

Angela Davis' commencement speech at the 2011 Evergreen graduation

by Angela Davis

Thank you. Thank you, I don't think I have ever experienced a graduation quite like this one. So, thank you for your spirit, thank you for your vitality.

I want to begin by acknowledging the original inhabitants of the land on which we gather this evening. And let us express our continued solidarity with indigenous people in this region in the country and in the world.

And so I say congratulations to The Evergreen State College class of 2011.

President Purce, members of the faculty, trustees, graduates, families, and friends of the graduates, I consider it a great honor to have been invited to address members of the class of 2011 during this concluding commemoration of the time you have spent as active participants in The Evergreen State College community.

I must confess that I was somewhat surprised that you chose me to deliver the commencement address, given that I spoke here just a little over one year ago, at the Sustainable Living Conference in May of last year. But I suppose that's a good sign, at least for me. Although that was my first visit to The Evergreen State College I have followed the development of this institution since the period of its founding.

So I knew already what an extraordinary place this was. As a matter of fact, I knew about its uniqueness long before I heard about a certain commencement address that became an international mark of distinction for this college. And while there was opposition to the speaker to whom I'm referring, people from Paris where he is an honorary citizen, from Berlin where there's a street named after him, and people all over the world recognized Mumia Abu Jamal as one of the world's great human rights activists and advocates...

The University where I have taught... actually it's the last 20 years; time goes by... UC Santa Cruz, until relatively recently was part of the community of colleges and universities that, like Evergreen, uses narrative evaluations instead of grades. Now, many of us at UCSC who continue to insist that students' performances cannot be so easily quantified (grades being the value equivalent of money), we're happy that TESC continues to uphold this qualitative, more nuanced strategy of evaluation. And you who are graduating today have had a unique experience in this respect...

If I were charged with further comparing our two institutions I would point out that neither school has a football team. And I would point out that we have very unusual mascots. Of course at UC Santa Cruz we have the banana slug, and many people think that's a very strange mascot, but at least they know what it is. So imagine all the conversations over the years and decades to come about the geoduck. Why do you have a duck as a mascot? Oh, it's not really a duck.

But what has impressed me most about your school is the emphasis it places on unconventional ways of knowing, on the collaborative production of knowledge through inter- or trans-disciplinary circuits, and the imperative to work across rather than beyond or in spite of differences. And to do this within the context of practical engagement. It is often the case that when one has a phenomenal experience, the recognition of the significance of this experience does not really emerge until long after the experience itself. And so I wonder how you, The Evergreen State College class of 2011, will over the next years appreciate the time you've spent here.

I can tell you a little bit about my own educational experience, and I'm referring now to my high school years. Last weekend I was in New York attending my 50th high school reunion. If you find it hard to imagine a 50th high school reunion, so do I. I attended a progressive private school in New York and I often wonder what my trajectory might have been had I not attended that school, where incidentally we read Karl Marx in the 11th grade. I was one of a small group of black students there. But last weekend, at the reunion, we concluded with songs. You know it was from the 60's, so everybody played the guitar in those days, and everybody sang. And I was so surprised when the concluding song was "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the black national anthem. It used to be referred to as the "negro national anthem" many, many years ago. But every single one of my white classmates knew all the words to that song. Now that tells you a little bit about me. It teaches me something more about myself than I had previously recognized. You have had a unique education here, you have had the opportunity to attend an institution which has acquired the reputation of being one of the very best public colleges in the nation. One of the very best. And you get to study issues in depth, through the learning contracts that you have developed. That is pretty extraordinary.

[Music interruption]

I guess so extraordinary that music has to play. I really love punctuations like that.

And you are all aware the extent which people in this contemporary world go to to ignore, or at best to bracket, those developments that seem not to directly affect our individual selves. You have had the exceptional experience of being encouraged to develop more capacious ways of perceiving the world.

We are all affected by the demand for freedom that moved from Cairo, Egypt, to Madison, Wisconsin. If our lives have been enriched by people resisting coercion, repression and exploitation, they are diminished by the over-incarceration of poor people, and especially people of color, throughout the country and the world.

Commencement speakers frequently assume that their role is to encourage graduates to go out and conquer the world. The task I have set for myself is much more modest. I want to urge you to be able to retrieve and sort through and rethink and preserve memories of your time here, which may very well turn out to be the most important period of your lives. Like the philosopher Walter Benjamin, I emphasize the past as the key to your future.

You are The Evergreen State College class of 2011. And you will always be The Evergreen State College class of 2011. In 2051 you will still be

the Evergreen class of 2011. In 2061, you will be attending your 50th college reunion here.

So I want you to look around at your classmates and ask yourselves how you will remember the years you shared with them. What will you say to your children, your grandchildren, about these years?

How, for example, will you narrate the impact of the election of Barack Obama? And I'm somewhat concerned that in a little more than two years, the presence of a black man in the White House, a black man who during his election campaign identified with a black radical tradition, this is now considered business as usual. Remember what Election Day felt like? Do you remember? Remember inauguration, and that sense of collective jubilation? And of course, the world did not change.

And I often point out that in this country we have a messiah complex, we believe that we can project all of our hopes and dreams and aspirations on one person. But remember that what was so immensely important about the election of Obama, that has not changed even if peoples' hopes have not been realized. At the time of the election of course, hope meant jobs, health care, education, and a process of purging the country of its racism, its Islamophobia, its homophobia, its transphobia, its militarism, its environmental ignorance, its xenophobia. But how could we have ever assumed that the election of one person would so radically change the world?

What was so exciting about that election was that young people demonstrated that it was possible to achieve the impossible. And so I would ask you to remember this as one of the most important collective achievements of your time as an undergraduate.

When I accepted the invitation to speak at your commencement, I responded in the affirmative because I wanted to associate myself with a college that has a deeply progressive tradition. I wanted to associate myself with students, faculty and workers who defend the integrity of the environment, its resources, its plants, its human and its non-human animals, and who encourage others to engage in sustainable living practices.

I wanted to associate myself with an institution that continues to defend the spirit and legacy of one of the most prominent members of its community, Rachel Corrie. And I think that each graduating class should take a moment and reflect on her courage her generosity.

And I'm happy to hear that students and faculty on this campus, in the context of a 21st century resistance to Israeli apartheid, are following those who stood up against South African apartheid and are raising the demand for divestment.

This is a burgeoning movement, and you here at the Evergreen State College have the opportunity to provide progressive leadership to the rest of the country. As the anti-South African apartheid campaign was spurred on by those universities that divested early on, Michigan State University, in 1978 I believe, Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin. And of course, eventually virtually every school in the country followed their leadership.

Your education has provided you with tools to recognize that solidarity with progressive Palestinian people is also solidarity with progressive Jewish people in Israel.

And I should point out that I attended a university as an undergraduate which was founded in the same year as the state of Israel, Brandeis University, the majority of whose students were Jewish. And it was there as an undergraduate with my Jewish classmates that I learned how to express solidarity for Palestinian people. I will never forget that.

Remember also that, while everyone now praises Nelson Mandela and expresses joy that the people of South Africa were finally able to defeat apartheid, Mandela was not always recognized as this legendary defender of democracy. In fact, he was represented initially as a pariah, as a terrorist. Amnesty International did not initially support him because of his association with Umkhonto we Sizwe. So I want us to recall that history, to think about it in a complicated way, and to be aware of the important role South Africa is playing in calling for the support of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement.

And I just want to share with you a very moving statement by Archbishop Tutu, who recently sent a message to the mayor of a town in Australia. The city council of that town decided to divest, and received a great deal of criticism as a result.

"Dear Mayor Fiona Byrne of Marrickville, New South Wales, Australia

"We in South Africa, who both suffered under apartheid and defeated it, have the moral right and responsibility to name and shame institutionalized separation, exclusion, and domination by one ethnic group over others. In my own eyes, I have seen how the Palestinians are oppressed, disposed, and exiled. We call on all our Jewish and Israeli sisters and brothers to oppose the Occupation and work for equality, justice, and peace between the river and the sea in the same way that so many South African whites took risk to oppose the crime of Apartheid."

And he concludes by saying, "Sometimes taking a public stand for what is ethical and right brings cost, but social justice on a local or global scale requires faith and courage."

If there is a skill we all need to acquire as we attempt to move forward in the 21st century, it is the ability to identify and act on an awareness of the links and connections across the range of issues we identify as crucial for democratic agendas today.

And so, those of us who call for freedom for Palestine acknowledge the connections between the attacks on the Palestinians in their own country and the racist discourse that relies on unquestioned acceptance of Islamophobia, which in turn is interpreted as necessary for the success of what has been represented as a global war on terror.

And so, I want to point out that there is a connection between the rise of homophobia and the assault on immigrants, undocumented immigrants especially, who find themselves under surveillance thanks to such documents as the USA Patriot Act. If you recall, immigrants used to fall under the INS, Immigration and Naturalization Services. Now they

fall under Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, a policing organization, that is controlled by Homeland Security. And so I want to say that undocumented immigrants work, they pay taxes, they stand up for democracy with more passion, with more passion than anyone. And they represent the future of this country - not those who want to lock them up, detain them, and deport them. Not those who want to use their bodies to create profitable enterprises.

And so as you move on, some of you will go to graduate school, right? Some of you will find jobs. Unfortunately, some of you may not find jobs. Some of you will make families, some of you will engage in activism, some of you will be involved in cultural work, and there are all kinds of permutations and combinations of all of these. But I would like you to periodically stop and reflect about the extent to which your lives were radically transformed by your experiences here. And I hope that you will have courage to draw upon the education you have received here from your most challenging professors, as you try to imagine more equitable ways of inhabiting all of our worlds. If you continue to think and act in the tradition of your college you will respect all of the inhabitants of our environments, and not simply assume that the environment must be preserved for the sake of future human generations, but rather for all the future generations of plant life, future generations of all animal life.

How do we extricate ourselves from enduring hierarchies, class, race, sexual, religious, geopolitical? This question, I think, is the question that needs to be posed. Posing that question is the mark of educated human beings. So I might then ask you to think about education as the practice of freedom. Education is the practice of freedom. And so freedom becomes, not an imagined condition in the future, not the set of achievements that will fulfill some desire, but rather an unrelenting, unending, collective effort to reconstruct our lives, our ways of relating to each other, our communities, and our futures.

Congratulations to The Evergreen State College class of 2011.

Thank you very much.