

## Commencement

June 4, 1982

Graduates,

Now the joy begins. Now the work begins. The years of preparation, of tedious study and exciting learning at least begin to make sense. The jumble of words and the tangle of small and great thoughts begin to take order, and this morning you can see a small portion, an infinitesimal portion, of the map of your future.

You have still had to develop an outstanding courage to invent this moment, for you have invented it. Of all your attributes—your youth, your beauty, your wit, your kindnesses, your money—courage is indeed your greatest achievement. It is the greatest of all your virtues, for without courage you cannot practice any other virtue with consistency.

And now that you have shown that you are capable of manufacturing that important and wondrous virtue, you must be asking yourselves what you will do with it. Be assured that that question is in the minds of your parents, of your instructors, of people whose names you will never know, of the group of women who will sit in those very seats next year. That is the question. There is an African statement which is, “The trouble for the thief is not how to steal the bugle, but where to blow it.”

Since you have worked this hard, since you have also been greatly blessed, since you are here, you have developed a marvelous level of courage, and the question then which you must ask yourself, I think, is will you really do the job which is to be done: Make this country more than it is today, more than what James Baldwin called “these yet to be United States.”

It takes a phenomenal amount of courage. For around this world, your world, my world, there are conflicts, brutalities, humiliations, terrors, murders, around this world. You can almost take any Rand McNally map and close your eyes and just point, and you will find there are injustices, but in your country, particularly in your country, young women, you have, as the old folks say, your work cut out for you. For fascism is on the rise, and be assured of it, sexism, racism, ageism, every vulgarity against the human spirit is on the rise. And this is what you have inherited.

However, on the other hand, what you have first is your courage. You may lean against it, it will hold you up, you have that. And the joy of achievement, the ecstasy of achievement. It enlightens and lightens at the same time. It is a marvelous thing. Today, your joy begins, today your work begins. You are phenomenal. I believe that women are phenomenal. I know us to be.

This is a poem called “Phenomenal Woman”. I wrote the poem for black women and white women and Asian and Hispanic women, Native American woman...I wrote it for fat women, women who may have posed for the before pictures in Weight Watchers. I wrote it for anorexics. I wrote it for all of us, for women in kibbutzim and burgher women, women on the pages and the front covers of Vogue and Essence magazine and Ebony magazine. For we are phenomenal.

Now, I know that men are phenomenal too, because I, like you, have been told that 98% of all the species which have lived on this little blob of spit and sand are now extinct. And I know nature afforded them balance, so Gentlemen, I accept your phenomenal nature. But I will tell you this—you will have to write your own poem.

It is upon you to increase your virtue, the virtue of courage—it is upon you. You will be challenged mightily, and you will fall many times.

It is upon you to increase your virtue, the virtue of courage—it is upon you. You will be challenged mightily, and you will fall many times. But it is important to remember that it may be necessary to encounter defeat, I don’t know. But I do know that a diamond, one of the most precious elements in this planet, certainly one in many ways the hardest, is the

result of extreme pressure, and time. Under less pressure, it's crystal. Less pressure than that, its coal, less than that, its fossilized leaves are just plain dirt.

You must encounter, confront life. Life loves the liver of it, ladies. It is for you to increase your virtues. There is that in the human spirit which will not be gunned down even by death. There is no person here who is over one year old who hasn't slept with fear, or pain or loss or grief, or terror, and yet we have all arisen, have made whatever absolutions we were able to, or chose to, dressed, and said to other human beings, "Good morning. How are you? Fine, thanks."

Therein lies our chance toward nobleness—not nobility—but nobleness, the best of a human being is in that ability to overcome.

### *Still I Rise*

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may tread me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.  
Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.  
Weakened by my soulful cries.  
Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own back yard.  
You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?  
Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.