

# Commencement Speech on Sacrifice

---

I would like to start by thanking the Board of Trustees; President (Confidential Name); Governor (Confidential Name); and the many proud parents, loyal friends and dedicated faculty members, present here today.

To the (Confidential Name) Graduating Class of 2018, congratulations are in order! As someone who sat amongst the audience here, a short while ago, I know that this moment may sometimes have seemed away, but you're here now, you made it!

It is my great honor and privilege to be with you on this on this auspicious occasion. Over the past four years you have given your hearts and minds to the pursuit of academic achievement, and those efforts have finally paid off. Now it is time to celebrate the fruits of that labor, and not just your own either. At every step of the way your accomplishment was supported and enabled by the loved ones and family members that surround you, today is also their day.

As a headstrong young undergraduate, with very particular ideas about what was significant and what was not, I had little inclination of just how important these ceremonies could be to those closest to me. When I informed my mother that I planned to skip my graduation ceremony because I felt that the real work still remained to be done, I was confused to hear her reply, *"when you go to get the gown for commencement, please get one-size bigger."* I stared at her and asked why? She replied, *"the gown is for me, if you aren't going to go, get one for me so that when they call your name, I will walk through the stage and make sure you are represented."*

For those of you who do not know me, my name is (Confidential) and I am not entirely sure why I am here. Unlike Governor (Confidential), I'm not the chief executive of anything. I haven't invented anything of note or made any discoveries that have advanced humanity. In fact, I couldn't even give you advice about how to be a professional success because I'm only halfway through my own doctoral education.

So then, why is a boy from a poor and remote village in the grass-fields of Cameroon speaking to you on the occasion of your graduation?

*Why am I here?*

It is a question that I'm sure everyone asks themselves at some point in their lives.

But by asking this question, I came to understand the answer.

I am here because I'm no different from anyone in the audience today. I have the same self-doubt, the same fears.

Like many here I am often rudderless, anxious, worried about what the future may hold. Like you, I wake up every day and do my utmost to succeed in spite of that self-doubt. So I stand here not to offer advice

or wisdom, but to share my story, and to hope you can draw something from it to inform your future path.

In Cameroon there is a famous proverb, *"it is the pot that boils but the dish that gets the credit."*

Throughout our lives there are so many people that contribute to our stories, supporting our successes and tragedies without unerring faith. I would not be standing on this stage, or indeed present in this country at all, were it not for the main character of my life story; my mother (Confidential).

My mother had me out of wedlock, which, in rural Cameroon is a sin worthy of disownment. Thankfully, she was not completely abandoned. My grandmother took over my care while my mother went to the city; where she washed dishes by day to make ends meet and attended school in the evenings so she wouldn't have to anymore.

During this time, my mother was so poor that she could not even afford oil to cook her eggs in. Nevertheless she had a relentless commitment to improving her station in life, and creating a better future for her son.

My mother became a secretary and saved her earnings to pay for me to attend a private boarding school. At the time I had no idea what a great sacrifice it was for a single mother. I remember complaining to her one day, that the socks she bought me weren't white like my classmate's (white socks were all the rage in boarding school).

In reply she told me, *"look at your fingers, they aren't the same. You get what you get."*

From this humble position my mother worked her way up to running the logistics department for an American petroleum company. By every measure, she had achieved a level of success that a majority of Cameroonians could only dream of. But even this was not enough for her. She was driven to provide me opportunities beyond those that existed in our village, in our country, and on our continent.

She left her career and immigrated to this country.

In the United States of America my mother saw a nation whose ideals, if not always its actions, promised success to those who would work and sacrifice.

And sacrifice she did.

She left behind her comfortable life and her child in Cameroon, and started in America from the bottom: working in a factory. Of course, making it to America was not success enough for her ambitions. She studied to become a Certified Nurse's Assistant, studied more to become a Licensed Practical Nurse, and studied even more to become a Registered Nurse.

Finally, after 5 years of living half a world apart, she was able to bring to me to join her in Massachusetts – a place that has become our adopted home.

Some people hear that I am pursuing an MD and a PhD and think that I must work hard. I certainly try to. But I am acutely aware that even my hardest day of work pales in comparison to what my mother had to deal through those long years.

I am here today because of her sacrifices.

Her selflessness not only provided me an excellent education and the freedom to strive for even greater things, but also taught me that struggle is worthwhile when we do it on behalf of others

Many of you have people in your life who, like my mother, sacrificed so that you could be here today.

Some of you had grandparents who fought for our civil rights. Others have parents who were doctors or lawyers in their home countries and started over in America. And all of us have benefitted from the support and commitment of our professors, advisors, and peers at (Name of University).

While today is a celebration of your accomplishments, it is equally recognition of the sacrifice of those around you.

Today, we thank you as well.

Of course, there are those amongst you who have been the ones to sacrifice, throughout your lives. Through tragedy and hardship you remained steadfast while the hopes and dreams of loved ones rested upon you. People like (Name of student), who came to this country with his father and two younger sisters at the age of 12, speaking no English at all. Before (Name of student) even graduated college, his family lost their father. I'm sure many of us would have given up there, but (Name of student) persevered.

He supported his sisters and became the man of the house while he continued his education. Today, (Name of student) sits amongst you, another proud graduate of (Name of University).

To each of you, I extend to you, this promise. Your efforts are not in vain. The dedication you show every day is what makes the world a better place, not just for your family and children but for everyone around you that takes heart from your kindness and perseverance.

I certainly know what my mother's sacrifices meant to me. When I enrolled into the University's Chemistry Program in 2010, after arriving here from Cameroon, I knew that I had to repay her for the long years she spent to make my world better, by working to make her dream for me come true. Sometimes that meant making sacrifices of my own.

As I spent my semesters immersing myself in biomedical research and complex scientific concepts, my spare time was spent at places like: The Warehouse at (Confidential Name) where I spent four days a week every summer shifting heavy boxes from 3AM in the morning to 3PM in the afternoon, or the local KMART where I helped sell shoes and kitchen appliances, or at the (Confidential) house nursing home where I served food and washed dishes.

Without these jobs I wouldn't be here today, so I am grateful for that sacrifice as well, although I may have told you something different at the time.

While today is a celebration of what all of you have achieved over these past several years, I can assure you the road going forward will not be easy.

Over the past four years of my doctoral training, I have faced prejudice, setbacks, and countless instances where I felt inadequate. In these moments you will likely think about quitting. I know that I have. But these instances of struggle are essential because they are there to remind you great things do not come easily; especially when we strive for the ones we love.

After all isn't that how society works?

Your sacrifices make it possible for those who depend on you to have more. And after all, isn't that the dream of institutions like these? To make each generation better, than the ones who came before?

You know there's a lot of pessimism in the world right now, but if I am to take this student body as any indication. I would say that we're doing a pretty good job on that front.

In Africa, they say, *"One whose seeds have not sprouted does not give up planting."*

The work that we do is like tending to a garden. For those of you who have planted a garden, you know that there is a lot of tilling, planting, and watering before your plants will begin to grow.

When I am faced with a difficult day or week or month, I think back to my first official patient from medical school. Many of you will know that young doctors can be quite arrogant, and I was no exception. When I walked into that treatment room, I was ready to cure the world.

Instead I found a young girl with a brain tumor who put my understanding of service to shame. Here was an 8 year old, suffering from an illness that would have driven anyone else to rail at the unfairness of the world. And here she was greeting me with a smile, talking to me as if I was the one who needed support rather than her. I will always remember the sacrifice that little girl made that day, as small as it may have been for anyone else it showed me that you always have the capacity to make a change.

While I don't harbor any illusion that I will cure cancer, I know that the long hours in the lab, the failed experiments, and the disappointing results may one day lead to a discovery that others can build on to prevent suffering. So when you have the hard days; when you experience the failures; when you doubt yourself, remember that your seeds may one day yield a tree that gives life and sustenance to so many more.

Nurture your trees, make sure they grow tall and strong so that they can help all who seek their shelter.

And given this theme of sacrificing for others, it is only fitting that you are graduating from (Name of University), a school that was founded in 18XX. At a time when industry was booming and educated men from around the world were making their millions in business. This school brought together a group of people with a different purpose. To guide the children of this growing city, to teach them to

become even greater than those that came before. The very foundations of this university stand on their sacrifices.

So as you go out into the world, look for those opportunities where you can sacrifice for the benefit of others. Let that goal sustain you through the trials and tribulations that you most certainly will face.

Press on.

Continue to work diligently.

Embrace the unknown.

Embrace the difficult.

Even if you do not see it immediately in your own life, this currency of sacrifice will advance the lives of others. And I am quite confident in saying that it will advance yours as well.