

Commencement Speech 2024

Oberlin College, Oberlin OH

May 25, 2024

Dear President Ambar, Oberlin faculty, staff, alumni, board of trustees, parents, and most importantly, you, the graduating class of 2024, thank you so much for having me be a part of this day of recognition and I am humbled to share the podium with Dr Anastos, Ms Cooper, and Mr and Ms Gates. I am especially grateful for being allowed out of the kitchen to be here today; it took me a while to figure out how to untie my apron, but thankfully I managed. In the 24 years since I have stood where you are right now, in my gown and cap - a cap, by the way, that I for some reason bought with Mickey Mouse ears, wanting to be cute and different (I unfortunately only managed one of those adjectives). Since that moment, I have not once thought of my commencement speaker or the speech they gave, and that's absolutely not their fault nor mine, but is just the way life goes sometimes. However in vain the desire for it to go differently this time might be, I do sincerely hope in the precious few minutes to follow that I say something that sticks with you; something that makes you think, something that makes you grateful that we share this great alma mater. I warn you now, if that happens, it will *not* be because I am funny - I have accepted the fact that I am the professional party pooper, the card-carrying Debbie Downer, and am always the one that can single-handedly release the joy from a party like the air from a popped balloon by interjecting facts about slavery, or banjos, or, god forbid, BOTH AT THE SAME TIME. I will endeavour not to do that here, but the best I can offer is an honest earnestness that is mildly humorous, at best, as I focus on a few things I learned here at Oberlin that have helped me guide my ship of life until I am standing here before you, that unlikeliest of things, an opera singer turned banjo player, on this day of your celebration. <2 min>

Before I do, however, I need to situate us in this day on our planet, in our reality, and in our global context, and to state that it is a privilege to be here in communion with you all, with no worries in this particular moment in time other than how long this speech may be, with no bombs whizzing overhead, and plenty of food to eat and good weather surrounding us. Given all that we have to celebrate and be grateful for today, it seems only appropriate that we acknowledge those who are not so fortunate in this moment. I would like us to hold a moment of silence together; for the victims in Israel of Oct 7; for the victims in Palestine in all the days following; for the victims in Sudan; for the victims in Congo; for the victims in Ukraine, in Myanmar, in Ethiopia, in Haiti. For all the people displaced and killed by armed conflict around the world, let us hold silence and grieve together.

<silence>

I stand here before you, 24 years after I graduated, marvelling at my good fortune. And if there's one thing I want you to take away with you and remember 24 years later on it's this: you- me - all of us here right now - have privileges that have allowed us to be in this space, in this time. In general - privilege is nothing to be ashamed of- but neither is it something to be proud of. It just IS. The curious and particular confluence of events that have led us to be sitting in that chair, right now, at this moment, is a consequence of circumstances beyond our control that in large part shape why and who we are. And this absolutely doesn't take away from the hard work you have done, the obstacles you have overcome, or the battles you have won. I worked the entire time I was here, because we didn't have a lot of money, and I paid off my loans for years - but I had parents who believed in me, and who expected great things of me, and I ended up with a great education. We all have varying degrees of privilege, some of us more than others, some of us different kinds. The way society might look and react to you because of the colour of your skin. The money you

may have unthinking access to. The philosophical tenets you were exposed to that might help you think more critically. Privilege is a series of advantages we are simply born with and acquire as we age- and one privilege often leads to another, like compound interest. Privileges don't always go hand in hand - you can be poor in money and rich in emotional support; deficient in societal advantage yet exposed to incredible intellectual stimulation; and we can certainly lose them, so it pays to always be aware of the world that you are in and how it benefits you. Privilege doesn't make us more worthy, or deserving. It simply makes us lucky. When you have financial privilege that broken down car is simply a nuisance; when you don't, it can completely wreck everything and change the trajectory of your life. It's absolutely not shameful to have privilege but it *is* shameful not to share it as much as you can, and to be aware that you don't just make good choices. You HAVE good choices. As you go out into the big world, and meet the people who will become the cast of your life - judge not. For you do not know the choices those people have been given.

The second idea I desperately hope you will remember 24 months after this speech is this: if you want to do something, dive in with no expectations. But find your lifeguards as soon as you can. Let passion rule your life - but be smart about it. When I was 18 years old, after four years of math, science, and technology schools, I decided I wanted to sing opera - despite having little to no knowledge of Western classical art music; despite not really being able to read sheet music at all; despite having only sung a handful of solos in my entire life. I came to this campus for the first time when the school year started, as we couldn't afford the grand tour of schools; bright eyed, bushy tailed and so incredibly excited. No more chemistry! No more equations! All I had to do was learn about music?? I felt incredibly blessed, and incredibly focused. Front row in Suskin's music history class, stars in my eyes. It didn't take long though for it all to come crashing down on me in the weeks to follow- there was SO much to learn, all at once - and the sheer mountain of what I did not know threatened my mental health. I ended up crying in my voice teacher's studio, completely overwhelmed, holding the stack of music she had given me to learn but not having the skills to learn it. Marlene Rosen had a choice in that moment - tell me to buck up, get back out there, and figure it out! Or, and I'll be forever grateful to her for this, she looked at how hard I was trying, and met me where I was. She recorded the melodies of those first art songs on a cassette for me to learn by ear, and that single act of generosity by Ms Rosen (yes I still call her Ms Rosen 24 years later - Southern habits die extremely hard) — gave me the confidence I needed to get my feet under me, and soon afterwards I learned how to use the library and after that, I was off to the races. I have been known to throw myself, shrieking, into the deep end (metaphorically speaking), but I always look for those folks who throw a life raft when I need it, not the ones yelling at me to 'just swim better!'.

There have been faculty and staff here at Oberlin who have, when they saw you in moments of great difficulty, threw you that life raft. Parents and siblings who were there with a kind and loving hug, a supportive care package, a word of advice when they saw things were tough. It is important to recognize that this is not a helicopter whizzing overhead, making slightly hard things easy because we all know *that* is the very opposite of support. But here's the deal - when you are in rough and choppy waters, and someone throws you a raft, you are still alone with that raft and the waves. You may still go under. You will still struggle - but you struggle knowing you have a chance. And that makes all the difference. Find your life guards who care enough to throw you a line when you need one. And you will know when to throw one to someone else. <2:44>

The third thing I really, really hope you remember 24 days down the line is that you should continuously learn something new, and that you cannot be afraid to suck at it. I was a pretty good singer while at Oberlin; and I loved singing opera so much, but ultimately, upon graduation, I wasn't sure the opera world was where I was meant to be. I did all the things while I was here - had the leads in operas, sang on recitals, got an A grade point average - by all measure, a capital S Success, destined to have as good a chance as anyone in the classical world. But what, I asked myself, could I do as an opera singer that approximately 34.5 million sopranos didn't already do as well as I did, or much much better? This nagging feeling made me go home to North Carolina and regroup. I fell in love with contra dancing, an American folk dance that prizes sobriety, inter-generational community, and is always done to live music. (And by the way I discovered it here, at Oberlin!) It is where I fell in love with old-time banjo and subsequently found my life's work.

But as a twenty-something opera singer, just picking up an instrument wasn't the easiest thing in the world. Luckily I didn't think much about whether I would ever be good- I just wanted to *play*. And in the beginning, hoo boy was I terrible! I'd get tired of sounding bad at the banjo and put it down and pick up the fiddle til I got tired of sounding bad at that and then I'd trudge, wearily, back to the banjo, a tear in my eye and cotton in my ears to block out the noise. All of this while I was earning a living working 40 hours a week doing corporate administration. But ultimately, I didn't care how bad I sounded so long as I was making progress; I was so obsessed with learning how to play this tradition that had quickly come to mean so much to me that every failure to make a good sound was an impetus to try harder. And that is the secret!

One of the reasons children learn so quickly is because they haven't learned to be afraid of failure yet; since they have to learn literally... *everything*, they just jump fearlessly into it and aren't ashamed of making mistakes - and they learn from them. Unless it has to do with vegetables, and then, I can assure you as a mother of two children, all bets are off. As we grow we learn to prize the praise we get for doing things well, and we slowly absorb that failure is undesirable. But when you become afraid of failure, you stop trying new things, and there is so much to learn from learning something new! Being comfortable with sucking at something new as an adult led me to a whole new mission in life, and the career that has led me here. But just be grateful you weren't there in my apartment, those first awful days of the banjo. Nobody said failure is fun.

Another thing I hope you remember 24 hours after this speech is this: be open to not knowing how things will look in your life. It's great to have a goal - but be aware that you may not know what the path to that goal will look like, nor what final shape that goal will be. We are not great enough, nor big enough, nor smart enough- to know what the world may have in store for us. We are too small. How many times have we ignored the off ramp that would have led us to an unexpectedly amazing local restaurant just to keep trudging down the highway, aiming for that Red Lobster because that was the original plan? And then of course when we get there all the shrimp is already gone. Our task in life is to find our purpose - to find the heart of why we take up space on this planet - to find the thing that we do better than anyone else - and let the world (or God, or the ancestors, or whatever you believe is greater than we are) shape it for the greater good. When I was here at Oberlin, my only dream was to grace the stage of the Metropolitan Opera house in New York as a world famous soprano, and be written up in the magazine Opera News - (this was back when magazines were something you could hold in your hand, and check out from the library - it was a weird time). I let go of those dreams when I left the world of

classical music and focused on the mission of telling the African American story of the banjo.

But as the years passed, I would keep my toe in with the occasional symphony gig, or my first string quartet composition, or the sporadic aria thrown into a concert. Eventually I ended up hosting a podcast about opera, *Aria Code*, for WYNC in partnership with the MET, that became pretty popular. One day I was in New York and the MET asked me to come in to read some promo - and before I did, they took me on a tour of the theatre. And didn't I end up on that storied stage, looking out at the rows of empty chairs - and I thought, well look at that - I made it. Just not in the way I thought I would! And I was eventually written up in *Opera News*- but because of an opera I had written, not one I had sung in. And all of it precisely because of the work I had done since I had left opera singing. Aim for the essence of something important, and let the look of it happen as it may.

And finally, even if you forget everything else I have said here today, and you probably will, (and I will hold no grudge against you, just as I hope my long ago commencement speaker holds no grudge against me) - but this is what I hope stays in your mind 24 minutes after this event is over - my heart is with you. I will not lie to you; you already know the challenges your generation faces, the challenges we face as a nation, the challenges we face as a species on this poor, precious, mishandled planet of ours. And yet ... you still gotta find a job, right?

This is the massive quotidian contradiction of modern life - the knowledge of a lot combined with the power of a little. The Amazon is on fire and I must wash the dishes; disease is ravaging the globe while I have homework to do; people are being murdered and I have to figure out what to wear today. I guess I'll donate to this charity? Try to remember to bring my coffee mug to my local cafe? Remember to vote even though it feels like nobody on the ballot is thinking of me at all? It is so hard to care and to feel powerless but I have been so impressed with the students I have met with from this graduating class and their capacity to care - which I know all of you share. I was walking campus early in the morning yesterday, thinking about your beautiful faces, and crying; knowing that whatever I said in this speech would never be enough. But then I had to remember: Every time I sing the word 'schwartzes' in Ethel Water's version of *Underneath the Harlem Moon* and use it as an excuse to talk about the Black / Jewish cultural exchange that is so vital to the history of American music, and that is based upon the kinship of centuries of oppression...every time my opera *Omar*, about the enslaved Senegalese scholar and his life in North Carolina, begins with the lead tenor intoning the opening surah of the Qur'an in Arabic...every time I sing *At the Purchaser's Option* to tell the story of trafficked women from centuries ago to this very day...or sing a Palestinian lullaby with musicians from the Silkroad Ensemble - all of these are protests. It is our life's work to protest - to push back - to uphold the morals of life and liberty, to celebrate the humanity in us all while holding it accountable and to be aware that each and every one of us can be harmed, and can also do the harming. To know that until all of us are free, none of us are free. The most important thing we can do in our quest to re-center humanity in our culture is to work together, in transparency, in collaboration, in community and in good faith. There are many ways to make change and it will take every. single. one. Whether a march, encampment, teach-in or sit-in, or the mind-numbingly slow yet hopefully inexorable systemic change that can permeate an institution for decades; a Pulitzer Prize-winning rap album from Kendrick Lamar, or Katie Porter with her white board and her numbers, there are many ways to show up, and we need them all. Your task is to figure out which one fits YOU.

As Bayard Rustin, one of the chief architects of the original March on Washington during the Civil Rights era said, "So while there can be no argument that progress depends both on the revision of private attitudes and a change in institutions, the onus must be placed on institutional change." But the only time institutional change happens is when, as he put it, 'angelic troublemakers' get to work - the front lines and the strategy room are intimately connected, and we forget that to our peril.

We all live in a dangerous age of misinformation, an unreliable and imbalanced media landscape, the proliferation of AI and an overreliance on technology. So it is important to emphasize that our salvation lies in each other - in our hearts, minds, souls - in the people standing next to us and living next door - the realness of what we can see, hear and feel. And also, in peace.

I am, first and foremost, a singer, and I would like to close my speech with a song, reminded to me by Crys Matthews and written by my friend, and OG song writer activist, Peggy Seeger. It says it all.

Will you sing this line with me? 'Oh how I long for peace.'

HOW I LONG FOR PEACE
Words and music, Peggy Seeger

O how I long for peace
Among the peoples and the nation
How I long to halt the plunder
Of the wonders of creation
O how I long for peace

I cannot understand
How the sisters, wives and mothers
Cannot stop the slaughter
Of the husbands, sons and brothers

O how I long for peace
Among the peoples and the nation
How I long to halt the plunder
Of the wonders of creation
O how I long for peace

There never will be peace
Till men abandon fighting
As the way to deal with problems
That prevent us from uniting

O how I long for peace
Among the peoples and the nation
How I long to halt the plunder
Of the wonders of creation
O how I long for peace

The profits made from war

There's few that can resist them
Hypocrisy and greed control
The lifeblood of the system

O how I long for peace
Among the peoples and the nation
How I long to halt the plunder
Of the wonders of creation
O how I long for peace

The world can wait no longer
For political permission
Sit down, disrupt, do anything
To make the whole world listen

O how I long for peace
Among the peoples and the nation
How I long to halt the plunder
Of the wonders of creation
O how I long for peace