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Commencement Speech
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It is a “cold, bleak, biting” winter night. Dense fog is “pouring in at every chink and keyhole.” As this dreary day comes to a close, the night is prolonged by visitors. These are not “normal” visitors. No, these come bringing messages, bearing warnings. These are the Ghosts of Christmases Past, Present, and Yet to Come.

Okay, so Commencement and Christmas aren’t quite the same thing, but we can still learn a thing or two from the story of good ol’ Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol. Commencement is a transitional moment in our lives. We’re celebrating finally being done with our degree, we’re excited to conquer the world ahead of us, we’re crying over all the student loans we have to start paying off... (Oh, wait! This is supposed to be motivational. Scratch that last part.) It’s graduation day. There’s a lot going on in our minds.

As we stare at the big empty field before us that is our future, what are we supposed to consider? What are we supposed to do with ourselves? Scrooge’s eventful night gives us an answer. As we move forward, we must consider three things: our past, our present, and our future.

Our first visitor is the Ghost of the Past. Now, this isn’t the ghost of any past, nor the ghost of “long past,” as Scrooge asks. This is your past. So come, and as the ghost says, “rise, and walk with me” as we take a moment to consider from where we have come. Think back through your time here at UW-Platteville. If you’re anything like me, you came to your first class, ten minutes early, with a backpack full of new notebooks and pens, just thinking, “Yay, college!”

A lot has changed since then, hasn’t it? You’ve made memories with friends, such as climbing the world’s largest M. You’ve expanded your mind through coursework, and a co-op or semester abroad. You’ve improved your resume through an on-campus job or undergraduate research. You’ve pulled the all nighters, lost your voice cheering for the sports teams, maybe explored our historic second street, and learned a lot about life in general. These past few years weren’t just about getting a degree; they were about trying new things and figuring out where you fit in the world. Be proud of how much you’ve grown, of how much you’ve accomplished.

Looking back, we also see all the people who have helped us along the way. There are the family members, friends, tutors, professors, mentors, staff members, and so many others who have supported us and pushed us to achieve more than we ever thought possible. As you move
forward to new endeavors, appreciate the help you’ve received, cherish the memories made, and always remember from where you have come.

Next in our line of visitors is the Ghost of the Present. Life is happening here and now. It’s in constant motion; it’s always changing. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I get so focused on my destination that I forget to enjoy the ride. What’s the point of life if we’re not having fun along the way? Take some time to lay under the stars and trace constellations with your fingers. Read a book for fun. Sit around a campfire with friends and talk the night away. Life is a continuous journey. Fill it with enjoyable moments in the here and now.

Speaking of the here and now, what are you thinking in this current moment? Are you looking forward to your graduation celebrations or wishing you could go back to the easy life of kindergarten or just waiting for this speech to be over because you want to get out of these robes? How about you pause, look at your peers around you, and take in the meaning of today: it’s a celebration of us. We made it. We’re getting our degrees! How exciting is that?

Our final visitor is the Ghost of what is Yet to Come. Okay graduates, if you are sick and tired of having people ask you what you plan to do after graduation, please raise your hand. *(pause)* Right?! Isn’t that a terrible question? Don’t you feel as if you’re being backed into a corner and told, “Hey there, buddy. You need a plan for your life. I don’t care if you have three-quarters of your life still ahead of you; you need a plan right now, and I want to hear it.”

I don’t know about all of you, but I don’t have a plan for my life; and I’ll let you in on a little secret: I’m okay with not having a plan for my life. If anything, my plan is simply to have an adventure. The whole world is ahead of us! As much as society pressures us, there’s nothing we have to do. There’s no path we have to take. We get to decide our futures for ourselves; and if you’re ever worried about people disliking you for taking an unusual path, just listen to Mr. Rogers.

Yes, the Mr. Rogers who would put on his cardigan each day and invite us to be his neighbor. He once said, “You’ve made this day a special day just by being you. There’s no one in the world quite like you, and I like you just the way you are.” Isn’t that a wonderful message? I think everyone in the world needs to print that out and tape it above their bathroom mirrors so that we all start each day knowing we are loved just for being ourselves.

As you walk across this stage today and into your future, I want you to be yourself. I want you to embrace your past, be excited about your future, and be present in each moment. Class of 2015, go have an amazing story.