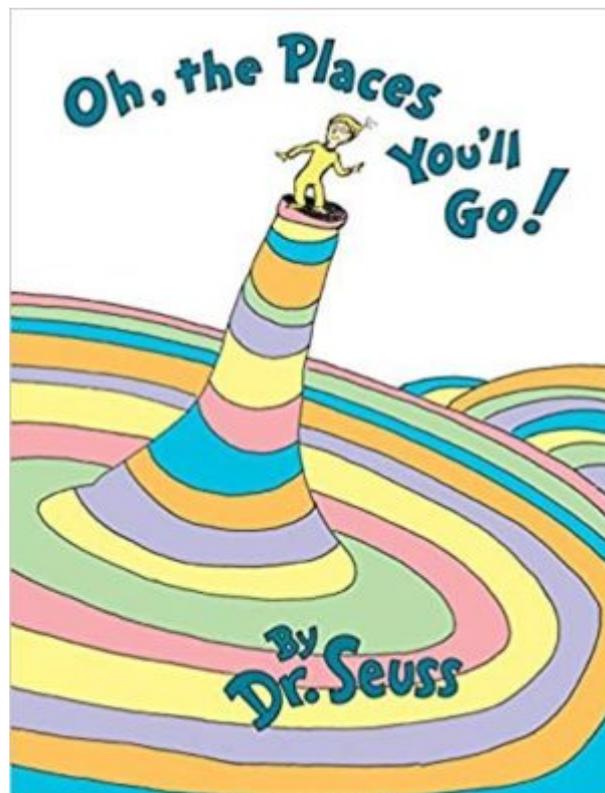


Oh, The Places You'll Go: Four Leadership Lessons from Commencement Season

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The content of commencement speeches often amounts to little more than the title line from the Dr. Seuss book “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!” Granted, the commencement speech is a tough assignment. How does one adequately convey pearls of wisdom to a mostly uninterested audience?

After all, most college graduates are ready to move on from intellectual pursuits, family members are anxious to see their graduates walk across the stage, and faculty have heard too many speeches urging students to “follow their passion.”

Nevertheless, commencement speeches sometimes convey significant life lessons. This year was no exception. Many speeches focused on leadership—defining what it is, leading well, leading with others, and leading much-needed change.

Leadership is doing good: Robert F. Smith delivered one of the most significant examples of leadership via his commencement speech. The billionaire philanthropist and founder and CEO of the private equity firm Vista Equity Partners spoke at the small, all-male, historically black Morehouse College in Atlanta. Urging others to show their gratitude and follow his example for generations to come, Smith announced his family would eliminate the student debt of the class of 2019. He used this act of leadership to encourage future acts of leadership: “We are enough to ensure we have all of the opportunities of the American dream. And we will show it to each other through our actions and through our words and through our deeds.”

Leading well means leading people (not machines): Actress Glenn Close conveyed a powerful message to the 2019 College of William and Mary graduates: *Look at and speak more with actual people and spend less time with machines and screens.* Her story of personal awareness and discovery through face-to-face communication raises important questions about the changing nature of human interactions in a digital world. Only recently have we begun to appreciate the significance of this abrupt change.

It takes more than one to lead: Like Close, Pierce Brosnan stressed leadership as a social phenomenon in his commencement address at Dickinson College. In what may seem a surprising turn for the actor known for his role as James Bond, he told graduates that leaders cannot accomplish much on their own: “Our world doesn’t need a lone hero, out to solve things solo.” Instead, Brosnan encouraged graduates to lead within groups and work together across differences.

Finally, **leaders don’t have time to waste:** A sense of urgency undergirded the leadership theme of Apple CEO Tim Cook’s remarks at Tulane University. Acknowledging that 2019 graduates will face many challenges, he encouraged them to tackle the tough ones. Cook urged them not to waste time “on problems that have been solved,” but rather to seek out new

and complex problems where they can make the biggest impact.

In short, this year's commencement addresses were less about the joy that comes with going to Dr. Seuss's new places and more about how to take the lead in meeting the challenges 2019 graduates have inherited.



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