

UMBC Undergraduate Commencement Address by Valedictorian Amber McGuigan, 2006 Sondheim Public Affairs Scholar

President Hrabowski, Provost Johnson, distinguished guests, faculty, staff, family, friends, and, of course, fellow students: I am truly honored to serve as valedictorian of the class of 2006 and to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you about my experiences at UMBC.

When I began at UMBC four years ago, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life. Having known a young girl who had struggled through many years in the foster care system, I had decided that the needs of abused and neglected children were great and urgent. I was determined to study social work and law and to pursue a career in forensic social work with children and families. However, like many of you, my orientation to college life was marked by a dizzying expansion of opportunity. It only took a matter of weeks at UMBC for my self-assurance to crack, as I quickly became aware of just how many great and urgent needs there were to address.

I don't believe that my experience is unusual. It seems to me that one of the outstanding characteristics of UMBC's culture is an emphasis on raising awareness—of injustice, of potential danger, of need, of opportunity. I don't find this at all surprising. We college students have an unprecedented level of access to information, and a greater ability to choose our paths in life than those who came before us. Those who focus their energies on raising awareness recognize our potential and hope to move us from knowledge to action.

Several weeks ago, I attended a rally in DC, to call for an end to violence in Darfur, Sudan. Of all the notable speakers present, ranging from Michael Steele to George Clooney, I was most struck by a line from the Rev. Al Sharpton. He stated with conviction that none of those present could sit comfortably in their living rooms as long as innocent blood was being spilled anywhere in the world.

That's a tall order, I thought to myself, but I would guess that most of you have also been issued challenges like this. Maybe it didn't come from Al Sharpton, but from a mentor, professor, or loved one. Maybe it wasn't about genocide, but about disease, poverty, ignorance, or hatred, saving your community, providing for your family, or some combination of these.

It seems to me there are three ways we can respond to such expectations: 1) we can tune them out and concern ourselves with our own affairs, 2) we can allow ourselves to become paralyzed by the burdens, or 3) we can consider our opportunities and choose to dedicate ourselves in some specific way to the good of others. This last option is decidedly the most difficult, but, if we can do it, will prove to be the most rewarding. I think that in order to make those tough choices and fully dedicate ourselves, we need to keep a few things in mind.

The first is the importance of passion. Two summers ago I interned with a community organizing group in Camden City, New Jersey. I chose the job because I had grown up near Camden and felt passionately about its renewal. My passion served me well there and I have no doubt that it was crucial to any successes I experienced. That being said, after three months I was gone. Others that I worked with, some of whom spent decades in struggling neighborhoods, lived passion in its original meaning—the endurance of suffering. Lives such as theirs remind me that real passion is beyond a feeling, and includes a willingness to sacrifice for good when doing so has great cost.

The second thing we need to remember is to be mindful of our gifts. As we prepare to graduate, something that only a tiny fraction of the world's population has the honor of doing, it is especially appropriate to consider the great gift of education, and the many ways in which it can be used. There are also other gifts: our skills, talents, intelligence, material resources, creativity, time, energy. The list goes on. But in taking this inventory of our assets and possessions, we should not lose sight of the fact that not just our resources, but our very selves, are gifts which we can offer for the world.

I believe that the way to be both effective and happy is to live as a gift which finds fulfillment only in its giving. If we think of ourselves, not primarily as laborers or carriers of burdens, but as gifts, we will be less likely to become overwhelmed by the needs of others, and more likely to find joy in our sacrifices. If we recognize ourselves as gifts, and value our own contributions, we will be more inspired to contribute faithfully. And if we are conscious that every person we encounter is in some way a gift to us, we will foster a sense of gratitude that will refresh and sustain us in our lofty pursuits.

Each of us, regardless of our career choices, are bound to encounter needs—in our families, our communities, our nation, and our world. As we have received much, much is expected. We can rise to the occasion, if we will foster the willingness to give of ourselves, and the dedication to continue giving when it hurts. On this day, which is a wonderful celebration of our accomplishments, we should be sure to express our gratitude to those who have given of themselves on our behalf. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family, whose examples of loving sacrifice challenge me to give freely and faithfully, and to thank you, my professors and colleagues, whose gifts of time and effort have expanded my horizons and taught me much about myself and my world. I wish you all the greatest success, for yourselves and for those whose lives you will touch.

Thank you.