

Redemption through Education

Valedictory Speech

By
Jae Choi

*“A mind that has been stretched will
never return to its original dimension.”*

-----Anonymous

Years ago, I was all irresponsible young man. My companion was ignorance. This ignorance contributed to my making terrible choices that hurt and harmed so many others. One wrong choice I made ultimately put me here behind bars. When I was sentenced and sent to prison, my life seemed over. It was like “a blast of wind on a flickering candle.” It seemed to kill whatever little hope and goodness were left in me. I came to Sing Sing, engulfed in bitterness and despair.

At that critical point in my life, however, I met a number of great people who gave me positive guidance in prison. One was John Valverde, who has been my teacher, good friend, and ongoing role model. John once told me that I must make prison “a monastery, a school, a place of healing and a second chance.” He told me to dedicate myself to making sure that I could never be the person I used to be. He challenged me to seek redemption, not only by taking full responsibility for my action but also by committing to make amends, recognizing that I would have to do so for the rest of my life. But how? How could I find the redemption he was talking about? John pointed me to Hudson Link / Mercy College, which boldly declared to the world: Redemption is found in education.

This revelation marked a moment of personal conversion. Something shattered and then something shined inside me. For the first time, I knew what I really had to do: I had to defeat ignorance. I had to say goodbye to my old companion. That became my mission. So I made a simple decision, but a crucial one. It was a step on a long, remarkable journey that brought me here this evening, honored to wear this cap and gown. I must admit it has not been an easy road. But thinking of the sights I’ve seen on the way makes the journey priceless.

My first trip to school terrified me. No subject was familiar. I was one of the youngest students in the class. Yet I belonged there in the classroom, and I was thankful. My new life called to me, and I answered with a big “yes,” which I’d never felt before. I had no thought of going back to my old self. I was on a new path, although I could see only one step at a time. Deep down, I knew something special was happening. I thought my wings were unfolding, but I could not yet see that I was flying.

I believe my experience speaks for my fellow graduates. Becoming educated, we gained exciting new information about the world and our relationship to it. Not only was this process exhilarating for many of us who once held a very crippling way of seeing the world and ourselves, but also we have undergone a true transformation. We plumbed the depths of the attitudes, values, and beliefs that we previously held, and challenged their validity, making major modifications in the process. Confronting ourselves, we took full advantage of the greatest privilege of the educated: To change our minds. We changed our minds. It’s said that “a mind that has been stretched will never return to its original dimension.” This, I now believe.

Education has removed the blinders. With every book we read, we became a bit more aware of the darkness that we had long entertained. As our blinders came off we saw the painful reality of the damage we had caused. But at the same time, we could see many great possibilities--that we could repair what once seemed irreparable; that we could build new dreams over old nightmares; and that we could become givers instead of takers. Without the blinders, we were able to recognize the greatness in others, and in ourselves. We were compelled to unite in such greatness

rather than remaining alienated from our humanity. We've discovered how precious, how truly passionate and fulfilling life can be.

In a sense, becoming educated has been a dying process; our old selves were burned to ashes. But, like the Phoenix, from these very ashes we rise again. We emerge as men who proclaim the birth of new hearts and minds, committed to share all we have: knowledge, skills, and talents to restore our broken relationships with our communities and our loved ones. As I humbly stand here before you, I confidently declare that we are not the men that we once were, and that we are destined to become much more than what we are now.

Now, I would like to take this opportunity to address my fellow graduates. My dear brothers, we've traveled a magnificent journey together. This shared experience has created a deeper bond among us. As we are assembled together tonight, faces beaming with joy and hearts thumping with pride, let's be mindful that this is not an end. The learning has not met with finality. We are simply moving from one stage to another in our life-long journey of improving ourselves. As we proceed, we must never lose focus on our primary duties and obligations to our communities and our loved ones. Let's clearly understand that tonight's conferring of degrees bespeaks much more than a mere completion of an academic goal.

We have knowledge of theories and ideologies of culture and civilization. They are tremendously powerful tools for us to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others. If we choose, we can be truly valuable members within our respective communities, whether in prison or out in society. As we humbly receive our diplomas, let's remember to not only talk the talk of advanced learning, but also walk the walk of right thinking and right doing as an educated human being.

After the social stigma of being labeled a convict or ex-convict--- make no mistake about it---in a real sense, all eyes will be on us. So let our hearts and minds be focused and our steps confident and sure as we continue reflecting redemptive contents in our academic accomplishment. No matter where we are, no matter how old we are, no matter how challenged we may be, deep inside, we know we are much more than our terrible mistakes and wrong choices. We want more. Simply there's no reason for us to settle for anything less than the best that we can be. So I challenge you, to do and to be the best that we can in the eyes of God and all humankind.

As an apprentice piano player, I've often thought of Hudson Link as a grand orchestra. It is made of many members, linked by hope, connected by caring souls that constantly strive to make a difference, to add a little more "sunshine" to the world in which we and our loved ones live. Each member offers what he or she has, each playing different melodies. But together we create a melody that is different still, music that cannot be made alone. It is the most beautiful music in the world; music we hear with our hearts, music of redemption, music of transformation, music "of healing and a second chance."

Our orchestra has some of the most extraordinary instruments in the world:

Ms. Arlene Mohammed, our academic coordinator, whose dedication has kept our orchestra in harmony --- we thank you, Ms. Mohammed, and our music will play on.

Hudson Link board members, Mercy College Staff, especially Dean Shelly Alkin and the Mercy College President, Dr. Feroe, and all of our professors, who enabled us to evolve by building a solid academic foundation---we thank you all, and our music will play on.

Commissioner Fischer, who for years has invested in all of us, by exchanging an old dogma of punishment with fresh values rehabilitation---we thank you, Mr. Fischer, and our music will play on.

Superintendent Marshall and Deputy Superintendent Kaplan, and the entire Sing Sing Executive Team and Staff, who have contributed to our growth with much support and special interest in our college program at Sing Sing---we thank you all, and our music will play on.

No orchestra can share its music without an audience, our ever-faithful fans: friends, families; all the supporters present tonight and many who are not present; and many of our fellow inmates who are eager to follow our example and replace us when we take our band on the road---we thank you all for singing and marching along to the beat of our music.

I thank God for all His blessings and for being an immediate source of strength and courage during difficult times of doubt and anguish. I also extend my personal gratitude to John Valverde, Chang, Ms. Marchese, Ms. Marciano, and Father Ron, for their guidance and support.

As I conclude this speech, I would like to give special thanks to my dear family: After so much heartache and turmoil that I put you through, I am so grateful to be able to thank you for all your love and sacrifices. I promise to make you only proud from now on. I love you and thank you.