

Peabody College Commencement

Remarks by Shaiza Rizavi

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Thank you, Dean Benbow.

How remarkable to be standing on this lawn, where my education began over two decades ago, looking out at this sea of graduates.

We gather here to recognize the collective acts, the mighty and the minute, that brought you and me – all of us - to this juncture and to bless your journey forward. Today. This day. Marks just the beginning.

To the parents, siblings, grandparents, peers, professors, administrators, coaches and all those who accompanied the journey and helped widen the path. It is almost as though an air of gratitude floats around this crowd and I feel blessed to bear witness.

As I thought about what we might discuss today, I started to wonder about the history that brought us here which leads me to George Peabody. What a figure!

Already an enterprising businessman, Mr. Peabody returns to his native America (from England) over 150 years ago and boy what a reflective moment.

It is 1866 and Peabody learns first-hand of the aftermath of the civil war. Misery. Poverty. Destruction. Generations of young minds left to wilt. He stops. He surrenders as he remembers the inability to complete his own education because of the oppressive forces of poverty. He finds himself motivated. He dares to imagine without knowing exactly where it will lead. He endows an education fund. The foundation of this remarkable School and, 50 years ago George Peabody College for Teachers joins Vanderbilt, forming a remarkable union.

Mr. Peabody's call to action over a century and a half ago *prophetically poured* capacity into each of us. He changed the course of my life, changed the course of your life and changed the lives of thousands of others, many more perhaps than he predicted. To see growth rise from the ashes of destruction, wow.

We have the privilege and responsibility of standing on the shoulders of other giants at Vanderbilt like President Zeppos, Dean Benbow, Bob Innes and Terry Deal.

I recently read a book by Todd Rose titled *Dark Horse*. There I learned the stories of giants who come from unexcepted places.

Rose describes the life of a misfit child born to a single mother in Wanganui, New Zealand. She is head strong. 15 years old, a high school dropout, she's cleaning stables and her mother walks out of her life. In her twenties, history repeats, she too finds herself a single mother working at a fast food restaurant, just to make ends meet. One night, while visiting family in the country, she is given a pair of binoculars and encouraged to look up.

Imagine: Her back wet from dewy grass, the dead weight of the binoculars against the bones of the face, trying to find the right angle. Without warning, suddenly a raging river of galaxy runs across the inkiest night sky. And there it is. The majestic milky way.

She's lived every moment of her life under this sky, but it is as though the sky did not exist until this very moment.

Now, she returns to her every day. Her circumstances are *absolutely* unchanged – she is a single mother, still. Scrapping by, still. Yet that little sense of wonder keeps gnawing at her. She begins to pick up books and step-by-step learns about the sky. Astronomy, the unfamiliar. She finds her own personal obsession.

Something about this woman's story and her sense of wonder and curiosity resonate. Where have moments of curiosity and wonder taken me? Where have they taken you?

As a little girl, I was unbridled. My curious exploration was unstoppable.

Certain vignettes I remember clearly: My pre-school. Convent of Jesus and Mary. In my hometown of Karachi, Pakistan where the rules were *endlessly strict* and *in constant conflict* with my own curiosity.

I remember: getting my knuckles rapped at age 3, a parent teacher conference called over an extra “na” in my spelling of B-A-N-A-N-A-N-A.

At age 5, I could help myself no longer and climbed a stack of filing cabinets to reach the enormous, heavy, brass bell my teachers rang at the end of each day. I watched in delight as throngs of students and teachers rushed midday towards the exits – I had let school out early, it seemed, not a welcomed event.

As I grew older my curiosity manifested in different ways. At age 7 in the middle of the school year, my family leaves behind Karachi, Pakistan, the only home I have known, and arrives in the middle of this country, in the middle of winter.

With the natural curiosity, preciously held by young children, I am welcomed into a classroom of students who wonder about me.

On my first day, I walk into a room decorated with flags of my birth place. The kids ask me questions: *Why don't you know how to tie shoe laces?* Well, Karachi is warm. I have only ever worn sandals. *Why don't you know how to ride a bike?* That is not what you do in Karachi. In response, they generously teach me.

I get to question in return. I remember a little girl letting me rub her yellow, yellow hair. I had never seen skin so white or hair so blonde. These kids encouraged me to unabashedly question. And, what a privilege to have my innocent child-like wonder encouraged at this critical juncture.

It was that same *spirit of wonder* that led me to the office of Dr. Bob Inness, the father of *our* Human and Organizational Development program. During that conversation, my ideas coupled with his encouragement emboldened me to push the boundaries of learning and earn credit by doing.

Unbeknownst to me, critical building blocks are falling into place.

I find an internship, apprenticing under Bill Shulman Nashville's public defender at the time.

On my first day I am asked to sit alone with a client on death row in the chapel of the jail and report my impressions. Would a jury of his peers find him worthy of compassion?

I remember walking through picket lines. I arrive at the jail conflicted. I sit. I look at this man accused of murder. I ask: What does it feel like to have protesters calling for you to be put to death?

And, he begins to philosophize: “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth wouldn’t we all be blind and toothless.”

As the months go by, I continue to learn from this. I begin to see humanity where I was not sure there was any and continue to wonder about people, desperation and judgements. What if we were defined for all time by the worst thing we had ever done?

I feel empowered... maybe this is my calling, my way to serve.

I go on to work in the public defenders service in DC. I am 21, investigating a homicide case, and I take what I and the public defender think is a case-deciding statement that proves our client’s innocence.

In crafting the closing argument we decide, the statement speaks for itself and there is no need to belabor the obvious facts in the closing arguments.

Waiting for the jury to reach the verdict I find myself sitting between our client’s sister and mother. The fore person reads the verdict. Our client has been found guilty.

My eyes open, my hope deflates. I am not where I expected to be. This is not the outcome I expected or planned for.

Whether it is later moments, building latrines in central Mexico and working to unpeel the suffocating hold of slavery and prostitution on children in Thailand, or losing this case in DC - each experience forces me to face the necessary friction and relationship between possibility and doubt.

I learn from the doing and from the detours.

What does any of this have to do with who I am now - a stockbroker in New York City?

When I look back to decipher the code, what compelled me then and compels me now is just the same: no plan but a commitment.

A commitment to do what is right, not what is easy.

A commitment to keep showing up even when I do not want to.

A commitment to allow curiosity and wonder to generate hope.

If my life experiences seem unrelated on the surface. Dig one layer deeper and you will see, they are the connective tissue that binds.

Because I lost in DC, I am a better stock broker. Knowing through first-hand experience how *not testing* assumptions can go against me.

Because I sat across from that man on death row, I know better than to judge someone on any one reveal.

Because my lack of skills prevented me from making a difference in Thailand, I decided to gain those skills in business school.

Because I analyzed Susan Gray's head start work at Vanderbilt, I am more equipped to be a mother to children who may not exactly fit into a cookie cutter mold.

Because I have perspective, I am a better stockbroker, mother, wife, mentor, friend, citizen. Self.

We all have choices about what we allow to define us, and we do not always know where things will lead and what will matter over time.

When I think of the people I admire, it seems much of their “success” can be attributed to staying open to the beautiful unexpected, unfamiliar, and inexplicable (which is the definition of wonder).

Whether it is Jacqueline Novogratz (Founder of Acumen and author of The Blue Sweater), a banker turned social entrepreneur who was intent on disrupting how the world tackles poverty and succeeded in creating an entirely new culture of capitalism, or Bryan Stevenson who refuses to let us forget the history of our own country and reminds us that we are all connected as a human race in our brokenness

OR ... the woman in New Zealand. Her name is Jennie McCormick and last we discussed she was busy reading and researching the skies. Eventually, she decides she needs a telescope. Without the money to buy the traditional equipment, she rigs together her own observation mechanism. She studies the sky, tinkering and playing.

Years after pointing that pair of binoculars towards the cosmos for the first time, Jennie helps discover an entirely new planet estimated to be some 15,000 light years away. WHO. WOULD. HAVE. IMAGINED. THAT?

Today marks a moment of new beginnings in *your* lives. Many of you may be wondering, what will come next?

If Jennie's story - or my story - says one thing: it is that growth can come from the most unlikely, inexplicable sources. That what might be perceived as a point of detour is actually *just* where you are supposed to be and might result in beautiful learning and growth - if you can stay open and curious and find your right dilution of wonder and doubt.

My hope is that you will steep in your own sense of purpose and allow a sense of wonder to lead you in your work and, what's more, that you will support the development of wonder in others.

It might not all make sense in the moment. The moments sure do fly by. But I beseech you TO LOOK UP *to the wonder of the infinite*. To allow yourself in some moment each day to make space for the wonder, to go towards the unexpected, inexplicable.

So that, as you walk through your days, you don't reach just for the script or the way you have been told you are supposed to do it, but you actually LOOK UP and then dig deep within yourself and find your own personal obsession. Then it becomes *your journey* ... not the journey other people are expecting you to be on.