

Thank you.

Sit down.

Maternal?

I thought I was a fox.

( Laughter )

( Cheers and applause )

A member of this great class of 2012 said something very important to me recently.

I don't know why it hadn't struck me before.

He said, "I'm glad you're leaving with us because after all, once the class of 2012 leaves, what is the point of staying?"

( Laughter )

( Applause )

That is so true.

( Laughter )

Now I've said on many occasions-- don't get me wrong, I confess.

I've said on many occasions to previous classes that they were the best.

( Laughter )

in the history of this great university.

But I confess today...

( Laughter )

that you are the best.

( Cheers and applause )

For ten years, I climbed these stairs to introduce baccalaureate speakers.

I have sat with them in this elevated space as they delivered their remarks and descended with them upon conclusion, always with a sense of respect for how difficult it must have been for them to extract the essence of their personal journey in a way that would resonate for seniors at the very start of theirs.

I understand now how challenging this assignment must have been for them.

That this would be my very last baccalaureate and commencement added significantly to the dilemma of addressing you today.

The range of emotions I felt -- awe and regret, gratitude and apprehension, satisfaction and ambivalence -- have marked this moment of passage at every turn.

But in the end, the opportunity to prepare these remarks provided me with a valuable opportunity to reflect upon my life while I simultaneously packed up my office and house to start a new life.

Reflecting upon my time and role at brown led to the expected questions: How and why did I come to be here at this moment in history, and do my actions at brown measure up to the hope and expectations that I had when I accepted the challenge to lead this great university?

Although there will surely be no shortage of opinions about my presidency, I recognize the value of answering those questions from the unique perspective of what I have seen and lived.

True to the popular adage about the value of closure, I needed this final exercise.

Where do I begin?

A logical place to start is in the small town of Grapeland, which lies roughly midway between Crockett and Palestine, Texas.

My birth certificate from the Bureau of Vital Statistics of the State of Texas indicates that my birth was attended by a physician but actually, contrary to this official account, a midwife named Miss Addie Bryant delivered me in our family home on the outskirts of Grapeland.

The tiny house where I was born perched uncomfortably on a knoll overlooking the rolling landscape of Houston County with its contrasting red earth and white hot sands that burned our bare feet during searing summers.

The scenic appeal of this landscape with its ubiquitous grapevines belied the meagerness and meanness of life lived upon this land.

Spring to fall, the fields came alive with hundreds of workers plowing and planting, hoeing and picking, to meet sharecropper work quotas and preserve the arrangements that kept families in substandard housing on vast tracts in the service of king cotton.

Adults or children, men or women, hale or feeble, all were called to work as soon as the hint of day appeared and continued their tasks as long as a hint of daylight remained.

This way of life that I shared with my grandparents, my parents and my older siblings, was certain to be my fate.

But when Miss Addie Bryant pulled me into the world as the last child born to my parents, cotton farming was increasingly being mechanized and the need for such large numbers of farm hands was disappearing.

By the time I reached the age of seven, my parents decided to move to the city, joining my older siblings who had already resettled there to find work.

Ironically, my happy deliverance from my birthright came as a consequence of the ascendancy of infernal machines that drove so many, including my family, out of work.

The change from an East Texas farm to the city of Houston brought into my life opportunities that were significantly different from what my parents had experienced; both of them had only a minimalist eighth grade education.

The pivotal difference between what they had faced and what I experienced was that I was able to attend school in every season and to advance from grade to grade in the routine manner taken for granted today.

This simple difference would set me on a path not foretold by the life into which and for which I was ostensibly born.

That life was not only a farming life, but it was a life marred by deep segregation and discrimination. While I escaped sharecropping, moving to the city did not provide a respite from the consequences of Jim Crow.

I grew up understanding that the restrictions on where I could go, what I could do, and whom I could be were exactingly clear and enforced frequently through violent deterrence.

I didn't think much of these restrictions in my early years. After all, not only had my parents endured segregation and discrimination, but the same limitations were visited upon everyone I knew.

We lived within this bizarre universe as if it were quasi normal to be considered less than human, less than intelligent, less than fully free.

Another realm proved a powerful counterweight to these limitations: the classroom.

I did not immediately apprehend the deeper meaning of the change that this experience ushered into my life, but I knew immediately that the opportunity for an education had launched me into an enterprise to which I would devote my heart and soul.

Apart from my beloved family, learning was simply the finest and most cherished aspect of my young life.

Not as well-adjusted as my

siblings-- they tell me this frequently--

I happily retreated into reading, studying and excelling in school.

In fact my family expressed concern about my habit of reading too much and playing too little.

I seemed to have escaped into an entirely different world from the one they lived.

and they were right.

Retreating into my studies, a variety of subject areas, but especially fiction and history provided a way for me to establish, a more assured place and identity for myself both within my community and within society at large.

This new identity had been created for me neither by the constraints of my birth nor by those of segregation.

Though still an evolving one, it had been freely elected.

The more I learned about literature, other times, and other cultures, the more comfortable I grew with the world outside of books.

With this comfort came a growing confidence in my ability to define the world as I wished it to be rather than to see it solely as it was and had been for my parents.

And more importantly, it facilitated a new understanding of the absurdity of the limitations imposed upon me by others.

I drew increasing satisfaction from exerting some control in a context in which I objectively had so little.

Perhaps it was this invented comfort that became the ultimate enabler of much of what I have accomplished in my life.

Perhaps the solace and excitement of that world saved me from losing hope, saved me from retreating from my aspirations when others were hostile to my ambitions and achievement.

Saved me when I started my career and found myself isolated as the only african american in my group or at my rank.

Saved me when my advocacy for educational access pitted me against others.

Saved me when I was trying to do justice to managing a career and parenthood.

A sense of alienation and hopelessness dominates all too many lives around the world, but a glimpse of change can do wonders for the birth or reawakening of hope.

As I advanced through school and college and subsequently the early stages of my career, the positive changes that emerged from the civil rights struggle strengthened my resolve.

Imagine something as small as the ability to take a seat on a bus or to eat in a restaurant becoming emblematic of radical change.

Eventually, such victories began to point to the inevitability of change as the country came to grips with historic wrongs.

Heroic leaders like John Lewis

whom we will honor tomorrow,

and Martin Luther King, Jr. pressed for equality and, together with massive numbers of average citizens, set the country on a different course.

I entered my career on the cusp of this change and with hope that change would continue.

Instructed by the courage of these heroes, I grew to understand that my choices had to be different from what I had envisioned as a scholar of French literature.

While the door had been opened, our institutions and policies were still far from providing equal opportunity for those who entered.

So I turned my attention to reaching beyond French literature, important as that is, to trying to learn how to transform higher education.

If education could eradicate the many constraints of my early life, it could also be the answer to advancing the well-being of millions.

Fighting for that idea became the focus of my work in the academy and fueled my determination to persevere

through failures, obstacles, cynicism and discouragement.

It is overwhelming when someone knocks unexpectedly on your door and invites you to become a leader.

When approached about becoming President of Smith College, I quickly reverted to the messages of my childhood: perhaps I was not smart enough, not seasoned enough, not deserving enough to lead a major college.

After all, I did not have the social connections, the networks, or the profile of previous leaders that I associated with such an important role.

Furthermore, I knew that my focus as president could not be what a board of trustees normally sought in a president.

At the same time, understanding that all that I had been working to accomplish in encouraging children who are poor to aspire to a college education was on the line in my consideration of whether to accept this role.

Ultimately, setting aside my personal misgivings, I concluded that it was simply my turn to serve.

That decision and my service at Smith ultimately led the Brown Corporation to approach me about becoming President of Brown six years later.

My concern about the inevitable hype that would arise if I agreed to become President of Brown worried me considerably.

More than being merely distracting, attention to the fact that I would be the first African American president of an Ivy League University would, I knew, be uncomfortable for me.

After all, it was no more than the convergence of historical happenstance that would lead me to wear that mantle for all times.

The case would never be made for many that I had earned my place of leadership in higher education, and did I wish after all to spend yet more of my life proving myself?

Much of what I would do would be judged through the high stakes and distorting prism of race.

All of these factors weighed against my accepting the position as President of Brown.

But the appeal of Brown's culture and progressive tradition was a powerful draw.

The mere possibility that I might find in Brown a university to match my impossible hope for a community of equals in which bias has no quarter was far too tempting to resist.

I imagined the world impact of a genuinely high-functioning teaching, learning and research environment in which the desire to devise solutions to world problems impelled scholars to teach with commitment, to conduct research with honor, and to demonstrate respect and care for others.

And would it be possible for me to succeed well enough that I could finally satisfy the ideals that had marked my journey for over three decades?

That all of this might come together in such an improbable and hopelessly idealistic way was a powerful enough idea that I said yes to the invitation to lead Brown.

It was the best decision that I have ever made.

These eleven years have been uplifting, challenging and incredibly enjoyable.

Much of what I presumed would be so was not correct, at least not to the degree I expected, and multiple blessings that I would not have dared to imagine became a factor of daily life.

I have had excellent colleagues, magnificent and loving students, and phenomenal alumni support.

The many selfless actions that I have witnessed here have added an important dimension to the way that I see the world now and how I can imagine it for my granddaughter.

To think that in a short span of time, our family history will have evolved from the cotton fields of my childhood to the world stage upon which she is already comfortable is an emotional and fulfilling reality to contemplate.

My life started with a wisp of hope that the country that rejected me and mine would change.

Her life begins with an affirmation that change has come and will continue.

I would never have thought it would be so when I walked into the first grade classroom that changed my life.

I would not have thought it possible when I started my career.

I would not have imagined standing here today at the end of a period of leadership of one of the world's great universities.

But as John Lennon said, "Life happens when you're making other plans."

It will almost certainly be the same for all of you.

I know that you have certain hopes and plans and that you have the intelligence and determination to make them materialize.

I also know that life happens.

I hope that your studies and experiences at Brown will have given you the wherewithal to live with the uncertainty that life inevitably brings.

At the same time, I trust that you will grow in ability to be impatient for positive change, to discern the good from the merely adequate, to embrace the challenge of fighting for those who are less fortunate, to insist that your choices measure up to your values, and, in all things, to allow for the fact that change will come.

Hope not for what is feasible but for what is needed.

Work not for the best that you think you can do but for all that should be done.

Fight, fight, fight for the rights of the many over the privilege of the few.

Be what your education tells you that you can be: the best.

Thank you for these wonderful years.

May your years ahead also be blessed with love, with passionate pursuits, continued learning, and an enduring sense of hope.

Thank you.