

VALEDICTORIAN'S SPEECH

(Mercy College/Hudson Link Class of 2006)

ZA'ID A. ALI

First, and foremost I would like to thank the Creator, for without Him none of this would be possible. I would also like to thank the entire Mercy College/Hudson Link staff that has continuously gone over and beyond the call of duty to make sure that the men here at Sing Sing are offered an opportunity to obtain higher education. I cannot express enough the gratitude that the men here have for your efforts. We are forever indebted.

A tremendous amount of gratitude and admiration must be extended to our superintendent, Mr. Brian Fischer. His unwavering belief in the reformatory power of education has translated into an unprecedented degree of support and encouragement for higher education. I was one of the men whose dream of obtaining a degree was threatened by the closing of Tappan. I witnessed first hand the strides that Mr. Fischer made to accommodate us. He is a man whom I have much respect and a tremendous amount of gratitude for.

I would be remiss not to express special thanks to the families, friends and loved ones who have taken time out of their busy schedules to come inside of this prison and give their support. It is undoubtedly your love and support that has allowed us to persevere through the trials and tribulations associated with being incarcerated. As these degrees are testament, together there are no obstacles too big for us to overcome.

There was a saying back when I was growing up that I used to make fun of. I am not sure if it was actually Jessie Jackson who coined the phrase but he was the first person that I remember saying it. The phrase was "keep hope alive!" I used to hear people say this with such conviction, and my friends and I would mock them and laugh. As a young kid, I used to make fun of this adage because I didn't understand the wisdom and importance of keeping hope alive. I was once told that as young people we used to make fun of the jewels that our elders used to impart to us because we didn't have the wisdom to apply those jewels to our lives. The acts of mockery were actually our defense mechanisms protecting us from exposing our ignorance. We were trying to disguise the fact that we had no idea how essential hope is to life.

When you're young, you are filled with so much hope. You believe that you could be anything in the world. I wanted to be the first black president when I was growing up. I was so proud. I was going to change the poor living conditions of all the people living in the projects. I was going to make a difference. My first grade teacher killed that dream for me. Her name was Ms. Powell. I remember her clearly; she was a gingery black woman. She told me that I was not astute enough to be president. That was the first year that I was held back a grade in school. I was held back twice in public school. The only way that I made it out of junior high school was through social promotion. They said that I was too old to stay there another year. After a year in high school, my counselor told me that I should pursue some vocational training. And here I am now, valedictorian. Keep hope alive.

I have no ill will towards Ms. Powell because that was her perception of reality at the time. She was a lot like me in the sense that she could not see the wisdom and importance of keeping hope alive. She may have been one, like so many of us, who allowed our experiences to dilute our expectations: to make our current reality the basis

upon which we judge not only our own future, but the futures of those whom we come in contact with. Many of us come from environments where it is a constant struggle to keep hope alive, environments without positive reinforcement and positive role models leading us by example and showing us that it is possible to persevere, that we can fulfill our dreams. Without these affirmations and role models, many of us lose hope. With each disappointment, a little bit of hope dies inside us. I was one of those who lost hope. My hope was wounded during my adolescent years but it did not die until I was 20 years old. I remember the day vividly. It happened at 2:36 AM on the morning of July 10, 1994.

That is the day that I made the worst decision of my life. As soon as the bullet left the gun, I knew that any hope I might have had of becoming someone that my family would be proud of was gone. Any hope that I may have had that I would make a difference in this world, and that I would do good and achieve salvation was gone. I not only destroyed my hopes and dreams, but I robbed a man and his family of the chance of fulfilling their hopes and dreams as well. On that day, I became a man without hope. I was like the walking dead. I walked into a courtroom four years later, on the day I was to be sentenced, a defeated man. I held my head down in shame. I could not even look at Leonard's family. I heard my own family call out to me in support, but I could not bear to look at them either. I had destroyed so much. Two families were devastated and it was all my fault.

When Leonard's father stepped forward to address the court, I sat there waiting for him to lash out at me. I welcomed it because I deserved it. He had every right to be angry with me. I had taken something from him that I had no right taking. I had taken something that I could never give back. But rather than lash out at me, he forgave me. He knew that I could go no lower than I was at that moment. Through his wisdom and experienced eyes, he saw that I had lost all hope, that I was broken. He said that he forgave me, but that I was indebted to him. He said that if any good was to come out of this situation that it would have to come through me. To repay this debt of forgiveness he said that I had to make a difference. He said that I had to stop other families from having to suffer through the kind of pain that our families were going through. He said that I had to stop other young people from making the same poor decisions that I made. He said that it was time for me to become a shepherd. I did not understand at the time how or why he would forgive me, but in my heart I knew that I was going to honor his words. I decided that I was going to live not only for myself but for Leonard. For this chance of redemption and for the restoration of my hope, I commenced living his declaration.

I became an artisan of change and virtue. I began taking programs like victim's awareness counseling and breaking barriers in order to work on my humanity. In order to become more in touch with my feelings, as my empathy began to grow, I started taking on more teaching and facilitating positions. I began working with P.A.C.E., teaching HIV/AIDS counseling and education. I became a facilitator for the Alternatives to Violence program and took a job with Transitional Services so that I could work with the men when they first came upstate and then again right before they were released. I created a support group for incarcerated men ages 21 & under in order to give them an alternative to the negative lures of prison, to show them through my words and actions that there is still hope. It is an indescribable feeling to see the young men in my group, 18, 19, 20 years old, starting to make positive choices and taking strides towards the betterment of self and the betterment of this environment. I believe that I am making a difference when I share my experiences with these young men. I also believe that I am making a difference when I share my experiences with the young people from the

surrounding communities that come inside the prison with the Youth Awareness Program. Through this program, I am able to catch a number of young people before they make that one bad decision that can destroy so many lives. As a member of the Youth Awareness Program, I am able to keep hope alive.

I owe a great amount of my effectiveness to Hudson Link and their supporters. The courses that I've taken at Mercy College have given me the tools I needed to transform my experiences into a therapeutic model for change, a model that has proven effective in deterring delinquency in young people and has also given me an opportunity to begin repaying the debt that I was charged with.

Hudson Link has given so many men here hope. Hope that we can go home and live normal lives. Hope that we have a chance of actually leveling the playing field. These degrees have helped us to believe that we do not have to be just another statistic, that we can make a difference. We now have the tools to make a difference right here in Sing Sing. They say that the climate in prison is hot. They say that the young people in our communities are bringing the waters of unrest to a boil.

We have to decide if we are going to be the thermometers or the thermostats. With these degrees and our life experiences, we have the tools to change the climate in our environment, but we have to decide if we are going to be the thermometers or the thermostats. You see, the thermometers they measure the temperature, but the thermostats, the thermostats they change it. Only you can make that decision. Which one are you going to be?

I had the privilege of being housed on the same gallery as Rory Anderson. Many of the people here know Rory. He was the recipient of last year's Ossie Davis award. After serving 25 years in prison, he was released on his first parole board. He was a person who knew the importance of keeping hope alive. When he found out that he was to be released by the board, he began sharing his blessed news with any and all. I remember we were in the mess hall and he was sharing the news with people and someone came up and told him: "You, you can't go around telling people that you made the board, someone is going to get jealous and try to mess up your release date." Rory gave a pause and really considered the man's words. No longer able to hold my tongue, I jumped straight into the conversation, which is kind of a no-no in prison but I could not allow this man to steal our joy. I told them "Man, this is a victory for all of us; people are starting to believe that we have a chance of making the board again. You have to share that." Rory said, "You're right, we have to keep hope alive." It was at that moment that I truly understood how powerful hope is. Leonard's father knew how powerful and important hope is. He knew that hope was not just a word but that hope is alive and living.

Hope has hands, hands that can reach down and pull people up when they fall. Hope has eyes, eyes that can see possibility and success when it's just beyond the horizon. Hope has ears, ears that can hear opportunity knocking when the radio of disappointment is turned up loud. Hope has a voice, a voice that yells out, "You're better than this!" "You can do this!" when the shadows of doubt begin to form overhead. Hope also has a heart, a heart that pumps love when you feel lost and alone. Hope is alive.

Now, I know that my mother is going to disagree with me, but I cannot remember ever doing anything to make her proud. Being a parent, I can understand how she could disagree because we take pride in the smallest of accomplishments that our children make. We beam with pride when the baby goes poop in the toilet by himself. So I can understand her disagreeing, but that's not the type of accomplishment that I'm talking about. Mom, I have never done anything that you could brag to your friends about. It hurts me to think about how you must feel when you're at the supermarket or the beauty parlor or at church and the other mothers start bragging about the accomplishments of their children. My Johnny did this or my Sally did that, and you have to sit there and endure that because I never gave you any ammunition. I never did anything worth bragging about and I'm truly sorry for that. Well this is for you. This is something that you can be proud of, that you can brag to the world about because your baby persevered through the greatest of obstacles and did what so many thought that he could not do. This is for you, Ma. All of the families here should be proud. We have achieved a great achievement. Let us share in this joy because by sharing we inspire, and when we inspire, we keep hope alive. Let's keep hope alive.