

Stevenson College, UCSC Commencement Address, June 13, 2010

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(Rickford, a 1971 graduate of Stevenson College, won the 2009 UCSC Alumni Achievement Award, and in 2010 was the Wallace J. Sterling Professor of Linguistics and the Humanities at Stanford University. He has since been elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Sciences, and the British Academy.)

Introduction. Thank you Provost Suckiel and the faculty of Stevenson College, for inviting me to give this commencement address. And to the graduates assembled here today, *and* the parents, grandparents, family members and friends who helped to get you to this glorious stage (I'm the parent of four college graduates, so I know the work behind the scenes!), a million well-deserved congratulations!

It's *astounding* to realize that 39 years ago, I sat where many of you sit today, graduating from Stevenson. In the trendy non-conventionalism of the day, we wore no gowns nor mortar-boards. I had on a bell-bottomed pants, a colorful dashiki, and a white armband, protesting the Vietnam War and other issues. Our transcripts bore no letter grades (but that didn't stop us from getting in to top graduate and professional schools), and my major was a self-designed one in socio-linguistics, the study of language in society. In these respects, *my* commencement ceremony was *different* from yours. But I had the *same* satisfaction at getting to this stage, and the mixture of excitement and trepidation about the next stage that many of you may feel today. (I married Angela, my high school sweetheart, a week later, and started grad school 2 months later). And I had similar regrets at parting with good friends.

Curiously enough, I still have, in my office and at home, lots of memorabilia from Stevenson and UCSC (copies of the *Stevenson Libre* newsletter we mimeographed weekly, term papers, photos, newspaper clippings, notes from fellow students, and the journal I kept during my extra-mural quarter on Daufuskie, Island, South Carolina). I carted this stuff from Santa Cruz to Philadelphia when I went off to grad school in 1971, from Philly to Guyana, South America, when I returned to my home country to teach at the University there in 1974, and from Guyana to Stanford when I came to take up a faculty position there in 1980. I've kept this stuff not just because I'm a pack rat (although I AM, as my wife often reminds me), but also because the experiences and memories of our college years mark a special period in our lives. It's the first time you're off on your own, fending for yourself, more or less. And these special years enfold the hopes and fears and joys and disappointments and relationships and visions and loves and intellectual and political self-awakenings that accompany this distinctive stage of your life—and make this fabulous event today not so much an *ending*, but a *commencing*, the start of events whose shape and meaning you may not discern until 10, 20, 40 or more years down the line.

Setbacks. While today is deservedly about celebrating your *successes*, you need to be ready too for *setbacks and failures*, for those will come, as surely as night follows day. And what you *learn* from them will chart your career and life as much as how hard you work or how many breaks you get. Let me give you a few examples, from my own experiences, and the experiences of others.

1. My first big setbacks came in the summer of 1969, after my first year at Stevenson. Some of you may have heard a version of this story before, but please indulge

me while I tell it again, because it loomed so large in my life. I came to UCSC on a US scholarship, which I very much appreciated. (I could *never* have afforded to come here otherwise.) But it didn't cover the summer months, and because I was not yet a US citizen or a resident alien, I was starving and struggling that summer. Having gone to Los Angeles at the suggestion of a friend, I depended on his kindness for food and money, in between working at odd jobs that paid little or nothing, like pumping gas at a station that paid its primarily non-US employees below minimum wage, and selling Black History encyclopedias. (The folks in Watts were interested but couldn't afford them, and the folks in Baldwin Hills could afford them but weren't interested.) The aging Volvo car that a friend had lent me died even before I hit LA's city limits, and I was trying to figure out how to tell her the bad news. Worst of all, on September 14, 1969, two days before my 20th birthday, my dad died of a sudden brain hemorrhage. Unable to raise the money to travel to his funeral in Guyana, I was distraught.

I remembered among other things that a year earlier, leaving Guyana, I'd tried to say goodbye to my dad at the airport with a handshake. He'd asked, half-jokingly, half-chastisingly, if I'd grown too big to give him a kiss, and I *did* kiss him, despite the teenage embarrassment at public displays of affection that had made me hesitant in the first place. Moreover, a few months before he died, we had had a disagreement by mail about whether I should get involved in campus demonstrations. I wrote him self-righteously to say that I was a citizen of the *world*, committed to fighting prejudice and injustice *everywhere*, and that while I would love my parents to walk that road with me, I was prepared to walk alone if necessary. Thankfully, he was a bigger, wiser man than me, and he'd replied with a moving letter that began, "Forgive me. Forgive me, my son." I read it here at this city on a hill, with tears streaming from my eyes. In the end, we not only patched up the relationship, but renewed it at a deeper, richer level. I'm SO glad that we did, because not making up before he died would have haunted me throughout my life. The lesson I learned from this is to build bridges over troubled waters as swiftly as possible, and to convey affection to your loved ones regularly and openly, regardless of time and place. I also developed a lifelong respect for the poor by living and suffering among them in East Los Angeles.

2. The *second* setback I'll share with you came during my graduate studies in Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. For various reasons, I elected to take my PhD comprehensive exams ahead of my class, in fall 1973. The exams involved two questions in each of four areas—mine were Socio-linguistics, Acoustic Phonetics, Descriptive, and Historical Linguistics—and they were the weekend take-home type: you picked up the exam on Friday at 5 pm, and had to turn in your answers on Monday by 9 am. I was well-prepared, with boxes of notes on each area neatly arranged around our apartment, and pots of coffee (which my wife later revealed to be *decaf*) on hand.

I began with Sociolinguistics, my favorite area, with a question that was so perfect for me that I set out to hit it out of the ballpark, crafting an answer that people would talk about for ages. Well, in retrospect, that was *not* a good strategy. I became obsessed with pouring everything I could think of into that one answer. Friday turned into Saturday, and Saturday into Sunday, without my considering *any* of the other seven questions I had to address. Sometime in the early hours of Monday morning, I finished my magnum opus, and even in my wild, sleep-deprived state, I realized the desperate situation I was in. Luckily Angela advised me to try to finish a second question in the area I'd begun rather than starting another one, and I managed to do that in a few hours before crashing, exhausted at

daybreak. Angela jumped on her bike and took my two answers into the department. I passed one section, but of course had to retake the others, on which I'd written nothing, the following semester.

That experience of failing, while demoralizing at the time, and scary for the obsessive-compulsive tendency it revealed in me, has made me an infinitely better teacher over the 36 years that I have been in university teaching. It has allowed me to empathize with the many students I've encountered who have had "problems" of one type or another. In an academic world in which colleagues often expect stratospheric performances from every student, it's kept me more *grounded* and more *human*, more able to recognize and help the student who needs a helping hand to reach the finish line and beyond. There are undoubtedly some of you in this category in this beaming crowd of graduates today, and I can assure you, you'll be fine.

3. My third setback example comes from a person who will be very familiar to sports fans in the audience. He was successfully elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in February 2010, his first year of eligibility, and he will be inducted in Akron, Ohio, in August. He is generally regarded as the greatest receiver in NFL history—holding the records for the most receiving yards (22,895—four more *miles* than his closest competitor, Isaac Bruce), and the most touchdowns (208—fifty more than his closest competitor, Emmitt Smith). Any guesses? Yes, I'm talking about the legendary **Jerry Rice**, who played for the San Francisco Forty-Niners from 1985-2000.

For all his celebrated successes, many people don't know or remember that in his rookie season with the 49ers, after being plucked out of the relative obscurity of Mississippi Valley State, Rice began as a disappointment. In the words of San Jose Mercury News sportswriter Daniel Brown (SJMN 2/6/10, A1), he kept "dropping footballs as though they [we]'re greased bowling balls." To quote Brown:

The bricklayer's son from the dirt roads of Mississippi had a hard time adjusting to San Francisco. Rice has said that when he stepped off the plane, he wanted to get right back on and fly home. He'd dazzle on the 49ers practice field but falter in the glare of the NFL game days. Rice would muff a pass. Montana would glare. Fans would boo. A Mercury News headline would blare: "Snap, Crackle, Drop."

According to Brown, Rice's former Mississippi Valley Coach Archie Cooley advised 49ers coach Bill Walsh to keep throwing Rice the ball, and Rice doubled up on his practice time, staying behind for extra sessions with veteran receiver Freddie Solomon. In the 14th game of his rookie season, playing on Monday Night Football, Rice "broke loose for 10 catches and 241 yards," and the rest is history. The lesson to retain from Rice's initial setbacks is to not lose faith if you're nervous and don't succeed at first, but to keep working at it, as he did.

4. The person in my fourth example is also from humble roots in Mississippi, but is even *more* of a household name than Jerry Rice is. According to Wikipedia:

"Her self-titled, award-winning [television] talk show has become the highest-rated program of its kind in history. She has been ranked the richest [African American](#) of the 20th century and beyond, . . . She is also, according to [some assessments](#), the most influential woman in the world."

Who? Yes, **Oprah Winfrey**, the woman whose face graces the cover of "O magazine" every month. [As I like to joke with my wife, of the many things you have to worry about in life, you never have to worry about who's going to be on the cover of "O Magazine." ☺]

Oprah has had more than her share of setbacks. Many of them, like her rape at 9, her stint in a juvenile detention home at 13, her pregnancy at 14, resulting in the birth and subsequent death of a premature child, are probably familiar to some of you or your parents. But the setback I want to focus on today, while milder than any of these, is less familiar, and had a profound effect on her professional life. At 22, a year after leaving college, she got a fantastic job as co-anchor of a TV news show in Baltimore. But in less than a year, she lost it. One problem was that she didn't like just reporting on the news aspects of tragedies she was covering—she wanted to *reach out* to help the victims of a fire, or *express her feelings* about an accident on the highway. (“Oh my goodness,” she'd say.) In the words that Oprah herself used when she told this story at Stanford a couple years ago [Stanford Report 6/15/08]:

... after eight months, I lost that job. They said I was too emotional. . . . But since they didn't want to pay out the contract, they put me on a talk show in Baltimore. And the moment I sat down on that show, . . . I felt like I'd come home. I realized that TV could be . . . a platform for service, for helping other people lift their lives. And the moment I sat down, doing that talk show, it felt like breathing. It felt right. And that's where everything that followed for me began. And I got that lesson. When you're doing the work you're meant to do, it feels right . . . If it doesn't feel right, don't do it. That's the lesson.

Conclusion. As you go out from Stevenson and UCSC, you'll undoubtedly enjoy many other *successes and achievements* besides the degrees you'll receive today. But you'll also experience *setbacks and failures*, some more devastating and painful than any of the examples I've shared with you today. Be assured, first of all, that other successes and *spring-forwards* **will** follow, as surely as day follows night. And wherever possible, try to learn something from it. As Oprah put it: “Ask every failure: What is this here to teach me? And as soon as you get the lesson, you get to move on. {If you really get the lesson, you get to pass and you don't have to repeat the class. If you don't get the lesson, it shows up wearing another pair of pants—or skirt—to give you some remedial work.” } [Stanford Report 6/15/08]

I have only one small thing to add. It is to encourage you, starting today, to talk to your parents and grandparents about *their* life histories—their successes and failures—much of which you may not know about, although they have probably shaped you in ways you've never realized. As a sociolinguist, I have hundreds of tape-recordings of speakers from all over the world, but the one I treasure most is a recording I made with my mom shortly before *she* died in 1984. In that recording she revealed some of the mischievous things she'd done as a child, and other aspects of her life that I would never have imagined. I've had more requests for copies of that recording (from grateful relatives) than for *any* of my professional recordings. So get out your recorders, laptops, video cameras or I-phones and start discovering the mysteries of the wonderful people who surround you.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with some moving words from *Adlai E. Stevenson*, the former Illinois governor, US presidential candidate, and Ambassador to the UN, after whom our beloved College is named. [Stevenson certainly had setbacks in his day, including the fact that he accidentally shot and killed a friend in 1912, when he was only 12; he also lost two presidential elections to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956, and lost the Democratic nomination for president to John F. Kennedy in 1960. But he left behind a distinguished career in public service.] Here are his closing remarks to the graduating class at Princeton

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in 1954:

Your days are short here; this is the last of your springs. And now in the serenity and quiet of this lovely place, touch the depths of truth, feel the hem of Heaven. You will go away with old, good friends. And don't forget when you leave, why you came.