

Baccalaureate Address: Sylvia Boorstein
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It's so great. I got so excited while that was happening.

One of my meditation teachers used to end each of our interviews actually, I'd have my hand on the door ready to leave, and she'd say to me, "Remember, Sylvia, be happy," and I'd go out and I actually for a long time thought it was a salutation, like "have a good day" or something that you say just in a routine kind of a way, and it took me a long time to realize that it was an instruction, "Be happy," and not only that it was an instruction but that it was a wisdom transmission, that happiness was a possibility. I understand that happiness to mean the happiness of a mind that's alert, that's awake to the amazing potential of being a person in a life, with a mind that's opened, that sees everything that's going on, that sees my own life drama and the drama of life, and realizes what an amazing possibility this is, and with a heart that's open, the heart that responds naturally as hearts do, in compassion, in connection with friendliness, with love, with consolation when it needs to, that that's the happiness of life, a mind that's awake, a heart that's engaged, and that what I want to do this morning is share with you two practices, three practices, really, that are my current practices, that help me keep my mind in a shape where I remember that that's a possibility.

But, the first thing I want to say is congratulations, to everybody – to the graduates, of course, but to their families and the faculty and the administration and the founders of Stanford and everyone and everything else that has gone into making this event merge at this very moment. I have photos in a very old photo album of my father graduating from the City College of New York in 1934, and there are pictures of him posing in his cap and gown, but also my grandfather and my grandmother and my mother to whom he was engaged at that time, also posing in his cap and gown, and the truth is, when I was young, I was a little embarrassed about that. I felt a little bit shy about the fact that my grandparents, immigrants to this country who didn't speak English and hadn't gone to school at all, were presuming to wear a cap and gown. But you know, now I look at those photos and I think that they're exactly right, that everyone should have been wearing the cap and gown, that my grandparents each did whatever jobs they needed to do in order for my father to be able to not take a job, to go to school instead. The fact that they were all there at that graduation, trying on the cap and gown, had to do with the fact that my mother insisted that my father, who did not like ceremonies, go to that ceremony. It also has to do with the fact that the immigration laws into the United States in the early 19th [sic] century allowed my grandparents and many, many other people to come and start new lives here. That photo also depends on a free education at City College being available to everyone. If I look at that photo I not only see my

father's efforts; I see everyone's efforts and everything that was part of the world at that moment conspiring to make those photos possible. Just as, everything thing morning is possible because of a zillion myriad causes. The thing that I find most exciting to remember is that no one does anything alone. Everyone does everything with the help of everyone who has ever been in their life and supported them in all the ways that we support, and with the help of a culture that supports. Everything makes every single moment. That's so amazing to me. I think to myself, wow, the scripture line that came to me this morning as I looked out at all of you is wow, mana ra hama comaza. It's Jacob waking up from his dream and saying, "How amazing, how awesome in this world."

In my life, when I think about what's happening, it's sometimes tedious and sometimes wonderful, but when I think about life that is happening, that's amazing, so what I want to do with you right now is I'd like to do a mini-meditation. You don't need to close your eyes. It used to be when you said let's meditate, everybody'd close their eyes and folded their legs in a certain way, sat up straight. You can sit exactly the way you are. In fact, I hope you keep your eyes open and look at this glorious day, look at the people around you. Yu can look just for a minute, look at the people around you. This is a looking meditation. (LAUGHTER)

Look at the people around you. Some of them you know. Graduates probably most know each other. The parents and family, you can look at other people and not know them personally but in this moment, know that you are sharing this celebratory moment of passage, this moment that could only happen because of zillions and zillions and zillions of causes of which you are all a part.

You know, if everybody could discuss with another, if we had a lot of time, what's in your mind at this moment, what are your mind states, people would say, I'm sure, delighted and joyful and relieved and maybe a little sad, actually, to be finishing, and maybe parents and family are feeling nostalgic about when they were young people starting out into their lives. Maybe you're feeling anticipatory nostalgia about leaving Stanford before you leave, if you're leaving. (LAUGHTER) Everyone's got a mind full of an extraordinary array of human emotions, and if we look at each other, we don't even have to have little discussion groups to say how you are feeling. We know that that person, like me, is celebrating this moment together with me. We are human beings awake to this moment. It's a gorgeous day that supports awareness.

I want to say that really what I think about when my teacher said to me, "Be happy," is be awake, be alert, stay in your life, stay present to it. She said at another point, "It's your life, Sylvia, don't miss it." That's been a very important thing.

Now I want – that, by the way, was the warm-up meditation. This is the real meditation.

Just for a moment, you could even close your eyes if you want to, and this one is not a requirement, just for a moment, think about some challenge in your life at this point. Maybe you're about to start a new job or a new school or a new program or everyone, you know, it's not just for graduates. I think our life, my life is a continuing series of new challenges, new things to do, and among them always something that seems perhaps a little difficult, and I'd like you to be aware of the fact that when the mind is alert and expansive, present as it is in this moment, something that seems like a challenge seems workable. My mind is helpful. It says, well, this seems like a hard thing to do, but I can do it, I'll do that. Well, this is a difficult time in my life but it'll pass. I'll do that. When my mind is buoyant, it can carry the challenges of my life in a more hopeful, inspired way.

One last meditation. I'd like you to think for a moment, in this expansive and I hope hopeful and joyful moment, about the world and its difficulties. It's a very complicated world. It needs a lot of help. In the moments when my mind is inspired, I think about the readings from Abraham Heschel, the readings from Father Merton, the readings from the Dalai Lama, and I think yes, yes, that's right, that is the potential of human beings. We can in fact arise above our personal, trivial needs. We can, as Dr. Heschel said, really make a new world. We can, as Father Merton said, really find that our basic nature is lovingness and kindness and we can live in the awareness of that, and we can express that in the way we are with people. And we can, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, really meet people as friends. Imagine a world where we met everyone as sisters and brothers.

In moments when my mind is blank, like this one, I think to myself, I know that's true, yes, yes. And I can be a part of it. I'm inspired to make a difference. When I realize that every moment is the result of every single thing that's ever happened, I can even think about the world and its difficulties now and think about it in this way. I can say the world is full of difficulties but they didn't get there by accident. The way the world is is the result of all the actions of everybody up to now, but the actions of me and everybody else now will make a different world. Everything is always the lawful consequence of causes and conditions, and I and all of you are always for all of our life part of the causes and conditions of the emerging world. That's so exciting for me, when I remember, when my own story of my own life has not captivated me so much that I am bewildered or beleaguered or too tired to remember what I know what's true.

So here are the three practices that I know, that help my mind, picked itself up and remember, there's a world out there and I could make a difference in it, and the difference making would make me happy.

The first practice is a practice of mindfulness. It's a practice of the Buddha ** but it is not a parochial practice. It has no dogma. It's the practice of paying attention, really paying attention. It's a fancy word for paying attention. The point of paying attention, which means in every moment of my life trying to make myself aware of how do I feel? What's going on inside of me? What's going on outside, but what's going on inside? And, from that, getting to see what's always true. The point of it is wisdom. This is the wisdom that we're meant to see. There are three wisdoms. The first is that everything passes. This moment, like every other moment, passes. It's a great piece of wisdom to have in mind when my life is difficult, it's wonderful to remember that it won't be that way forever. I had a very difficult time come up in my family recently. Some incident happened and I was so upset about it, and one of my daughters came by me and said, "Mom, get a grip, its 12 minutes out of a whole life." That was a really important wisdom transmission. It's just this time out of a whole life.

The other part is not only that every experience passes so that when difficult ones are here, they're supportable, but every moment passes so I shouldn't miss this one. This is the only chance I get to do this one. Every moment is precious. Everything that I do makes a difference so I want everything that I do to be inspired by kindness.

The second thing that's important to know is that things are the way they are because of so many causes. Some of the things I can change in my life, and some of them I cant, but the wisest way I can respond to my life is by accommodating it and responding to it and not fighting and struggling with it, that are the things that I can change and I'd like the courage to change them. There are things that I can't change. I'd like the serenity to accept them. I'd like to keep the wisdom to know the difference.

And the third thing, again, is the recognition that no one does anything alone, that is, all causes and conditions. It relieves me personally of worrying too much about praise or blame. If I do something good, I think to myself, well, great, this is my teachers and my parents and my whole life speaking through me at this moment and acting through me, and I am very, very grateful for all of my teachers and all the people that make me who I am today, and I figure I share the merit with them. They're part of it. And when I don't do so well, when I don't do as well as I wish, I can also distribute the dismay and say this is not my fault. (LAUGHTER) All of my committee did not show up in exactly the right proportions today, but they will another time, so thank you, committee, and we carry on. I don't have to carry the whole burden myself. I'm part of the

committee but I'm not the whole committee. That's a great piece of awareness. That's what's supposed to happen from paying attention. That's my first practice.

Second practice is a practice of kind expression. The Buddha word for it is meta practice, kindness practice. Actually meta means friendliness practice, and in the reading from the Dalai Lama, you heard about meeting every moment as a friend, every person as a friend. It's easy to meet people and it's easy to meet experiences in your life as a friend if they're pleasant. It's not so easy if they're unpleasant and if you don't like them, so it's really important to know that this is a practice not for the benefit of the other person. It's a practice for the benefit of myself, that what I'm actually trying to do is to keep my heart an enmity-free zone. There's so much enmity in the world. I don't want any of it in my heart. If I can meet this person at least with a good intention for them, my grandfather used to say about everybody, because that was just an Eastern European thing to say, "My daughter, Miriam, may she live and thrive; my cousin Murray, may he live and thrive. I like to think about people as they come along — here comes so-and-so; may they live and thrive. I can like them or not like them, but if I think 'may they live and thrive,' it picks me up and it keeps me from thinking my stories about why I might not like them, which will condition how it is when I meet them. It's actually a safeguard for myself, so I hope as you meet people through the day, you might say to them, "May you live and thrive," and they'll never know actually, except other than that you wish them well. And your heart will stay in a very good zone.

There's a third practice that I have. This is not a practice of the Buddha could have taught, because it involves having a computer and doing e-mail. (LAUGHTER) And it's a practice that I have been doing for two years with my friend, Carol. Carol lives in Massachusetts, I live in California, we decided while we were teaching somewhere together having heard from a friend of ours that this was a good practice, I looked over at Carol and said, "You want to do this?" and she said, "yes." We went home. We e-mail each other every single day and I write to Carol what I am grateful for that day, and she writes to me. It's not a letter. I don't even write "Dear Carol." I say, "I am grateful today for" this and this and this. She writes the same. I don't have to respond to her, she doesn't have to respond to me. When we started, it was easy. She went back to Massachusetts, she said, "I'm grateful the snow is melting." I wrote to her, "I am grateful I live n California, we already have crocuses and daffodils." (LAUGHTER)

But after a while, after the excitement and the novelty of being friends used up all of our great stuff, we inevitably came to the truth of our lives, and sometimes there are really difficult days, and I would find myself at the end of the day in front of my computer writing to Carol and saying, "I am grateful for your

presence at the other end of this e-mail because I've had an absolutely terrible day. I am up to here with my colleagues. I'm upset with this and this with my family. I am trying to get a grip about this because I'm trying to be spiritual about it and it's not working, and I'm very happy that you're out there so I can tell you I'm in a really desperate mood, and in truth, as I'm telling you and as I'm writing you, it doesn't seem so bad, and actually there's a little space around the edges of it, and actually as I'm writing to you I see that I've made more of a mountain out of a mole hill than I needed to do and it becomes workable, and so and so." And Carol and I over these two years that we've been doing it have become as a result of this, very dear friends, because we've come to really tell each other what the really challenged parts of our lives are, and it's extraordinary to feel that I am held in loving compassion by someone out there, that I don't have to see, that I don't have to meet, that somewhere in the world there is someone waiting for her e-mail from me every day saying my gratitude. What it does for me, because it obligates me to make a space of gratitude in my mind, is I have to find some frame around my story large enough to hold the story, even if my story is one of woe and difficulty, I can say I'm still so happy that you love me and you're out there and you'll read this and you'll care about me. If the frame gets bigger, it allows me to see different possibilities in my life and when the frame is bigger, it allows me to remember that there is a life outside of mine, that there are other possibilities not only in my life but in the world. I get reconnected to myself in affection, and I get re-inspired to make a difference in the world.

Yu know, the Buddha said, the Ananda, the principal disciple of the Buddha, said to him at one point, "Is it true that noble friends are half of the holy life?" And the Buddha said, "No, it's not true. Noble friends are the whole of the holy life." So I would like you for a minute to look around at your noble friends, people that have helped you through all these years. Think about it your family back there who are, all of them, your noblest friends from the beginning. Think about the people who couldn't be here today who are part of your life who are your noble friends. And I'd like us to do this meditation together. Yu can look at the noble friends so you can think about the noble families. I'd like you to think, you don't have to say this out of your mouth, but you can think it in your mind. May your life go well, may you be happy, may your dreams come true. Think of somebody else now. May your life go well, may you be happy, may your dreams come true. Think of somebody else. May your life go well, may you be happy, may your dreams come true.

Now let's change the — we're all doing that, right? We're all doing that. Think of people. Now change the pronoun. We'll all change the pronoun. We'll change the pronoun from "you" to "we." May our lives go well, may we be happy, may

our dreams come true. May we stay awake and alert, may we stay friendly, may we stay amazed.

Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)