

Congratulatory Address: The 44th Soka University /The 32nd Soka Women's College Commencement Ceremony

“Discovering One's Unique Potential”

Jim Garrison

President Yoshihisa Baba, trustees, members of the faculty, graduates, families, and honored guests. It is a great privilege to share this glorious day with all of you. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Congratulations graduates, you will remember this day for the rest of your life. Celebrate your achievement with family and friends.

As you celebrate, please recognize that today's graduation proves that the official motto of this University, “Discover your Potential” was truly meaningful to you. Recall now the sacrifices you have made. Recall too the moments of inspiration, your love for challenge, the obstacles you have overcome, and the support of family and friends. In every victory large or small you not only discovered your potential, you took steps toward actualizing it.

I ask today's graduates to join me in reflecting further upon the idea of discovering your unique potential. Let us explore the idea by turning to the writings of Walt Whitman whose statue you passed by on your way into the auditorium today.

In my dialogue with Dr. Larry Hickman and Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, it was president Ikeda that initiated the discussion of Walt Whitman (*Living as Learning*). He remarked that Whitman is among his favorite poets. Perhaps Whitman is one of your favorite poets also. He is one of mine.

Near the end of our discussion of Whitman, I mention how important it is that each of us strives to recognize and actualize our unique potential. I commented on how actualizing our unique potential resembles the notion that “each of us has the Buddha nature whose beauty and wonder we express in our unique way” (OTT 200). My remarks today are an extension of the amazing conversation I had with Drs. Hickman and Ikeda about Whitman and unique potential.

Whitman thought everyone a unique irreplaceable individual. Paradoxically, Whitman believed that what everyone has in common is that everyone has an absolutely unique

Jim Garrison (Professor of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University)

potential. In the Orally Transmitted Teachings, Nichiren Daishonin states that “each thing — the cherry, the plum, the peach, the damson” blossoms in its own unique way (OTT 200). Likewise, graduates, each and every one of you must bloom in your own unique way.

Whitman rejects all fixed hierarchies in favor of what he calls “leveling.”

Everyone is morally equal, on the same level, in that they deserve to have their unique potential actualized that they may make their unique contribution to the community.

The universe is attempting to create something new and different in every one of us.

Individuals having actualized their unique potential can create profoundly exceptional social values.

To reconcile the paradox that the only way to achieve unique individuality is through the leveling of moral equality, Whitman turned to what he called “adhesiveness” by which he meant sympathy, kindness, and compassion. Adhesiveness binds together the community of unique individuals. Appreciating beauty while benefiting the unique individual self by sympathetically creating value for one's community expresses Bodhisattva compassion.

Today, Whitman is a globally appreciated poet and we all live in a global community. Soka University is among 37 universities in Japan to participate in the Top Global University Project; hence, the university and its representatives such as today's graduates must prepare themselves to lead the internationalization of Japanese society and the Global community in the twenty-first century.

In his 1996 Teachers College lecture, Dr. Ikeda states three aspects comprising his vision of global citizenship. I believe that all three point to obstacles everyone must overcome if they are to actualize their unique potential in the global community. The first aspect is, “The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living” (*A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda*, p. 55).

To achieve such Dharma wisdom one must overcome a false individualism that isolates us from each other. Only values created according to the law bring genuine benefit and good.

Second, one must have, “The courage not to fear or deny difference; but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them” (id., p. 55). Those having beliefs, attitudes, and values different from ourselves often provide what we need to create new and unexpected value in an impermanent ever-changing world. Paradoxically, we need others different from ourselves if we are to become our unique selves. Xenophobic fear of otherness and difference is an obstacle that everyone must overcome if they are to perceive the truths others have to offer and to actualize our unique potential in the global community.

Third, one must have, “The compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places” (id., p. 55). We must overcome tendencies toward malice and indifference to suffering.

Only values created through compassion are truly valuable.

These three qualities of a global citizen correspond nicely to Whitman’s ideas about leveling, unique individuality, and adhesion. Recognizing interconnectedness allows us to stop thinking in terms of fixed hierarchies, not fearing difference allows us to recognize and appreciate the unique individuality of others while imaginative empathy contributes needed adhesion or sense of community.

There are of course, other obstacles to individual intellectual, social, and emotional development unique to one’s life circumstances. Instead of talking about how to overcome any and every obstacle we encounter, I would like to speak to you about the inevitability of failure and what failure contributes to actualizing your unique potential.

After all, if everyone could overcome every obstacle, no one would have unique potential. However, in life, there are some obstacles we simply cannot overcome.

Although I studied very hard, I still received a grade of “C” in my freshman English course. English grammar and spelling have been a struggle for me my whole life. I lack the potential to become a professor of English, although I am married to one.

I might add that I have played basketball my whole life, but have never dunked a basketball. One may love a challenge yet fail to overcome it simply because one lacks the potential, although one never knows until they try their very best.

I will leave you with two thoughts. First, if there is anyone in this room that both received an “A” in English and can dunk a basketball, I envy you.

Second, consider the complete sentence from the Orally Transmitted Teachings referred to earlier, “When one comes to realize and see that each thing—the cherry, the plum, the peach, the damson—in its own entity, without undergoing any change, possesses the eternally endowed three bodies, then this is what is meant by the word *ryō*, “to include” or all-inclusive.”

The closer you come to actualizing your unique potential, to blossoming in your own special way, the closer you will come to the greater self of Dharma wisdom, the capacity to perceive the truth of the law in concrete practice, and to perform compassionate actions that bring the greatest benefit to yourself and the greatest good to the global community.

Again, congratulations graduates, you will remember this day for the rest of your life. Celebrate your achievement with family and friends, and should you pass Walt Whitman as you depart, please say hello.