

Remarks at Icahn School of Medicine Graduation

Marie Lynn Miranda, 20 June 2019

Good afternoon.

Thank you so much for that very kind introduction. I am deeply honored to have been asked to be part of this event. And surprised and pleased by, and, honestly, doubtful that I am worthy of the honorary doctorate.

I am not really a big fan of ceremony or the hoopla that tends to accompany important events. My husband and I eloped – except not really. People who elope go somewhere planning to get married. We went to Sweden planning to go fishing and somehow we got married – well, we did go fishing too.

Here I am, in the middle of all this hoopla, wearing what I like to refer to as a batrobe, and, embarrassingly, so many of you are wearing the same dress! And I'm supposed to say something inspiring and entertaining and hopefully inject some humor.

And I really better do a good job because two of my three children are here – Mariel and Viviana. If I mess up, y'all might smile politely and say a few nice words. They will tell me the truth. The whole truth. So here goes.

I thought about talking about my science in today's talk, but I do spatial analysis and it's hard to explain the work without showing some maps. And as much as I thought you wanted to sit through just one more powerpoint presentation before you graduate, I decided against that.

I imagine that some of you have struggled to explain to family and friends what you have been doing in graduate school – and why you chose this path. The decision to pursue a master's can be a hard choice to explain. I imagine that some of you have been asked many questions by family and friends. Like what does it mean to get a master's? And what do you do in graduate school? And what's a thesis? And what's it for? And so who's going to read it? And why would you do that anyway?

In preparing these remarks, I have been thinking about those questions and thinking about how one might respond to these so-called family and friends. And I came up with this: when you pursue a master's, you are deciding that you are going to work hard enough and long enough to, as the name suggests, achieve mastery over something.

Think about that: achieve mastery.

And not just mastery over a little something – it's mastery over a field. And mastery today is not what it used to be where there might be a limited and well-defined set of things you needed to know. Today it means you need to know a lot of things, but you also have to achieve conceptual mastery, which is what allows you to apply what you have learned in your programs to all kinds of different situations. You also need to master humility, which is what will help you evolve and learn and adapt as a thinker and doer, acknowledging all the while that there is no way to ever achieve mastery in our rapidly changing world.

Think about that: it's pretty amazing, right? Achieve mastery, which means, at least in part, that your work to achieve mastery is never ending. But don't think about it too hard or too long, because if you do, you will almost certainly reach one conclusion: Achieving mastery? That's just ridiculous.

How many of you are familiar with Brene Brown's work? Brene Brown is a leading researcher on vulnerability and leadership based in Houston with multiple bestselling books to her name and great insights into the human condition. If nothing else, watch her Netflix special! I was recently reading some of Brene Brown's work where she talked about the difference between fitting in and belonging. Fitting in is about observing the system in which you are operating and adjusting your words and actions to slide into the background – don't call attention to yourself – change to become an unnoticed part of the system you choose for yourself. Belonging, on the other hand, is finding a way to be fully yourself and fully comfortable wherever you are.

Seeking to fit in is easier. Seeking belonging is harder, more risky, creates much more vulnerability. Seeking belonging is also much more likely to change the system, change lives, and allow other people to feel that they belong.

Where is this speech going? What does fitting in and belonging have to do with achieving mastery? I would argue that if you want to achieve true mastery, you can't do that by trying to fit in! You can only do that by being relentlessly curious – by asking questions that no one else is asking. You can only do that by working really hard, and throwing yourself deeply into your work. By caring about things that others are ignoring – whether it's caring about a group of people who are suffering disproportionately from environmental exposures or caring about developing a new method to glean operational insights from electronic health record data.

Throw yourself so deeply into your work that you suddenly realize that when you are surrounded by people who are also trying to achieve mastery, and you are one of those people yourself, you feel a deep sense of belonging. You are ridiculous to think you can achieve mastery – but everyone else around you is equally ridiculous.

We live in a time where popular culture pushes easy gains and where ideology trumps thoughtful engagement. We live in a time where, despite the complex problems our world faces, we are encouraged to lean back and go with easy, pat answers. We are encouraged to just fit in.

Yet, in the face of that overwhelming cultural message to take an easy route, to fit in, all of you have chosen to achieve mastery, and, in so doing, have chosen to seek belonging. All of you have chosen to do something hard and meaningful and important. I'm guessing your degrees today are marked by late nights, confusion, even failure – followed by clarity, success...and, let's be honest, most likely, more late nights.

You have committed yourself to the pursuit of mastery in the belief that all of us, both individually and collectively, bear responsibility for making the world more functional, more sustainable, more just, more beautiful.

I am looking out over a group of smart, capable, incredibly hard-working and ridiculous people who could find success, as it is conventionally defined, in many, many places. Yet somehow you all decided to commit your lives to achieving mastery. That is a ridiculous choice, but it is also an inspiring choice.

When my older two children were young, they went to this little school that started in pre-school and went through 8th grade. One day I had parked and was walking to pick up my son Thompson from his class's designated area. He saw me from a distance. As I approached, I think in an attempt to look cool in front of his friends, he yelled out "Hey Stinky!" The whole area went silent as children and parents alike waited to see how I would respond. I was one of the few mothers who worked full-time at this school, for which my children and I all paid a high social price. And everyone wanted to see how I would handle the situation.

My son's eyes grew really round as I got closer and you could tell he was getting nervous about that "Hey Stinky!" When I reached him, I smiled and said, "That's Dr. Stinky to you, son." And then reached my hand out to hold his. He grabbed my hand, smiled back at me, and did a little half-skip as we headed to the car together. To this day, my 25-year old son still calls me Dr. Stinky from time to time – as do my daughters. Or we will just repeat the Stinky/Dr. Stinky exchange and start laughing.

But why on earth am I telling this story at your graduation? First, because I want to fill you in on a little secret about being a parent. There is not a parent among us who has achieved mastery of parenting. It's the most hilarious thing about being a parent. We speak confidently about how to handle a situation and all the while we are just making it up as we go. Want to drive a car? Pass a test to confirm you know the rules of the road and get a license. Want to sell real estate? Pass a test to confirm you understand the business and legal issues involved in real estate transactions and get a license. Want to be in charge of a little human being? Here you go.

In our family, I was definitely the disciplinarian in the house. Now if my husband were here, he would tell you that he was the disciplinarian – but the only person who thinks my husband is the disciplinarian in the family is my husband. You can confirm this with my girls. In that situation with my son, I had no idea what I should do – and only a few seconds to decide. Should I let it pass? Should I discipline him? There in the moment or later at home? Should I have a conversation with him about name-calling? Should I ask him about what made him decide to call me that?

So the second reason I tell this story is that I want to make the point that you will face situations in the years ahead where you will have no mastery; you will have no evidence base to rely upon; your intellect will not be able to supply a needed answer. In those situations, I would like to suggest that you respond with love. Mastery is really good. Mastery is really important. Mastery can help you see the world differently. Mastery can help you change the world. Mastery is powerful, but love always wins.

The third reason I tell this story is because when I told one of my oldest friends that I had been invited to give this commencement speech and would be receiving an honorary doctorate, she immediately responded, “Is your son going to have to call you Dr. Dr. Stinky now?” And I thought that might make you laugh.

So I’ve talked about my husband. I’ve talked about my children. I’ve talked about belonging and fitting in. And I’ve talked about love. This is SUCH a chick talk.

Some people say that graduation is for the students, and others say that it is for the parents. But the truth of the matter is that graduation is for the faculty. For faculty, working with students is not something we do – that work is a gift. We love you for your belief that you can achieve mastery. We love you because you actually did achieve mastery. We love that working with you, watching you succeed, and following your adventures as you leave this place – all of those contribute to our own sense of belonging. All of those contribute to the warmth we feel as we carry you in our hearts.

I encourage you to carry others deeply in your heart as you make your way in this world and remember that you are being carried in others' hearts as well.

Commencement speeches are perhaps best known for being completely forgettable. But maybe you could remember this: Dr. Stinky says mastery is a big deal and so is love.

Congratulations.