

University of Michigan

2023 Spring Commencement Address

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By Wynton Marsalis

NOW'S THE TIME

Thank you Board of Regents and President Ono for the pleasure and honor of addressing this year's graduates.

Class of '23. You have finally made it to the finish line, congratulations. As you congregate here to the rightful chorus of kudos from family, friends, mentors, professors and others, please take in the size, the grandeur, and the pomp of this – your graduation from the mighty University of Michigan.

As you scour the stadium for the approving eyes of beloved and valued persons, I hope you also feel the presence of an extended support system that opened for membership long ago with the very first graduating class of 1845 which culminates in your induction this morning. From henceforth, this moment delineates the timeline of your life: in college, before college, after college.

Although all eyes are upon you, you are not a destination, you are a connector forever spanning what was, and what will be. In actualizing the dreams and aspirations of parents, ancestors and alumni, you are also an inspiration to younger relatives, future graduates and those (not yet on the path of higher education) who wish to follow.

You are a bridge... a powerful translator between the generations: of your family, of this institution, and of our way of life. As a musician traveling up and down this bountiful country for over 40 years, having done close to two hundred gigs in the last two years alone, I have had the opportunity to speak to all sorts of people from every walk and stage of life. This is what our post-Covid conversations have taught me: We desperately need your participation to silence the loud and messy divisiveness that has come to define our national life. I would love to stand here and keep things light and breezy, blow a tune or two... but this precarious moment demands your attention.

In this time, the tearing apart of families, the battling of genders, and unrestrained vilification of the “other” has become a public sport. Our landscape is littered with profiteers who demonize your actual support system (here surrounding you) to flatter you into a consumer relationship by ascribing special value to your youth. Think about it. Youth, in and of itself, is not a value. It is not a quality like intelligence or humanity, or soul. Don't be fooled, graduates.

Because you are a bridge in the unrelenting cycle of life, you need a strong constitution and a willingness to invest in your position as emissary of the past to the future and as translator of the future to the past. The deeper the divide— the more crucial the need.

From the moment a bridge is constructed, everything from daily traffic, to the corrosive forces of the elements, to the pitiless passage of time itself conspires to degrade its integrity. A bridge needs to be flexible yet firm, and its structural and functional health requires consistent care.

May you take down your toll gates, keep the lanes of communication open and invest in your relationships with elders and youngsters **with the same intensity and interest** you show for people your own age. You will be responsible for bridging unforeseen transitions from one crisis to the next, from one time to the next and from one way of being to the next. Your ecosystem requires your presence. Be present.

Look around carefully on this day. Drink in the memories of each street and building, pub, club, classroom, store and house. Every pathway holds the stories of hundreds of thousands, no, millions of students who have passed this way. You too will return as alumni, as parents, artists, donors and professors to experience what the many of us who embrace you in this very moment feel. We are the audience and you are center stage but, no audience—no stage.

In this time of technology-as-Demi God (second only to money), on the cusp of ubiquitous AI technology that promises everything from writing epochal masterpieces to going to the bathroom for you— some, confusing information with knowledge, are already prepared to rethink the value of learning itself. “Hm... if the computer works *and* thinks for you, why, you can live a life of absolute leisure?” goes the reasoning. Don’t be fooled, graduates.

Because you have the recipe doesn’t mean you can cook the meal. At some point, a person has to show you *how* to breathe life into those instructions. And eventually, you may transcend the recipe with the power of your own creative imagination and your own unique brand of feeling... but that’s not a given.

May you never lose your sense of taste to the degree that you would choose prepackaged, nutrition-less, over-preserved food products to a downhome meal prepared with skill, love and interest in your well-being.

Look around and feel the convening strength of a class this size. Let’s consider all the personal and collective resources that have been invested and expended to get you to this moment... all of the dreams you ride on. The collective dream is the most powerful force on earth. Today’s commencement, down to the placement of chairs on this dais, is the result of a collective dream called the University of Michigan. And from that collective vision, every one of you dreamt, at some point, of this day. And here we are: from Engineering to Public Policy, Law to Business to Nursing, all the disciplines represented here form component parts of a whole that has prepared you to undergird the building blocks of our way of life. If those foundations are nurtured and in balance, we are healthy and thriving. If not, we struggle. That’s why we need y’all at the table. It’s plain and evident. You are the avant-garde of our optimism. Your collective success will mean that this education has been brought to bear to solve the pressing and overwhelming problems of our time. Forget the forced hipness of apathy, we need your enthusiasm, your willingness and your solutions.

I have played Hill Auditorium over twenty-something times, presented by UMS over these past thirty-seven years. Teaching and playing with students and interacting with professors, coaches, alumni, kids and parents alike. They have always demonstrated great warmth and deep feeling of community. It is one of the defining relationships of my professional career and a partnership that has given me great pleasure and pride. UMS is the finest college presenting organization in this nation because students, professors and alumni alike actually attend the fantastic art that is presented from around the world. They fill Hill with a bristling intergenerational energy that is all too rare. It is in the spirit of this feeling that I remain hopeful and vigilant.

IN THIS TIME, our country is actually crying out for a new collective dream. We need a new belief and a massive, unapologetic assertion of integrity. There is just simply **too much trash in this system**: a pornographic cultural mainstream that sells sexualized and violent products to kids under the guise of music and film; a contemptuous corrupt leadership in all political parties and from all walks of life posing as public servants, boasting and preening while wasting billions of overprinted dollars that have been siphoned off of the hide of America with increasing velocity and shameless arrogance; incendiary and lightweight punditry from fraudulent news outlets on both sides delivering cynical entertainment under the banner of serious journalism; paper-thin celebrities and narcissistic “influencers” peddling pixie dust as holy water.

It is now and finally, just too much to bear. This headlong descent into shameless decadence and unchecked commercialism has created an anxiety and isolation that is increasingly destroying the mental health of our young, that is causing us to murder each other over minor disputes, to gun down young children in schools, to desire empty transactional lives, and ultimately to interface more eagerly and meaningfully with gadgets and devices than with people. We are numbed into accepting the unacceptable without blinking an eye. Don't be fooled, graduates.

Because the dimensions of understanding are not binary, there is no simple right and wrong. We need a revolution in thought and feeling through collective participation. An entire nation cannot hold **itself** hostage and become an armed perimeter **in fear of itself**. Our planet is multi-dimensional and people all over it want to know you. We need indefatigable volunteers in the cause of *the* people... not just *our* people. This democracy cost a lot of people a lot. It would be a tragedy of historic proportion to squander that inheritance because our young couldn't envision an America better than the mess we've made of it for you. Because our young didn't have the will and desire to throw off the shackles of deeply rooted corruption and come together in the cause of mutual freedoms, because they're too busy playing make-believe games... or they're lost in a make-believe world... or too distracted by wondering who likes them on an app.

May you never become numb to the depravation and poverty, the misery and lack of opportunity that besets so many of your less fortunate and less aware fellow citizens. May you never lose the sense that a collective will can create unimagined change to better the lives of more and more citizens. You are needed out here. Hello! We desperately need you and your creativity, your conscience and your consciousness.

The genius alto saxophonist Charlie Parker wrote a defining blues of the bebop style entitled "Now's the Time." If you believe in the ascendancy of humanity, please loudly declare your intentions. And spend your lives making those dreams, whatever they may be, a reality. Class of '23, I know you can help put us on the good foot. We need your very best and we need it now.