

Colgate University

2023 Commencement Address

Hamilton, NY – May 21, 2023
by Wynton Marsalis

Thank you, Marietta Cheng for the humbling introduction. Thank you, President Casey, Dean Cushing, Colgate Trustees, and the faculty and staff of Colgate for having me with you today. My fellow honorees, it's a pleasure to be up here with you.

Class of '23, it is a profound honor to address you on this life-defining occasion. I wish you congratulations on the many triumphs that have led you to this point, and an extravagant salutation on redefining yourself as a graduate of Colgate University.

Though the gravitas of this moment is unforgettably marked by colorful banners and ornate regalia, rows of seats packed with all the generations in their Sunday's finest and fancy hats, proud processional music and very particular parking, most importantly and significantly graduates, you are seated in a cocoon of feeling and surrounded by your people.

Your people have traveled from near and far to be here today. Your people have expended all types of resources to get YOU here. Your people have taught you more than you thought it possible to know, and your people have invested so many quietly powerful prayers to undergird your resolve to complete this journey. They now are here, in this definitive moment, to be with you and for you, to bear witness and to share in the triumph of what you have accomplished.

I want you to allow yourself to feel the embrace of your family, your professors and mentors, and the pride of alumni and future students. And though your journey is singular, you are not alone. We have all gathered here to celebrate your induction into the life of the learned and we will be here to help with your transition into the newfound responsibilities that come with the freedoms of adulthood.

I wish I actually had some masterful insights into what you will find in the world that you are entering. To be honest, when I got here to Hamilton yesterday, I had absolutely no idea that I would find such a soulful community of trumpet players and knowing jazz fans at the ceremonial dinner last night. But there we were, locked in an embrace of mutual admiration. So instead of being oracular today, I will request of you, in thanks for the brevity of my remarks, a few simple things. All of which you can begin to fulfill before you leave this very venue in which we sit, can continue to fulfill at that (always-colorful-in-some-way) post-graduation meal with family and friends, and can easily realize with minimal fuss every day of your lives without wasting time, energy, words or money.

My first request: BE PRESENT. We are here to be with you. Seize the emotional complexity of this day and challenge yourself to understand who surrounds you. Give us your attention with an uncommon focus, and you will be surprised at the things you

learn. Experience things as they happen. Life is more interesting when you allow IT to set the banquet table. Don't curate your life. Be present and let the intensity of your participation shape your feeling— not the act of you observing your participation in your own experience. These are your people—be present.

And presence is connected to place. If Zoom taught us one thing, it was the centrality of geography. There is no adequate replacement for presence. So my second request to you is: please be where you are. You have to be HERE at Colgate University to know how bad the food is... but also to know how good Ray Bros Barbecue is. You have to be here to understand how to run Cardiac Hill but never quite make it into Case. You have to be here to know that President Casey received a much better education in the challenges of dorm life in his late 50s. But guess what, after tomorrow, you no longer have to worry about saying "Hello" to everybody you meet.

Class of '23 - we are here together BECAUSE of you and FOR you. You are a tough group that has endured the many unanticipated challenges of Covid and its aftermath, yet here you sitgraduates. And you have learned (from each other) something fundamental that will remain true for your entire lives: every single one of us follows a different path on the road to a deeper understanding, and still the paths to knowledge are as varied as there are individuals in this world.

But we cannot be on all roads at once. When we wish to experience all things at all times, we end up with nothing. This campus, your investment in it, and its investment in you will forever delineate the timeline of your life.

Revel in the general spirit that defines this place. Wherever you may find yourself, take the organic lesson in community building that you have learned here and be where you are.

The world knows that Colgate University is a place, but for you it is also a time. You now know the past as a graduate... the future is unknowable. Though we all work towards the particular future we envision, the present is all we can actually experience. With a world full of different types of people and their differing abilities, agendas, energies, and efforts clanging in a dissonant rush for attention in person and online, the present can be volatile, pressurized, and overwhelming. We anxiously look to escape into dream worlds of an idyllic past or to project ourselves into techno-fantasies about a robotic self-absorbed future through life-like games and overpriced entertainment products. These constructs are perfect because those places are not populated with any actual people, they are simply elaborate simulations, incubators of narcissism where our best choice is always and only....ourselves. I must request of you: Please BE IN TIME. The present is your safest and only practical choice.

Be in time and you will be flexible enough to define yourself and your experience more broadly than your age, hairstyle, clothing, or your favorite popular video, app, or platform. Be in time and you will maintain your equilibrium when the next war or financial crash or mass act of violence occurs. Be in time and you will come to see the value of singing, dancing, cooking, storytelling, playing, laughing, and many other tactile human interactions that are not in our clichéd vision of a technological future. Be in time because the people all around you are the real technological marvels and how we

interact with each other is the most fascinating study on this earth. Be in time, and you will never underestimate the impact of your disposition on any tough situation that you may encounter. When asked about hitting a wrong note, trumpeter Miles Davis said, "I don't know if it's wrong... until I hit the next one."

Speaking of Miles I am reminded of the great trumpeter and sage raconteur Dizzy Gillespie who had a request for me that I now, some 40 years later ask of you: be yourself and be fabulous. In 1980, when I was 18 year of age or so, I asked Dizzy Gillespie "how can I find my own personal sound?". He said, "Well, you have to love yourself." I said, "But I don't play with the depth of the great Louis Armstrong." He replied, "That's how HE did it." I said, but I can't make the trumpet cry like Harry "Sweets" Edison (great trumpeter with the 1930's Basie orchestra and my mentor since teenhood). Dizzy said, "That's how HE did it." I said, "I can't even think of playing what you play."

Then Dizzy said, "Miles asked me that same question when he was young (in the 1940's). I told him 'Be yourself and stop imitating me. Play slower and lower where you naturally hear things and leave space.'" I later told Miles what Dizzy had divulged. Instead of counterstating it, Miles said, "If you listen to my album Round Midnight, it ain't nothing but Dizzy slowed down." A couple of years later, I laughingly relayed this back to Dizzy. His reply: "And Miles sounded fabulous on that recording." So be yourself and be fabulous.

I reflect on knowing so many of the greatest geniuses of my instrument and having been able to learn from them in such an in-depth and personal way. They have all passed on but they remain even more present as memories and on their fantastic recordings. When I reflect on having met so many families and young students and great people all over the world night after night (including last night), across so many decades, I am filled with an unspeakable gratitude. And that is my last request of you. Be grateful. Ingratitude is the most offensive form of disrespect for those who have been given so much. Don't let a day go by that you don't bow your head and acknowledge all that you have been given, all that you give and all the blessings you have received.

When I was a teenager, I decided to stop praying before meals. My mother noticed it and said, "Boy, where is my prayer?" I went into my young conscious thing about not worshipping a European Jesus and so forth and she replied, "I don't care who or what you pray to, but as arrogant as you are, just the act of bowing your head three times a day is bound to make for a lot of improvements over the years." I made fun of it at the time and ascribed it to superstition and to being old-fashioned, but I did do the bare minimum out of respect. As these years have rolled by, I have discovered... she was right.

Class of '23, it is a profound honor to address you on this life-defining occasion. I am grateful to have been given this opportunity. Please, be present, be where you are, be in time, be yourself and be fabulous, be grateful... and be cool about it all.