember – seeing friends from the 1999 class sitting here so many years later.

## **Speech**

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." How sad. What a desperately sad tragedy. As an alum of this great institution—I can attest that the world needs your talent. We need enlightened leaders now more than ever. We need leaders who are personally and profoundly committed to living lives of significance and not settling (yes, settling) for merely material and monetary success. The need for moral, ethical, and purpose-driven leadership has never been greater.

So to you, 2019 class, my wish for each of you is that you would experience the depth of joy and hope that comes with living **your best, most significant life.**

For a few moments, I would like to speak about the ***4 Keys to Living Your Best, Wild and Precious Life: Authenticity, Vulnerability, Resiliency and Legacy***

These thoughts were shaped by my experiences and inspired by Mary Oliver's poem, ***The Summer Day***.

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear? Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass, the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, ***Tell me Class of 2019***...what is it you plan to do with your **one wild and precious life?**

The first key is **Authenticity**: *TRUE* Authenticity takes courage—stating to the world, unapologetically—“This is me” is not for the faint of heart. Beyond being a buzz-word, I have come to learn that authenticity is one

of the primary currencies of great leadership. For anyone that has spent any time in Minnesota at all, you know, like I do, that Minnesota Nice isn't all that nice; silence is not affirmation and a "Yes" (even with a head nod), does not signal support. From a marketing perspective, products with high consumer loyalty, also usually has a unique value proposition. Your authenticity is your personal, unique value proposition.

People need to know that your yes is a real yes and what they can expect from you—and that you will be consistent over time. Most of you are young in your careers now, but trust me when I tell you, titles, money and influence can easily create social distance between people—when Authenticity is lived as a personal value, it suggests that no matter what else you may be, or have, that you will always be fully human—and such, that your humanity sees and acknowledges the humanity of others.

The next key is **Vulnerability**. Vulnerability has become its own cottage industry thank to Researcher and professor Brene Brown with her 2010 TedTalk, "The Power of Vulnerability". This talk is one of the top 5 TedTalks of all times with over 30 million views. About vulnerability, Dr. Brown (or Brene, as I like to call her, because she and I are buddies [*in my head*]) says, "*Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness.*"

Just imagine the shareholder value that would be unleashed in corporations if each of us showed up as our most courageous and fearless selves each and every day—fully acknowledging that you don't have all the answers and won't always be right.

I've seen poor examples of this when I was part of an organization led by a CEO whose main leadership tactic was intimidation – often bullying the senior executives during the quarterly business reviews. It was not

just a matter of “knowing your stuff” but inciting a palpable fear that you could feel just being in the room. Fear that you could be asked the most insignificant detail during the four-hour review.

So, the night before the review, presenting leaders would stay up late preparing (much like you preparing for finals at Owen). If a business leader provided an answer with even the slightest bit of hesitation or uncertainty, the meeting would be paused and facts checked. And having watched executives before me being publicly grilled for providing inaccurate answers, one day, it was my turn in the hot seat. I was presenting and was asked one of those minutia-red herring questions. In a split second my mind raced about how to respond...and in one the most vulnerable moments of my career, I responded, “I don’t know. Let me look into it and get back to you.” There was a pregnant pause—utter silence—that felt like an eternity as all 30 people in the room awaited the CEOs response. I fully expected to be banished from the room immediately. Instead, he paused, repeated my answer, then said “Thank you. Please do.” That experience has left an imprint on me as a leader regarding the power of vulnerability. There is power in knowing, but there is more power in knowing what you don’t know.

The third key is **Resiliency**. Like the grasshopper in the poem, learning to fling yourself out of the grass, and having the courage to get back up regardless of how many times you fall down or fail—and most importantly, learning something from the experience. Winston Churchill said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” I would encourage you neither let a good failure, a heartbreak, a devastation, the disappointment over a job offer that you wanted, but did not get—don’t let the lessons that these experiences could teach you, go to waste.

And it’s never just *one* lesson—it’s only the best lesson for where you are in that moment. As a friend recently said, the same experience has the power to teach many lessons depending on your lens and where

you are in the journey. The point being, failure is a gift, but only if you allow it to be. If you are never turned down, if you never mess up, if you never say “I don’t know” – you won’t learn and most certainly, you won’t grow.

If you live long enough and work hard enough, you will experience failures—like professors—the toughest ones, often times teach us our greatest lessons. Early in my career, I experienced a set-back in a role. And long after I had moved on to a new assignment, I continued to replay that situation over and over again. Two years later, during a performance review with my new boss, I, *despite receiving the top review rating*, kept giving her examples of what I could have done better and I still remember Sheri’s words to me that day, “Cindy, that was two years ago, if you don’t shake that experience, you will sabotage your career and your fears will become your reality.”

You’ve all heard the stories of failure of now-famous entrepreneurs and executives. It doesn’t matter how many times you fall, always have the courage to get back up. And in case your confidence gets shaken, surround yourself with a support group, your posse, your tribe (like those with you here today) who will, when you fall down, love and support you enough to not let you stay there!

Finally, the fourth and final key to living your best, wild and precious life is **Legacy**. I am obsessed with the notion of legacy. One of my daily prayers is to “leave people, places and things better than I found them.” And only recently, during reflection while on a retreat in the wilderness, along with research of my family history through Ancestry.com have I come to realize why I may be so consumed with the legacy that I am creating. Not only did my mother die suddenly and unexpectedly at age 53; and her mom, my grandmother at 51, both of heart disease---Ancestry showed me that several generations of women on that side of the family tree had died prematurely in their 30’s, 40’s and 50’s also of heart disease. Thus, somewhere deep within, buried

beyond my conscious mind, lays a keen sense of urgency and perhaps an unhealthy pre-occupation with lifespan. Maybe it has also driven me to spend the past 27 years in healthcare.

While we cannot control how much time we will have on this earth, I am deeply committed to vitality, and living out loud, in authenticity, in faith and in full-and- living color—helping as many people as I can in the process and leaving as big of a dent in the universe as I possibly can.

It doesn't matter where you are on the journey. Whether you're pursuing an MBA, EMBA, a Masters in Finance, Marketing, or Accounting, part time, full time, dual degree; pivoting to new career, building competency in your existing function, or if you have no clue what you want to do next—It is never too early to begin thinking about the legacy you are creating.

The truth of the matter is each of us have something within that is whispering and wanting MORE---to be more; to do more. Some call it purpose. Others, vocation. I do not care what you call it...just allow it; amplify it with intentionality and in so doing, I would imagine that you will live a life that is bigger, better—than anything you could have ever imagined. Not just for you, but for everyone around you and who will come after you.

Even if you receiving one of the Vanderbilt awards or are graduating at top of your class, no one got here alone. Recently, Judge Damon Keith, senior judge of the US 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals in an interview shared advice he gives to young lawyers, "...I tell them...they are walking on floors they did not scrub and going through doors that [they] did not open. You too must scrub floors for others, ...to walk on, and open doors [for them] that were not open for you... **We've got to leave a legacy.**" Graduates, you've completed an unparalleled educational experience, now part of that duty is paying it forward for others.

## **CLOSING:**

In closing, I offer one final CONGRATULATIONS to the 2019 class. I will conclude my talk by posing the question that Mary Oliver posed in her poem, *Summer Day*: **[Graduates] what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?**

Thank You.