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## Commencement 2021, 10:30 AM and 3:00 PM Faculty Reflections

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Good afternoon, Illinois Wesleyan University!!!! Faculty, staff, students, family, friends, and graduates, it is an honor to be speaking with you here today. Graduates of the class of 2021, CONGRATULATIONS!!!

I am very humbled and honored to be chosen as Professor of the Year. As many of you are aware, I'm on sabbatical this semester so imagine my surprise when I opened my email and received this phenomenal news a few weeks ago. See.....THIS is why your faculty and staff kept badgering you to "check your email". Of course, I'm SO OVER using forms of technology to connect and communicate but that's another speech entirely. I digress..... What I will share though is that writing this speech was harder than I thought. I mean, being charged with the duty to inspire new graduates when my audience has been suffering through enduring and/or witnessing ongoing acts of violence and oppression towards the BIPOC community not to mention the ongoing global pandemic??? REALLY?!? I found that I was at a loss for words and you all know how much I love to talk!! HOW do I fit in all that I want to share given this short amount of time.....it's JUST NOT possible!!! I mean, how am I supposed to make you laugh first, then cry, and then inspire you all within 10 minutes??? As you can see, that's not a very easy task to accomplish. But I've always been one who is up for a good challenge.

It has been said, "The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates, and the great teacher inspires." As I think about all my phenomenal colleagues who dedicate their blood, sweat and oh yes tears (sometimes MANY tears) to your education and to this institution in general, it is clear to me today

that we are in the presence of greatness. Today I receive this award only by standing on the shoulders of giants and don't think that I would've.....for a second.....made it this far without being inspired by colleagues, former teachers and most importantly, you.....the students.

It's a cliché, but I love teaching. And I know that I am very privileged to have a job, let alone a career which I love. One reason why I love my job is because I believe that educators can and do make a difference in students' lives. I know this, because I had several who impacted me very deeply during times when I seemed to need it the most. There was Mrs. Dorothy Vickers-Shelley who, with her long beautiful arms adorned with bangles which made tinkling sounds as she swayed this way and that, taught me that "Life is short; therefore I shall be a crusader in the fight against ignorance and fear, beginning with myself." No seriously, that was a pledge which all students had to cite prior to Kindergarten library time and you did NOT want to mess with Mrs. Vickers-Shelley by not memorizing that pledge. Mrs. Vickers-Shelley was a teacher who promoted progressive, free thought to her young students acknowledging that the barriers were quite different for each child and yet, she challenged them (us) to rise to the level of expectation. Then there was Ms. Uzarski in high school. Now, I could have sworn that this lady did not like me nor did she appreciate my bold personality, crassness and love of talking....during her class..... when I was supposed to be learning chemistry. She consistently put me in my place holding me accountable for my actions. And don't you know she always had to make sure she did it in front of everyone...man. However, it was Ms. Uzarski who, on the last day of class before graduation, pulled me aside and told me

that I was one of her favorite students ever. Me! When I answered with “Really??” she chuckled and said that during my time in her class and in my interactions with others, she could see that I “got it” and she expected big things from me. I had hoped by “got it” she meant that A+ I had been working towards all semester. She then shared with me that she was aware I was the first person in my biological family to graduate high school, but that she knew I had what it took to accomplish whatever life goals I set, while demonstrating compassion and care for others above all else. I just needed to learn how to balance life and work a little better.....and learn not to talk so much. And let me tell you, I’m still working on those last two things. But what I did learn, amongst other things from Mrs. Vickers-Shelly and Ms. Uzarski, was that great teachers positively influence others through role modeling and inspiring them to go beyond the minimum.

Another educator I want to tell you about is Professor Nancy Endress who, during my undergraduate studies, taught me to do The Work. Not just the work which gets noticed, gets you raises or which earns accolades, no, to her, that work was merely tasks which needed completed and would be quickly forgotten when you were gone. She taught me that NOBODY says on their deathbed “I wish I would’ve worked a little more.” Instead, she told me my future patients would whisper “I wish I would’ve spent more time with family” or sentiments indicating that they hoped they had made a lasting and real impact on those with whom they came into contact.

The last two educators I want to tell you about are Dr.s Agatha Gallo and Kate Vincent, professors who I worked with in graduate school and who also served on my dissertation committee. They taught me to move beyond merely having good intentions, to

that of demonstrating action because actions always speak louder than words. They also taught me something which I sincerely hope I inspire in each of you, which is to tap into your emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the most powerful form of intelligence, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Those with emotional intelligence can almost always learn the other forms and methods of intelligence. However, the same cannot be said of our counterparts. Those who discredit the importance and devalue the skills of caring, nurturing and the ability to inspire others (which some call 'soft' skills) are not as easily able to gain emotional intelligence skills. In fact, they often oppress, consciously and unconsciously, those who do possess a high level of emotional intelligence. They often send messages of "you don't have what it takes" to play OUR game. To them I say, don't mistake our kindness and emotional intelligence for weakness or inability to play that aforementioned game. Because one of the most valuable things about being a person with strong emotional intelligence is that we are able to swiftly adapt. We can quickly tap into our genuineness which makes us "us" at any given time with the purposes of not only standing beside others, but also uplifting others so that they too may feel the warmth of the sun. You do not have to have the highest IQ, or the most money, or the best grades to be emotionally intelligent. To the naysayers I say, "be careful" because although you can't play our game, we can play yours. But we play your game not necessarily to win, but to continue receiving invitations to the game to where we eventually are considered members of said team, and it is then that we can change the rules to include and positively impact others. Because we, YOU, have the ability to transform.

Emotionally intelligent people care about the conditions of living for everyone. We use our emotional intelligence to imagine what it is like to be the other. What it might be like for someone who experiences life from a completely different, less powerful perspective. And we use that intelligence to transform. Speaking of transformation, consider giving up trying to be an ally. Yes, you heard me correctly. I'm asking you to consider stopping putting your energies into being an ally. Instead, I urge you to consider becoming an accomplice. An ally is fine and all and is often someone who supports others, but does so safely from afar, away from anything which might truly impact them as individuals or disrupt their life as they know it. They often see themselves as caring individuals who don't discriminate, aren't racist and who want to facilitate the end of oppression by supporting others. And often, they are caring individuals. Except, it's 2021 and supporting others, while serving on the sidelines is not enough. An accomplice has literal skin in the game and walks right beside others in the quest for justice. Emotional intelligence allows us to be comfortable with being uncomfortable when hearing other people's truths- even if we've never experienced the same things they have. It allows us to recognize that there are many truths in this world. And for these truths to be known and heard, an accomplice is willing to suffer consequences. To my fellow white folk, consider this a call to action. The continued oppression and killings are cruel and urgent reminders that we must sprint, not walk, to dismantle white supremacy. Black and brown lives are an inexcusable price to pay for our unwillingness to act. NOW is the time to be real, raw and candid with others but most importantly, with yourselves. Let these words by Minor Myers, a former IWU President resonate with you throughout your life - "Go forth and do well,

but even more, go forth and do good.” But don’t think it will always be easy. No, quite the opposite especially if you’re creating real and long-lasting changes. And yet, learn to get comfortable being uncomfortable as you create positive changes no matter the resistance. As Stephanie Pace Marshall reminds us - contrary to the voices, images, sounds, and messages that surround and bombard you, your life is about: Your integrity, not your position. Your voice, not your power. Your name, not your title. Your calling, not your career. Your legacy, not your success. So think and learn more slowly. Honor the voice of possibility that calls you. Notice what diminishes you and what makes you come alive. Embrace your questions, treasures, and gifts with gratitude. Passionately commit to impossible causes. Love generously, believe in your own goodness and genius, and always, always keep learning. You can be and have been the ones to imagine and create a just, compassionate, and sustainable world for us all.

Again, I say “CONGRATULATIONS” to the class of 2021. It’s been one hell of a ride and this year has been unprecedented, to say the least. And yet, you rise.....WE rise. Remember to reflect where you’re headed as well as where you’ve been. As they say, it’s as much about the journey as it is about the destination. I am inspired by your choice to go beyond the minimum which is why we are here today - your college graduation. May you achieve work-life balance while engaging in The Work all while serving as an accomplice to those whose voices often go unheard. Thank you.