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Melinda French Gates

2024 Stanford Commencement Speech

Good morning, Class of 2024. [...]

Today is the day you graduate from Stanford University¹, and that's an amazing accomplishment.

Stanford has always held a special place in my family's heart.

My dad, Ray French, received a scholarship to study mechanical engineering here in the 1960s.

5 While he worked on his master's degree, my mother, Elaine French, supported them with her job at a bottled water company.

On nights and weekends, she was my dad's lab assistant.

There's an old photo I love of my mom, pregnant with my sister, standing next to the wind tunnel in the engineering lab with a clipboard and a stopwatch. [...]

10 Graduates, you've given us a lot to celebrate. And also a lot to admire.

You arrived on this campus already accomplished and ambitious young people.

And during your time here, you have also proven how adaptable you are and what powerful advocates you are for the causes you believe in.

Stanford is a demanding university.

15 And your time here was made even more challenging by what was happening in the world around you.

From a once-in-a-century pandemic² that changed the way you lived and learned to multiple wars³ that I know this campus is feeling very, very deeply.

There's no question you are graduating into a different world than the one you matriculated⁴ in.

But you are also leaving this campus prepared to be the leaders we need.

20 And today marks an important milestone in that journey.

Shortly after I sit down, you will be invited to rise if you are able.

You will *hear* that call as a Stanford *student*.

You will *answer* that call as a Stanford *graduate*.

And with that, a major transition in your life will begin.

25 I've been thinking a lot about transitions lately.

¹ *Stanford University*: a university in California, USA

² Covid-19

³ the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East

⁴ to begin at a university

The spiritual leader Ram Dass⁵ had a wonderful teaching about two waves traveling through the ocean: one big and one small.

As they get closer to land, the big wave sees what's about to happen.

All the waves ahead of them are crashing into the shore.

30 Devastated, the big wave warns the small wave that the end is near.

The small wave just smiles and says, "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"You don't understand," the big wave insists. "We're done for."

The smaller wave is still totally calm and says: "No we're not."

And I can explain why in just six words:

35 "You're not a wave. You're water."

I love that story.

It captures what it's like to experience an enormous transition without losing the core of who you are.

I turn 60 this year.

You don't get to be my age without navigating all kinds of transitions.

40 Some you embraced and some you never expected.

Some you hoped for and some you fought as hard as you could.

For me, those included starting my career at *Microsoft*.

Losing one of my best friends to cancer.

Falling in love.

45 Having children.

Starting my work on behalf of women and girls.

Ending a marriage and partnership of almost 30 years.

And, very recently, making a major career shift.

50 In each case, there was a moment when I felt like the big wave, terrified that life as I knew it was about to be over.

But I always made it to the next day.

So will you.

And I've learned that the next day is when the real work begins.

Because what we do the next day is what makes us who we are.

55 So in addition to honoring your accomplishments today, I also want to offer you something to think about when you wake up tomorrow – three lessons I've learned from my own experience with transitions.

My first piece of advice is to enter these moments with radical openheartedness.

⁵ *Ram Dass* (1931-2019)

Most of the time, we walk through life in the thicket of our everyday routine.

60 But during a transition, we step out of our familiar surroundings and into a big, open space where everything is new.

There are two ways to encounter these spaces.

You can keep your head down and focus on finding the shortest possible distance to the next familiar thing.

Or you can find the courage to linger in that liminal space and see what it has to tell you.

That, to me, is what practicing openheartedness means.

65 I have to admit that as a young person, I managed transitions the first way.

I had a list of goals I wanted to accomplish, and as soon as I checked one off the list, I raced across the clearing to the next one.

Frankly, it was a lot less scary that way.

As I've gotten older, though, I've learned the value of embracing uncertainty.

70 I'll give you one example of what this has looked like for me.

When I first entered philanthropy more than 25 years ago, it was unfamiliar terrain.

I didn't have any experience in global health or development yet.

So I knew I had a lot to learn, and I would need to pay attention.

Initially, we thought the foundation's⁶ work was going to focus on vaccine access.

75 But when I started traveling around the world to see that work in action, the women I met kept changing the subject.

"What about the shots I used to get?" they asked me.

They were talking about contraceptives.

So I stopped and listened to what they had to say.

80 Soon, I was talking about contraceptives on almost all my trips and continuing those conversations with my team when I got back.

Those conversations led to others.

I learned how much it benefits society when women are able to make their own decisions to control their own resources, to direct their own futures.

85 And I began to focus my efforts there instead.

I think back to those early trips with such gratitude now, because the women I met took me in a new direction and led me to my life's work.

Now *you* are *Stanford students*, so I imagine most of you are graduating today with big plans for yourselves.

Higher degrees to earn, causes to advance, companies to start, industries to disrupt⁷.

⁶ (here) *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*, an organisation working, among other things, to enhance healthcare and reduce poverty

⁷ (here) change

90 These big, bold plans are wonderful.
The world needs you.
But my advice is to leave some room for those plans to change.
Resist the idea that anything you've done here at Stanford has already locked you into any one path – or any one kind of life or career.

95 Be excited about the fact that you will encounter possibilities you haven't imagined yet.
And be willing to let what you learn shift your thinking about what you're on this earth to do.
Remember that once the wave learns to call itself by a different name – once it realizes it is not just a wave, but water – it becomes free to take on new forms.
The same is true for you.

100 That brings me to my second piece of advice, and it's quite short: Find your small wave.
In the story about the waves, the smaller wave is the hero because it helps the big wave see things another way.
In fact, the small wave isn't small at all.
It has a perspective on the big wave that the big wave doesn't have on itself.

105 Graduates, no matter who you are or where you are in life, a small wave is an incredibly valuable thing to have.
Different people will play that role for you at different times.
In the early days of my career, that person was my colleague Charlotte.
From the moment I got to *Microsoft*, I absolutely loved the work I was doing, but as time went on, I realized
110 that I didn't love the culture.
It was brash and aggressive, and that wasn't me.
I was the only woman in my hiring class⁸, and I felt a lot of pressure to emulate the men around me.
Eventually, I reached a point when I considered leaving the company.
Like the big wave, I thought I was coming to an end.

115 Charlotte helped me see things differently.
She was a little older and a little more experienced and had already figured out how to navigate the culture there without losing her own identity.
Having Charlotte in my life made it possible for me to imagine there was a future at *Microsoft* for me, too.
Graduates, I promise you that here in this stadium today, there is someone who is going to play that small
120 wave role for you.
Someone who can help you imagine yourself as the person you want to become.
And just as important, there is someone here who needs you to serve that role for them in return.
That leads me to my final piece of advice today: "Build a web of deserved trust."

⁸ *hiring class* (here): a group of new employees hired the same year

125 That beautiful phrase comes from the legendary businessman Charlie Munger⁹ who changed this campus's landscape with the incredible student housing his generosity made possible.

Charlie famously said that the "highest form which civilization can reach is a seamless web of deserved trust ... totally reliable people correctly trusting each other."

A web of deserved trust.

What a thing to aspire to.

130 As a society, we aren't always set up to feel responsibility for the person who's next to us – or the person who's on the other side of a divide or debate.

Especially not right now.

But we need each other.

135 No matter who you are, there will be moments in your journey when you need to be carried – or when someone else will need you to help carry them.

When my good friend John died at age 37, I was one of a small group of people who tried to carry his wife Emmy to the other side of her grief.

Three years ago, when my marriage ended, she was one of the people who carried me to the other side of mine.

140 That bond between us is incredibly profound.

But of course, what Charlie was talking about was much bigger than that.

A whole society based on that kind of relationship.

A bond that strong and reciprocal multiplied millions and billions of times over.

145 During your time as a student here, you've borne witness to many painful reminders of how the world is still falling short of that vision.

But you have also demonstrated just how ready you are to be the force for progress the world needs.

Yes, you are graduating into a broken world, but it is community that rebuilds things.

You've already started building that community here together.

And together is how you'll make the broken things whole again.

150 But first, you need to graduate.

In a few minutes, when you and your classmates are invited to rise, I hope you will hear in that invitation a call to action.

I hope you'll think of everyone who helped you reach this milestone today and vow to pay forward the investments they've made in you.

155 Most of all, I hope you will step forward into the future with radical openheartedness...

Emboldened by the wisdom and perspective of the smaller, wiser waves that travel with you...

Committed to expanding the seamless web of deserved trust you have already begun to weave around you.

And when you wake up tomorrow, no longer the person you were today and not yet the person you will

⁹ *Charlie Munger (1924-2023)*

160 become next, I hope you will draw courage and confidence from knowing that you, graduates, are water –
the force that shapes the shore.

What a powerful force you are.

Thank you.

(2024)