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100th Connecticut College Commencement Address

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Remarks to the Class of 2018
by Keynote Speaker Jazmine Hughes '12
100th Commencement Sunday
May 20, 2018

To President Bergeron, faculty, staff, and all the parents and friends and family here today—thank you for being here today. To the Class of 2018, a very insane number, I say: how do you do, fellow kids? My name is Jazmine Hughes. I am thrilled to be here today as your Commencement speaker and even more thrilled to demand to be called “Dr. Hughes” on a daily basis from this point onward. In 2012, I sat slumped where you all are, in my nicest dress and a crinkled gown and my room not even a little bit packed, ready to graduate. Now, six years later, I stand before you as your graduation speaker, and—let’s just clear the air—there appears to be some sort of horrible mistake.

The mistake isn’t that I’m up here talking to you all, as I can—and often do—talk to anybody, ever, about anything. The mistake is that I haven’t really done anything to deserve this! Well, I suppose that’s not entirely true: I did graduate that morning, managing to finish the bottle of champagne that my 360 roommates and I passed around while singing “Landslide” to each other for reasons I can’t recall. I moved to New York, I got a job, and another, and then a third job, which happens to be the job I have now, at The New York Times. Telling people that you work at The New York Times makes them kind of crazy: they tell you that you’re fake news, or that you’re failing, or that you’re a bleeding heart liberal, or a buttoned-up secret conservative, or that you’re qualified to give a graduation speech. I love my job, and it’s a peculiar, humbling honor to show up to work every day, but getting that job felt less like a victory and more like a successful scam, like I was the missing member of Ocean’s 8. It didn’t change me.

It’s also extremely funny that I, a terribly young person, am thought to be able to give advice to you, a bunch of other terribly young people. John Mulaney once joked, when he found out that his babysitter was only three years older than him, that it was like having a horse watching a dog. Call me Seabiscuit. Doctor Seabiscuit.

I really, really wanted to share something deep and profound with you all today, words that would grab you by the throat and shake you to the core and actually mean something to you. Language—it’s complexities and symphonies and stops and starts—is important, and when you’re given the gravity of something as huge and flattering and ridiculous as all this, you want to end up in history books. But for a while, I—and I guess you might have, too—have struggled with reconciling who I am with who I want to be. I would love to be a Very Serious Person, someone who is good at investigations and secrets and advice, someone who would share words today that would be imprinted on your skin for ages, archived in your brain for access in times where you needed strength. I always wanted to have gravitas and strength and wisdom, like an old tree, and I first realized I wanted that, here, in my creative writing class. Everyone around me, it seemed, was writing these belletristic, deeply-felt meditations on their family or the moon, and I was just writing piles of jokes, often about myself. I was embarrassed! I felt corny and unserious, like I had no place in the class, until one day, after I recited a series of jokes, my professor, Blanche Boyd, turned to one of my more serious peers and said, “That is such a tough way of writing.

Don't you wish you could write like her?" She nodded, out of fear or fealty, and I was thrilled. I return to that memory whenever someone asks me about my experience at Conn: you can just be who you are, and we're all the better for it.

But it turns out: I'm actually really funny. Like, really funny, like Shouts and Murmurs in print funny, thank you. Like Chrissy Teigen follows me on Twitter funny. And don't forget, I was just where you are, so I remember distinctly how trite and strange graduation can be—everyone's hugging you and telling you that they're so proud of you and handing you copies of Oh, the Places You'll Go! But here's the real: tomorrow you'll wake up without a plan. You might have a job lined up, or a trip to Europe, or a bunch of tabs on Indeed waiting for you, but, for the past four years, you've anticipated every single moment of the following day: you'll wake up at noon for your 1:15 class. You'll go to Harris and get an omelet, or you go to Smith and make a sandwich with the sundried tomato spread that I still dream about, or gorge yourself on soup and bread, then pad into class at 1:17, take notes, ask questions, stave off sleep, go to the AC, hang out at the lib, watch some TV, head to Cro Bar, hang out with your friends, go to bed. Tomorrow, you'll wake up at noon, but then you might be gripped by the panic that Harris isn't there, or your beloved roommates aren't there, or that your significant other isn't there, or, worse, that your old family dog who takes up the entire bed is, and so, instead of talking about how freeing and magical this time in your life might be, I'm just gonna give you some advice, which really means I'm just gonna tell you some jokes.

1. Stay humble.

Let's be real: part of the reason why I'm here today is because of my fancy, impressive-sounding job. But getting my job isn't the hardest thing I've ever done, and only betrays a fraction about who I actually am. Last year, I was named to the Forbes "30 Under 30" list—an honor! But when I clicked through to my name and the bio written for me on the website, it was riddled with inaccuracies. No disrespect to Forbes, thank you for saluting your girl, but no, I haven't written any cover stories for The New York Times Magazine, and no, all those columns they purported me to edit were not things I did on my own. And yet—I still love my job, and I think I'm still deserving of the credit. But had I given myself over to the folly that I finally hit some metric of success because of some arbitrary distinction, then clicked through to find out it was a slightly misguided designation? You cannot pin yourself, a solid, evolving thing, onto a moving target. It's easy to let the world, or yourself, define you by your position or your income or your clout, when it's actually a piece of your personal admixture. You're bigger than your business card. Forbes, please don't take away this distinction; my business cards are being printed up as we speak.

2. Always take the meeting.

This was the first piece of adult advice I had ever received, passed down to me from a playwright at a Lower East Side bar. I had received an email about a job that I didn't want or apply for, and I was waffling about setting up the coffee that they were asking me for. She told me she was going to give me the advice someone gave her when she was my age, which is like rock candy to a 21-year-old's ears: she told me to never turn down an initial meeting. Turn down jobs, of course, or stories, or things that you know that would make you deeply unhappy or waste your time, but

there is never any harm in talking to someone for 30 minutes, just to see. Take a chance: let the other person have the opportunity to surprise you, or give yourself a moment to potentially surprise yourself. A few minutes are probably not going to change your life, but it might. I have no idea what meeting that was. I'm still glad I went.

3. Listen to your fear, but don't succumb to it.

When I started working at the Times, a writer I admired took me to lunch, because, you know, black people support each other. He—wildly successful, by any measure—was gladdened to hear that I got the job, but when I told him my anxieties, he was disenchanted. I told him that I often felt like the dumbest person in the room, and he responded with four words I'll never forget: “Of course you are!” Any person in my position (young, dumb) was almost destined to be the dumbest person in a room, as long as I was in the right room. We've all read graduation speeches that vow to incite the genius that lies within you all, that implore each and every graduate to go out and make brilliant work. And sure, maybe some of you are geniuses, far be it from me to know, I am not Mensa. But it's far more likely that the lot of you are, instead, works in progress, which is far more interesting. And it's not because you're not geniuses—it's because you're 22! You're testing and trying, exploring your boundaries and your dreams and desires and your problems and your weaknesses and your blind spots. It is possible that some of you will strike intellectual gold and go forth, sprinting toward triumph and getting there without a hitch, but some of you will fail, or change your mind, or switch around, or take some time off, or be thrown off your track—and that's fine. What's more boring than a straight line?

4. Learn how to read.

Of course you've read before, and if you haven't, please come find me after class, because as an entry-level scammer, I'm always looking for ways to improve. But I want to implore you to read more, no matter how much you already do. The only reason why I work at The New York Times is because I started reading it here, as mandated by my professor Tristan Borer, who has tirelessly worked to ensure that The New York Times access is available to every student. Every day, I'd read the international section in order to undergird my studies on refugees and international relations, which made the theories and case studies we read real. Read widely and constantly and voraciously; read because you are a citizen of the world, and all that the world has asked of you in return is to maintain a curious mind. Read so that you know about the truth about the whole world, not just the one that you operate in. Read so that you know that at least one to two trans people are killed in the United States every week, according to The New York Times. Read so that you know that the rate of homelessness is actually rising, to over half a million people in 2017, according to The Wall Street Journal. Read so that you know more people have died in school shootings this year than in military combat, according to The Washington Post. Read so that you know that, in many areas in the United States, our public schools are more segregated than 50 years ago, so that you know that roughly 18,000 Puerto Rican households are still awaiting power; that, on average, almost 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. Read so that you know that 75 percent of white Americans only have white friends, an intellectual and spiritual limitation, but one certainly easy to fix. Read so that you know the experiences of people who aren't like you.

My last piece of advice is my favorite one. In her commencement speech to the graduates of Wellesley College, in 1996, Nora Ephron told the assembled audience to take it personally. When Hillary Clinton, then the First Lady of the United States, was criticized for not knowing her place, it was an attack on every woman, she told them. Any move to limit abortion rights—whether you believe in abortion or not—was an attack on a woman’s ability to decide her own way. It’s easy to follow my advice and imbibe all the news and feel clobbered by the multitude of inequalities that populate the planet, and to take that feeling and harden it into apathy or distance, in order to keep your head above water. It is tempting, but it is useless.

You have had the immense, indescribable privilege of existing on this campus for the past four years. Of course, I don’t know what waited for you beyond it, during holiday breaks and the long summer, but for four long years, you had Connecticut College as a refuge, a sanctuary of people who worked tirelessly to ensure your safety, your livelihood and your education. The world is outside of all this is, very likely, vastly different from what it has been for you these past years, and still, it has been made good for you and people like you, rendered in your image, designed for your tastes and comforts. Make it good for someone else. When it’s not, take it personally.