

Chairman of Council, Members of the University Council, Vice-Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Registrar, Provost and Deans, Members of the Advisory Board of the College of Humanities, Members of Convocation, Staff and Students, Alumni, Invited Guests, Members of the Press Corps, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, And most importantly, to the graduating class of the year 2019, for whom I am here today, I say CONGRATULATIONS.

Georges Duhamel once said:

“We do not know the true value of our moments until they have undergone the test of memory”.

When asked if I would be a guest speaker at the 2019 congregation, I was momentarily startled, quite scared, but immensely thrilled and I could not help it, but bask in the joy and excitement I presume all of you graduates must be feeling today.

You may all have different personal stories to tell, but I know that for some of you, the profound beginnings of your personal legends have been attained today. You may have come from backgrounds that when you set out, you were told it could not be done. You may have started from the bottom, but you are here now.

However, a wise man once said to me that potential is nothing, if it is not realised. You may have had a fine education, but what matters is what you do with it henceforth.

I sincerely wish that the import of this auspicious day is never lost upon any of you. As you go out into the “real world”, may you all never lose sense of who you really are, for it is pertinent to know thyself and nothing overmuch. Please strive to be open minded and tolerant of divergent opinions, but most importantly, conduct yourselves in a way and manner that you can always hold your heads high up and be able to call yourselves worthy alumni of the University of Ghana - Legon.

To my fellow Ladies, I am told that this year’s graduating class has a considerably higher number of females than past graduating classes, and for that I doff of my hat of Honour and say a big ‘Ayekoo’ to all of you.

As Dr. James E. K. Aggrey said:

“if you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation”.

I trust that the knowledge, skills and tools you have acquired here, would enable you navigate this life and prepare future generations for what lies ahead.

I am happy to be here and whilst I bask and share in your excitement, I cannot help but reminisce about my own life and a part of my journey and how far I have come. This is the beginning of "real life". Your life. Not your parents', your mentors', your idols', but your OWN life. And YES, it will be hard, even for those from privileged backgrounds. But with hard, also comes success, satisfaction, joy and happiness.

Some of you may be shy, outspoken, slow, loud, quiet, smart, intelligent. Some may have a few or all of those peculiar traits. You come from varied backgrounds. Some are from privileged homes, others from very simple homes. Some had it easy, others did not, but you have ALL achieved the same - You are graduates of this premier institution. This is an achievement every one of you must be proud of. But, do not forget, with this degree, comes invisible responsibilities, ethics, codes of honour, behaviour....

Looking back to when I started my journey of real life, there are three words that were and still are most important for everything I have done and still do. FAITH, PERSEVERANCE & PASSION. They have been the bedrock & the foundation of my real life. Do not give up when you know you are doing the right thing.

I want to share with you, one very crucial experience I had early into my studies that made me how I am, what I feel and how I think till today.

I had no financial support from home. I received DM 497,-/month stipend from Government. My room was DM 500,-/month (the cheapest I could find), so you do the math.

I had to work part time whilst studying. At the beginning, it all went well. I worked as a waitress at a popular café, had office jobs filing documents, writing letters, printing, brewing coffee etc. Suddenly, everything went mute. It all stopped. Like a curse. Exams were coming up and I hadn't worked for about 3 weeks as I was busy preparing for my exams. My wallet was drying out like the Sahara Desert, as were the contents of my fridge and pantry. It was a very cold winter. Lots of snow and temperatures were -20 degrees celsius. I had every newspaper the city had to offer, reading through the job vacancy section for students. I called all advertised student jobs but nada, niente, nothing. Absolutely no luck. To cut the story short, in the meantime I hadn't eaten for 6 days, in addition to that, I only had a day left for my phone to be disconnected for non-payment of the monthly bill. I was desperate! You can't imagine how much I prayed. I think I may have beaten the pope in praying but without success.

I had a Russian friend who tried encouraging me to take unethical jobs. I declined. I said I would die of hunger rather than succumb to losing my faith! Of course I was absolutely in total despair. I was hungry, but my inner faith & strong will was stronger/resistant than anything. No food for 6 days. My luck: running tap water. At least I had water to drink!!!!

I remember on the 6th day, at around 16.45hrs I sat on my window sill and told myself "this is my last prayer", and I know HIM up there will hear me. I just knew it. I had this inner confidence. I even forgot for a moment how hungry I was. I made a call to this huge 'Industrial Group' that designed and manufactured glasses for most of the world's leading brands.

I dialled and after what felt like a lifetime, someone answered. I told her I was calling for the student job vacancy. She said, sure come tomorrow morning at 09:00am.

My heart skipped a million beats, I screamed and fell on the floor thanking God. And then reality dawned on me. This place was outside Munich. I needed to take the train. But I had no means to buy a ticket. So at 2am in the morning I packed my little bag with some makeup, a suit & nice shoes, dressed like an eskimo and set off by foot. After 4hrs I arrived. Frozen. My feet and fingers were in terrible pain from the cold. I was shaking and shivering. The security guard looked at me and thought I was some homeless person. I asked him to please allow me enter and use the bathroom as I had an appointment with Ms. M at 9am. Under normal circumstances, he would probably have sent me away, but I think he saw the desperation in my eyes and let me in. When I entered the washroom, it was like I had entered heaven. It was warm! I held my hands slowly under the luke warm running tap water to bring back the flow of blood into my practically frozen fingers. It was a little after 6am and the building officially opened at 7.30am.

Anyway, in a nut shell, I regained myself, cleaned up, dressed and waited till 8.45am. I went to the reception and presented myself for the appointment with the director of the department for Duty Free worldwide. I was led up to the waiting room and was cautioned, that 'the director was something else and that I should stay calm no matter what'. Honestly, I really did not need any such advice at that moment. On the other hand, it didn't really matter, nothing could've been worse than my last 7 hours. I had planned every word, every move, etc.. Then, this beautiful, strict, executive looking woman, opens the door and ushers me in. I sat down, and it was the director herself. The only woman on the board of the firm and the only female director as well. She looked at me and I thought, to hell with my planned lies of telling her I wanted to try out something new and having experience etc.

I said, "Madam, I need this job or else I shall flunk my exams and die of hunger. Please hire me and I will do my best not to let you down. But I have to say, I have never done anything as per the expectations on the job requirements. You would need to teach me please".

This supposedly heartless, childless, power woman looked at me and said: 'Under normal circumstances, I would have walked you out. But, your honesty and sincerity tells me I should give you a chance. After the interview, she gave me a small cash advance payment, some tea and a sandwich - for me at that moment it was like eating fufu and lightsoup with prawns, lobster, fish, chicken, beef and goat meat all together.

Till this day, ie. nearly 30 years on, I have not been in such dire financial straits again.

What did I learn from this? First and foremost, Faith & Perseverance! Honesty, authenticity, integrity, love. And most importantly, being yourself. Own yourself. Keep your ethics, your principles. Be true to yourself. No matter what. Do not succumb to anything you know deep in your heart is not right. Do not allow anyone to talk you into something you are not comfortable with.

Some of you will become corporate leaders, political leaders. Some will stay average, some will change professional directions, some may end up just being passive. But whatever you do, look deep within yourself and ask yourself, am I doing the right thing for myself and the people who look up to me. Those who sacrificed for me to come this far. You did not achieve today's certificate on your own. Many believed in you, some visible, some invisible. Even if you think you sat and studied alone, or you wrote the exams yourselves. Keep in mind, someone sacrificed in one way or another for you to have the freedom of learning and writing.

Do not begin anything ONLY because of the financial benefit. It won't go far. Remember my little story, I could have saved myself the hunger and painful walk by being unethical and earning well and fast, but would I have had this inner satisfaction, pride and peace? No, I wouldn't have. I am sure if I wouldn't have stayed true to myself, I wouldn't be where I am today.

I became Ms. M's favourite P.A., even though I only worked part time, she would wait for me to organise all her important duties, trips, write ups. You name it.... I was more like a daughter than a secretary. She over paid me even though I made many mistakes at the beginning.

To my young ladies here, and I do see a lot of you, which makes me very very proud. Note, it was a woman who lifted me. A woman who was known to be mean, hard, ruthless to all. This woman was one of the kindest I ever met. What I want to say is, Do not be prejudice towards other fellow women. Do not just practice gender equality on paper and do not only make use of it when it benefits you. Do not compete with one another. Support and help another. Bring one another up. Laws and ratios are fine, but it's the human mind, the human strength and the human love that makes the real difference. Ms. M could have seen me as a competitor. A young beautiful student. A future threat. No. she stood above such mediocre thinking/mindset. She was progressive and success driven. She saw the capacity in having a woman by her side who she could train to help her. She knew together we are strong. Divided we are weak. That's why she was so successful and unbeatable.

In 1966, James Brown sang:

**"This is a man's world, this is a man's world
But it wouldn't be nothing without a woman"**

Throughout the world, the movement is on to bring more justice and equality between women and men.

Ladies and young men, we will and cannot reverse or undo what generations have believed in, and inbuilt in human society, but we can make a difference for us today and the future generations of tomorrow. For your younger siblings, your children....

Ms. M was my angel sent from above in the form of a woman. Girls, be confident, be strong. Believe in yourselves. And you will have your angel.

Remember, the honour is in being the trailblazer who opens the path to others. The honour lies in being the builder who sinks the foundations and erects the pillars on which will rest the promises of tomorrow.

What I want, what I expect, what I hope, is that there are among you those who will heed the call and respond to it - This, my young ladies and gentlemen, applies to you all.

After my initial studies I went on to do Art photography. Being creative was always my true passion. But I was brought up believing that being creative was only for the dreamers who would end nowhere. Against all odds, I

pursued my passion in Art Photography. And because I wanted it so badly, I worked hard and passionately. I became the trusted person in Art for leading European families. I was entrusted with artwork worth hundreds of millions of USD. I traded with galleries and art collectors who didn't want to be revealed. This was all based on Integrity. I loved my job. And with this enthusiasm and giving my all 100% dedication, came financial freedom. I earned well. I had no clue there was so much money to be earned. I dived into this because I was passionate about it.

Throughout my "real life", whenever I started something with absolute faith, perseverance and passion, it ended well. I owned it. I owned myself. I was myself and no one could distract my goal.

Yes, it will be hard and difficult. You will suffer blows and unfairness. You will meet failure in your career and possibly in your personal lives. But never give up. Like I didn't. Get up on your feet and walk again. You will be tested in different phases of your professional and private lives. I was tested. One of the tests was the 6 days no food & 4hrs of freezing walk in the dark cold. I was not an athlete nor anything close. My dear young ones. It was a hard one. But I did not give up! And for this I was rewarded.

My young graduates, you must always get up and try again. Believe in yourself as we believe in you and what you stand for; idealism, energy, optimism that anything and everything is possible when you set your mind on it. Persevere. Be passionate about what you do.

You are to build what tomorrow will be. This is not an abstract concept, this is a living practical reality. And only you will decide what it will be.

You are the bearers of your own optimism.

You might not be too conscious of this, but with this educational certificate, you embrace more than a profession. You will bring to our society order, structure and new ideas at a time when the powers of the world are tempted to turn their backs on the rule of law, ethics and principles for selfish short term interests.

For the law students, you will be called upon to be the pillars of the law. Yours will be to anchor even more firmly in our society its roots to make it grow and prosper. You are the gate keepers to and for us all.

And to all of you, find your niche and specialise in it. Be an expert in the subject or theme you are passionate about. Be skilled in a particular field. Become invaluable.

In this time of advanced social media, information and knowledge is available to all. The world today is filled with 'mini, pseudo' graduates. Netflix - on nearly everyone's phone or TV is filled with series/shows relating to many life topics. But experts are becoming rare. Be an expert, engage experts, create teams with experts.

Now, as you go out there, have the courage to shine. Let your light shine on the uncharted paths and courses that lay ahead and never hesitate to assist others to see their way out of darkness. Do not play small, shatter through that glass ceiling. And remember, what you do in this life, echoes in eternity.

Stand out and make your loved ones proud.

Ayekoo Class of 2019.

Thank you.