

Keynote Address
Urban College of Boston Commencement
June 5, 2010

I would like to thank President Turner for inviting me to be with you today for the Urban College of Boston's 2010 Commencement exercises. I feel privileged to be invited. I am delighted to be with the Class of 2010 and their families and friends. I also am honored to share the dais with Chairman Ebb, his fellow trustees, and other distinguished guests.

I want to tell you how proud I am of this institution for bringing higher education opportunities to the inner-city neighborhoods of Boston these past 16 years. The work this institution is doing to prepare early childhood teachers is legendary, and the Bilingual Certificate program you have to provide Latino women with career options is truly inspiring.

I note you have some new things happening this year. One in particular caught my eye. Your College and Career Advising Center sounds like the Academic Services Center at my own campus—giving students the support and counsel they need to prepare for the job market is simply good common sense for all educational institutions these days. I am pleased to see Urban College being proactive on this important area of our business. I also was informed that you have a new Gerontology program. Given the fact our population is getting older, this is an important emerging career opportunity.

I am especially inspired by what this college has done to support single mothers, working mothers here in Boston. I also note that you are serving a large number of Latino students as Massachusetts only Hispanic Serving Institution, and for them, I am especially proud! Education has always been the gateway out of the projects. In today's job market and slow economic recovery, an education past high school has never been more important. Your degree will help you bring a better life to you and your family.

I also want to acknowledge and say a tribute to Urban College's late founder, Mr. Robert Coard, who died this past November. It is visionaries like Mr. Coard who break through and clear aside barriers so that others may follow. I know that founding this college was a special source of pride for Mr. Coard. I know he would be very proud of today's graduates, for the courage they have shown, the sacrifices they have made, and the dreams they are working so hard to achieve.

I also want to acknowledge and congratulate the members of the faculty and staff and the families of our graduates for the guidance and support that they have given this year's graduating class. Graduates: Help me say "thank you" to all those who have helped you successfully reach this impressive achievement today!

- Will the parents and grandparents, please stand.
- Will the spouses and partners, brothers and sisters, please stand.
- Will the aunts, uncles and cousins, please stand.
- Will the friends, please stand.

I understand that there are 115 graduates today receiving Associate's Degrees and Professional Certifications, preparing for careers ranging from early childhood education to human services administration. Regardless of the path you have chosen, each of you has come to a crossroads today.

It is both a day of closure and a day of beginnings, but it is principally a day of celebration. Therefore, I am going to keep my remarks brief to ensure that most of our time is focused on today's graduates, as it should be. But I do have a few thoughts to share with you.

Many years ago I read a set of facts about geese and the lessons people could learn from them. It seems silly, but those of you who are animal lovers know that we can learn a great deal from non-humans. These were written in an Outward Bound Newsletter. I would like to share these with you

today because I have used them throughout my life. I often stop what I am doing and reread them to remind myself of their wisdom.

FACT 1 As each goose flaps its wings it creates an “uplift” for the birds that follow. By flying in a “V” formation, the whole flock adds 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

LESSON 1 People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

FACT 2 When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

LESSON 2 If we have as much sense as a goose we stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We should be willing to accept their help and give our help to others.

FACT 3 When the lead goose tires, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies to the point position.

LESSON 3 It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each other’s skills, capabilities and unique arrangements of gifts, talents or resources.

FACT 4 The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

LESSON 4 We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, production is much greater. The power of encouragement (to stand by one’s core values and encourage the core values of others) is the quality of honking we seek.

FACT 5 When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation or catch up with the flock.

LESSON 5 If we have as much sense as geese, we will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.

So how do these lessons apply to each of us?

In addition to finding a good job and supporting yourself and your family, you have a responsibility to help others. With the privilege of being a college graduate, comes the responsibility of positively affecting this great American society. Do not forget that as wealth is inherited, so too is poverty. There is a cause out there with your name on it, whether it’s helping out at your local pre-school, volunteering on a Habitat for Humanity project, or working at a homeless shelter. You will find the way to make a personal contribution.

There are many people I could hold up to you today as models for making your own personal contribution to the world. Martin Luther King. Robert Kennedy. Cesar Chavez. Sandra Day O’Connor. Of course, our tendency is to say, “There was only one Martin Luther King, only one Nelson Mandela.” That is true, but you don’t have to be a world leader to make a difference. These individuals used the lessons from the Geese to create change in the world.

Quite simply: they worked in teams and understood the power of moving in one direction while supporting the work of others.

Anthony Friedmann, in his book, “Writing for the Visual Media,” describes the classic movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life” starring Jimmy Stewart, and declares that the moral of the movie “... is that each individual life counts and affects the lives of others. In other words, the universe is affected by our individual existence. Individual destiny is universal destiny.”

Yes, one person can make an enormous difference even if it is in a local setting. I would like to tell you an amazing story about a woman who demonstrated what one person can do when they feel moved to try to help others. The lessons from the Geese served her well.

Hadley Denning was a 22-year-old woman from Maine who just graduated from college. She was visiting Guatemala 12 years ago on vacation. She came upon a situation that she simply could not walk away from. More than 6,000 people were living in or near the 35-acre city dump in Guatemala City, rummaging daily through the rubble and decay to find items they might use or sell. The methane gas was so bad it turned children’s hair red-orange. Dogs and gangs patrolled the alleyways.

For the next eight years, Denning worked tirelessly to bring hope and sustenance to the people of the dump. She became known as “El angel del Basurero” — the “angel of the dump.” She created an organization called Safe Passage and together with other organizations she was able to bring health services, education, and other support to the people she had given her life to. She established a school in an abandoned church — it now serves 500 children. Residential homes have been built on the edges of the dump, and the number of people living in squalor is down to 1,500.

An amazing legacy of an amazing woman. Like the Geese, she worked in a common direction with a community who needed her desperately; like the geese she helped them and accepted their help as they built a team.

Like the geese, she organized the group according to the skills they had (many of which she did not have); like the geese, they encouraged each other day after day even when the goal looked impossible – they honked; and like the geese they stood by each other as they turned around the living conditions for thousands of people. She applied the lessons of the geese, and it worked amazingly well.

Yes. One person can make all the difference. Yet as much as one person can have an amazing impact on the world, when we bring teams of people together, even greater good can occur. In the words of the late Senator Robert Kennedy, “Each time a man stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

As you go out into the workforce and forge your own way, find new ways to serve your local community beyond your workplace, be it as a Little League coach, a member of the school board, or serving food at a soup kitchen. If you go into business, strive to become a great leader and manager who stays connected to your community. If you go into healthcare, I challenge you to provide the best care you can to your patients. If you go into education, work to inspire your students. If you go into technology, create ideas that provide useful and valuable innovations.

Whatever you do and wherever you go in life, give it your all and always remember the lesson from the Geese that will empower you to succeed because you will see the good in working as a team with others to achieve your dreams and affect change for the good of others.