

**Dr. Shanee Stepakoff**

**Keynote Commencement Address**

**Delivered on May 13, 2007**

**Worcester State College, Worcester, Massachusetts**

Good afternoon, Worcester State College Board of Trustees, President Ashley, faculty, members of the college community, friends and relatives of the graduates, and in particular, graduates of the Worcester State College Class of 2007:

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you on this momentous occasion. I am deeply honored to be here.

However, I am also keenly aware that there is precious little I can say to you today that will truly make a difference in the course of your lives. There is precious little I can say to you today that you will even be able to recall at this time next year, let alone many years from now. There is precious little I can say that will spare you from some of the difficult, painful lessons that life will invariably bring—lessons about how little control any of us ever really has over events, bodily conditions, and especially, the behavior of others; lessons about the harsh consequences of failing to adequately or fully *show* our love, caring, and appreciation for relatives, colleagues, and friends whom we do love, care about, and value; lessons about how readily—whether intentionally or inadvertently—we can cause suffering and harm to others; above all, lessons about the astonishing speed with which the years pass.

More than 25 years ago, I sat in the amphitheater in my first class at Worcester State College – Intro to Urban Studies. Most of you graduates were not even born then. In 1984, I was seated in a different cap and gown, where *you* are today—the idea that one day I would be up here addressing you at commencement was unimaginable to me. My memory of that graduation day remains vivid and crisp, and when I try to figure out how I went from 21 to 44—and how my parents and friends' parents and professors have gone from their early 40's to their early 60's and beyond—I must confess I feel totally baffled.

But these are things that no commencement speaker—not even one who has stood in your shoes—can ever teach you. These are things that your parents and professors and favorite mentors cannot teach you. These are

things that can only be learned through experience, through the hard-earned insights that come from age, failure, success, loss, brilliant choices, disastrous choices, relationships, friendships, and triumphs—in short, these insights are gained only by traveling this very difficult but almost always interesting and quite often surprising journey called *life*.

I want to tell you a little about living a *meaningful* life. Because I am convinced that that is really the only thing worth talking about up here today.

Many of you are the first in your families to be graduating from college. Many of you have compelling reasons—financial need, family pressure, social norms—to choose your next steps in life based on considerations *other than* meaning.

I want to caution you about this.

Pay attention to the promptings of your soul. Heed your most authentic inner voice. Honor the needs of your own unique nature.

For when you defy your own deepest nature, when you ignore your interior voice, when you suppress or deny the stirrings of your soul—great suffering will invariably result, both for you and for others around you.

But when you use as the major criterion for your choices in life the question, “Is this a meaningful thing for me to do?,” the rest will fall into place, and even the shock of mortality and the passage of time will be attenuated—indeed, will become almost bearable—because what matters, ultimately, is not the number of years one has lived, but the richness and fullness and authenticity with which one has lived.

Naturally, the next question that comes to mind is “*How* does one go about creating a meaningful life?” And the answer is: you must have the courage to forge your own path. No one can do this for you. Not your parents, not your closest friends, not even your beloved. The question of what constitutes a meaningful life must be answered in a different way for each and every one of you.

I’d like to share with you a little about a few of the things that *I* have found meaningful in *my* life so far.

It’s kind of funny, but when I look back at my life, the things that might *seem* to matter a lot—that I have a PhD, that I have had articles published

in professional journals, that I work in a United Nations tribunal, that I have traveled widely—don't matter much to me at all.

But other things—which some people might overlook entirely, might not even consider to be significant, let alone *central*—stand out far more in my own mind, and imbue me with the feeling that my life has had purpose and worth.

When I began working at the war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone, I met a young woman named Neneh Barrie. She came from a very poor family of 12 children, from a remote village, and in her ethnic group, there was strong opposition to letting girls attend school. But Neneh had a natural curiosity and passion for learning, and against her parents' wishes, she used to follow the other children to school and sit in the classroom, without a uniform or books and without being formally registered; an astute teacher who recognized her potential permitted her to do so, and eventually persuaded her parents to let her attend. But after primary school, when she was 12, her parents tried to marry her off to a much older man, and she ran away to the capital, Freetown, so that she could go on to high school. She remained in Freetown all through the war, even when others had fled to neighboring countries for refuge, just so that she could complete her high school degree. The day after her graduation, the rebels, who were already responsible for mass atrocities, announced on the radio that all households with girls between the ages of 14 and 28 were to send the girls out to the street to serve as "rebel wives", and that if they failed to do so, the girl's entire family would be killed. That night, Neneh crept through the forest and eventually made her way across the border to Guinea, where she was taken to a refugee camp.

In the camp, an agency that was recruiting young high school graduates to become trauma counselors interviewed Neneh and decided that she had an aptitude for counseling. She was hired, and quickly rose to become the supervisor of all the counselors, and when peace came, she returned to Sierra Leone and obtained a position as the senior counselor at the Special Court, providing support to victims of war crimes who come to testify about their experiences. Although she has flourished in that position, she still has only a high school education, and this has blocked her from going further in her work. In the fall of 2006, I spent many hours helping Neneh research scholarship opportunities for study at U.S. colleges, and working side-by-side on the applications. A few days ago, I received an e-mail message from Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, informing me that Neneh had been offered a full scholarship with room & board for the duration of her undergraduate education, which she will begin this

September. I know that this opportunity will make an enormous difference in this young woman's life, and, in turn, in the lives of others with whom she will work in the future. And I consider my role in having assisted her—those late nights in the office searching the Internet for scholarships, those hours poring through pamphlets and brochures and proof-reading drafts of her essay—I consider this to be among the most meaningful things I have done.

Another example: when I was working in refugee camps in Guinea, for an organization called the Center for Victims of Torture, I got to know a teenager from Liberia named Marx Collie. Marx's parents both died when he was a child, due to the 2000 war in Liberia. He was beaten and captured during the war, but managed to escape and cross into refuge. However, unlike some refugees, who cope with life in the camps via mutual support among family members, Marx was totally alone. He had not been able to locate any surviving member of his large extended family. Marx showed natural intelligence, he wrote well, he loved to read, and he was earning outstanding grades in the refugee school. However, he was literally going hungry, because food that was supposed to be distributed by the authorities in the camp was not being distributed. Those who had relatives could usually figure out a way to grow food or to walk several miles to a spot where they could sometimes catch fish, but Marx, being on his own, and being committed to attending school every day, was not able to figure out a way of obtaining food. After a brief conversation in which I asked him to generate a business plan, he informed me that he felt he could earn his living by selling kerosene for the kerosene lamps that people use in the camps. I gave him a small loan, about \$20, for him to purchase his initial supply of kerosene. After that, I witnessed a remarkable transformation: this young man who had felt so hopeless began to regain a sense of dignity and self-sufficiency. And he was no longer hungry. Nevertheless, he continued to suffer from nightmares and traumatic grief due to the events he had undergone in the war. After determining that Marx needed to be in a safe, stable environment so that he could begin to heal, I made contact with the relevant authorities, and although it was extremely difficult, because many, many people were being turned away, I was able to make a strong case for his acceptance into the United States refugee resettlement program, and a few weeks ago, I was informed that he has now arrived in the United States. There were several others whom I was fortunate enough to be in a position to assist in similar ways. I know that being able to live in the United States—where there is universal free compulsory education, without the extreme hardships and risks that come from living in a refugee camp or returning to a still unstable Liberia—is going to make a major difference in the lives of these individuals, and their

children, and their children's children. And so, I consider my work to restore dignity and promote resettlement for the most vulnerable refugees to be a particularly meaningful part of my life.

It just so happens that I have been blessed by having been able to work in countries and contexts in which opportunities for making a difference are obvious and plentiful. In Sierra Leone, for example, where most of the population earn well under \$1 per day, and where the vast majority of parents cannot afford to pay school fees for their children, a gift of as little as \$20 can determine whether a child is able to attend school or will be doomed to illiteracy for the rest of his or her life.

However, it is *not* necessary to live and work in such extreme circumstances to create a meaningful life.

Many of those whom I view as role models for living lives of valor are in situations that are not at all dramatic or extreme—that, in fact, might appear rather “ordinary.” For example: a friend of mine, Dave Marzelli, who retired last year after 32 years as a guidance counselor at Plymouth South High School. He won a Counselor of the Year award from the Massachusetts School Counselors Association, but more importantly, he has helped literally hundreds of kids figure out where to go to college, get accepted to college, and make considered choices about their futures.

Or my professors from the urban studies program here at Worcester State College, Tuck Amory and Maureen Power, who taught me in the early 1980's and who are still here among us this afternoon—over more than two decades they have helped hundreds of students learn how to think in deeper and more sophisticated ways, to deal with complexity, and to take risks in order to expand their understanding of the world and their visions for what is possible in their lives.

You can create meaning in life by keeping a marriage together.

You can create meaning in life by knowing when to walk away from a situation or a job or a relationship that's no longer tenable.

You can create meaning in life by caring steadfastly for a sick parent or spouse.

You can create meaning in life by recognizing and using your god-given potential as an artist or musician or writer.

You can create meaning in life by raising a child from birth to college graduation day—and I'm sure that for many of you here today, your greatest sense of meaning has come from witnessing and facilitating the miraculous transformation of a bouncing baby boy or girl into the accomplished young adult seated here before us in cap and gown.

Before closing, I want to share with you one of the quotes that I have turned to during times of uncertainty in my life, when an important decision was called for. It is by the French-born writer Anaïs Nin: *life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage*.

What this quote hints at is that at any critical juncture, if you fail to reach deep within and draw on the wellsprings of courage that exist inside each of us—and you allow yourself to stay limited and parochial, you will have a life that is not as interesting or rich or full as life can be. On the other hand, if you take a few risks, broaden your experience, expand your understanding of the world and of yourself and others—you may become not only an educated person—because by virtue of your having reached the point of graduating from college you are already, by most of the world's standards, an educated person—but you may become a *wise* person. And wisdom is far more than a college degree. Wisdom is a subtle blend of discernment, experience, and love.

My wish for you today is that you will gradually move from being educated people to being *wise* people—that you will find within yourselves the reserves of courage and resilience that you will need to face the challenges ahead, and that a quarter-century from now, when *you* look back on *these* days from the vantage point called “mid-life” or “old age”—you will have the satisfaction and peace of mind—perhaps even, if you are very lucky, the joy—of knowing that you didn't waste this short span of being which each of us is allotted on earth, that you didn't “sell out” for money or status or social approval—but rather, that you looked *within*, and honored the knowledge that can only come from within—not from the classroom, not from books, not from professors, not even from parents—but from a mysterious and inexhaustible source, a source of knowledge that exists in every epoch and in every culture—which goes by different names—psyche, or soul, or God: May that source of knowledge be available to you in your darkest moments, and guide you toward growth, learning, compassion, and meaning for the rest of your lives.

Thank you.