

President Kwang-Wu Kim's Commencement Speech, Columbia College Chicago, May 2016

Transcribed by Eric Allen, 5/26/16

Graduates, parents, families, friends, guests, distinguished members of the faculty, College staff, and all others who are here joining us today, I welcome you to this happy occasion and I thank you for being here to bear witness to this important moment in the lives of our students. And now, with your collective permission, I would like to address my remarks directly to our students:

Graduates—congratulations, you did it! Getting to this moment is a major accomplishment, and we honor the hard work, the tough choices, and the sacrifices which helped you get here today. Back in May of 2004, when I was preparing a different commencement address, I came across the following headline in the New York Times science section. It read: “Globe grows darker as sunshine diminishes ten to thirty-seven percent”. The first sentence of the article read: “In the second half of the twentieth century, the world became, quite literally, a darker place.”

Recently, I learned that scientists are continuing to study this phenomenon, which is called “global dimming”, and the consensus in the larger scientific community is that it seems to be true. Basically, while the radiance of our sun has not diminished, the amount of light that reaches us here on earth has dropped significantly. So think about that for a second. Our world is growing darker.

Now let's think about how we live in the world. We seem to have lost our way. We seem to have forgotten that we need one another. We have grown fearful and suspicious. We are increasingly concerned with acquiring, rather than with sharing. And we are fractured by difference, and act as if life is a zero sum game—that the only way for me to get ahead is to pull someone down.

Many of our so-called “leaders” lie, without compunction. And rather than trying to elevate the discussion to focus on the common good, they pander shamelessly to fear, hatred, and special interests. Like all bad performers, they will say and do *anything* to get applause. Indeed, it does seem like the world has become a darker place.

So, what do we need? Well...

If we were in Gotham City, the Bat Signal would be blazing across the sky because we need superheroes. Before I get too carried away, let's define terms. So, for that exercise, I'm going to turn to that great scholarly reference, the Urban Dictionary: “Superhero — 1. A being with extraordinary physical or mental powers far beyond the range of normal human ability, who uses these powers to protect the innocent and for the general good.”

In other words, *you!* Now, some of you may be thinking: “Me, what?! I'm not a Superhero!” Really? Let's see...

“Extraordinary physical powers” – as Columbia students, you never give up. Your ability to gut it out is second to none. You know how to endure countless, sleepless nights, ignoring food and in severe cases personal hygiene in order to meet, with what others call, impossible deadlines. “Impossible,” you say, “Watch this!” – *BOOM!* Extraordinary physical powers, *CHECK!*

How about “extraordinary mental powers”? – As Columbia students, you face complexity and ambiguity. And what do you do? You laugh! – *HA HA!* You encounter tired social conventions, and what do you do? You raise your lip into a sneer, you scoff, and you go about your business, refusing to conform. *BAM!* You see a situation that others say has no solution. Then what do you do? You look at it from a different perspective, apply your creative problem solving skills, and you solve it. *WHAM!* “Extraordinary mental powers”? *Check!*

There’s one more thing about Superheroes—if you think about it, they tend to be rather scary—and trust me, you’re scary. You know why? Because you insist on discovering that which is true and authentic, and you see beyond the surface of things. *KAAPOW!* And by the way, a lot of you already have that colorful Superhero-look think down. Oh, *SNAP!*

So, you see, you are Superheroes. And the world needs you—particularly because of the last part of that definition. Remember? “Uses these powers to protect the innocent and the general good.” And I’m confident, because you’re Columbia students, you will do just that.

So, for the Superhero induction ceremony—will all graduates please stand.

Graduates stand.

And now, I’m going to ask that you join me in what is known as the “Triple S”, better known as the “Secret Superhero Salute”, which I am going to demonstrate for you now (demonstrates salute to students). Now, while holding the salute, please repeat after me:

I

Graduates: “I”

State your name

Graduates: “(name)”

Superhero that I am

Graduates: Superhero that I am

Hereby pledge

Graduates: Hereby pledge

To use my superpowers

Graduates: To use my superpowers

To protect the innocent

Graduates: To protect the innocent

And for the greater good

Graduates: And for the greater good

Thank you, please be seated.

Now, I want you to think about what you just pledged to do. To use your abilities, your skills, and your profound understanding of the human condition to advance the greater good. That's something worth living for.

So, let me tell you this—Actually, I don't think the world is a dark place. My path has always been illuminated by the care and the love of many. If you are open and generous of spirit, people will come into your lives that want to help you. Learning to let others help you is a skill you have may have yet to learn. Never forget that one of the biggest lies out there is the myth of the self-made person, who has achieved success all on their own through sheer brilliance, force of will, and determination. Graduates, you can search the world high and low, and you will *never* find anyone who truly succeeded all by themselves. Yes, of course, successful people work hard—incredibly hard. They learn from their failures, and are relentless in their pursuit of excellence and authenticity. But you can be sure that for each success story, there was someone else who recognized the ability and talent and who opened the door. Your success will come from others who see you and who choose to help you. So, this is a great moment to evaluate your people skills and to think about how you treat others.

Ok, we're almost done. As Columbia soon-to-be alumni, I know you have each experienced, many times, Mark Kelly's "Hell Yeah" liturgy. Last year, I added a new call-and-response to the Columbia lexicon that I like to call the "Yes I Will" affirmation. It's very simple: your response to me after I call out a series of sentences is, hopefully, "Yes I Will".

Graduates—will you show up on time?

Graduates: Yes I will!

Good, because you know my number one rule for success is be on time. Graduates—Will you do what you say you are going to do?

Graduates: Yes I will!

Excellent, because once you get tagged for being unreliable, you might as well stay home. Graduates—will you take time to listen to other people's stories?

Graduates: Yes I will!

Outstanding, because being a good listener will separate you from the crowd. Graduates—will you show compassion to others?

Graduates: Yes I will!

Thank you, because until you have walked in another's shoes, you don't have the right to judge. Graduates—will you take full responsibilities for your choices and their consequences?

Graduates: Yes I will!

Fantastic, because you all know that the three verbs which characterize all losers are to blame, to complain, and to whine. Graduates—will you live with gratitude for what you have and who you are?

Graduates: Yes I will!

Yes, each of us is blessed many times over. We must never forget that. And finally, Graduates—will you always aim high?

Graduates: Yes I will

Terrific! As Columbia students, I expect nothing less of you.

So take your next steps with full belief in yourself and your aspirations. There is no joy in pursuing someone else's dream, and spending your life being what you think others want you to be is a formula for despair. In a world that seems to have grown darker, let your light shine! Let your voice be heard! Have faith in the goodness and bounty of the Universe, and let your courage surface! Congratulations!