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Remarks for the University of Kansas 2015 Commencement

Chancellor Gray-Little, Distinguished Guests and Faculty. Above all, members of the Class of 2015 and your happy families: welcome, and thank you, for the honor of this degree and the privilege of speaking here today.

Congratulations to all our graduates. You completed a rigorous course of study, despite times of despair or frustration or confusion. Whatever the next stage on your journey, when you are discouraged and feel like quitting, remind yourself that you stuck with *this* job, this important job of education, even when the going was rough.

Let's have a round of applause for our courageous class of 2015.

While we're in the clapping mood, let's also thank the families and friends who made sacrifices so that these graduates could stay the course.

I have been a Jayhawk since I was five years old, when I attended my first KU commencement. My dad had just joined the Kansas faculty and he took part in the procession through the Campanile and down the hill. My mother and brothers and I stood in the stands and cheered when we saw him.

After the procession, he went on to the endzone for the speeches and awarding of degrees. My mother took us kids back up to the

Campanile where we drank hot chocolate until the speeches were over. Over the years, I watched my father and the new graduates many times. I couldn't wait for my own turn to march down the hill.

Unfortunately, when I got my degree, I couldn't attend commencement. The university mailed my diploma to my parents, who lost it. Finally, almost fifty years later, I got to take part in the procession, and, thanks to Chancellor Gray-Little and the Regents, I also finally have my KU diploma. I can now prove to the world that I really am a Jayhawk—not that there's ever been any doubt by the people around me. I grew up singing, "Talk about the Sooners." I drive my family nuts—and scare the dog—when the Hawks are on national TV and I start yelling "Rock, Chalk!" in the living room.

Of course, university education, your education, your life, are about more than cheering for sports teams. As a fan you are on the sidelines, but *you* are the key players in your own lives. You will spend those lives in your own fields of endeavor—almost always without a cheering section. You will be tested time and again, and you will find yourselves needing to draw on the lessons you learned here.

Although commencement literally means to begin, it is also a time of endings. All endings are hard—they are the hardest part of a novel to write well—so it shouldn't startle you if you find the end to your KU life difficult. Moving on to the next stage of your journey means taking a leap from the high dive without knowing what kind of water lies below you.

For those of you who do know what you are doing next, whether at work or school, or as a volunteer, my heartiest congratulations. For those who are facing the future with less certainty, you are not alone. If it's any comfort, after my own graduation I floundered in clerical jobs, sold computers to insurance agents, wrote speeches for corporate executives, and did many other odd jobs for a good number of years before finding my way to my public writing voice.

It is not always given to us to find our passion or our path easily. I can't promise that your own road will be easy, but I can promise this: if you give up, you will never find the road at all.

You are graduating into a world that will challenge you in many ways. You face financial and job uncertainties tougher than my generation knew. You also face opportunities we didn't have—those of you born with earbuds implanted in you roam the fast-changing technology landscape more easily than my generation does.

At the same time, you came of age in a world dominated by war, by terrorism and by economic instability. The first years of the 21st century could be called the Age of Fear, starting with fear of terrorism, and moving from there to fears closer to home.

Hand-in-hand with fear goes the extraordinary rage with which people around the globe confront each other. Here at home, we hurl abuse at each other from opposite sides of a deep political divide. We then retreat to the safety of our favorite Internet sites, where we stoke our rage by writing ever more monstrous accounts of what those other folks, those barely human beings, are doing.

Not since the Civil War has our country been such a house divided. Yet it was in the midst of the Civil War, that bloody conflagration, that the University of Kansas was founded. In 1863, two weeks before Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg, while war was still raging, the Kansas legislature voted to establish a university in Lawrence, provided the town could supply land and money.

Charles Robinson and his wife Sara, prominent abolitionists who helped found this state, deeded the necessary land. Amos A. Lawrence, a town founder, donated most of the money. In 1866, the first classes met, an equal mix of young men and women—virtually unheard of in that era.

The university's founders had a bedrock belief, bred in their very bones, that education was essential for good government and good citizenship. The first thing the Puritans did when they reached Massachusetts was to set up public schools, because they knew that their future depended on an educated citizenry.

The men and women who came from New England to settle Kansas two centuries later didn't know how or when the Civil War would end, but they, too, knew they needed to educate the next generation of citizens if the Republic had any hope of surviving. Charles and Sara Robinson took a great leap from that high board when they gave the university the land we stand on today, even though only a few months earlier, terrorists from Missouri had massacred most of the men in Lawrence.

Our founders chose as the motto for our school the verse from *Exodus*, when Moses says: *I must turn aside to see that great sight, why the bush burns but is not consumed.*

The ability to look at the unknown, the startling, the terrifying, and to ask fundamental questions about it, lies at the heart of our Kansas education.

If you take nothing else away with you, take this: an abiding spirit of inquiry.

Questioning, listening, learning are the true antidotes for fear. FDR said we have nothing to fear but fear itself, but I believe the biggest thing we have to fear is willful ignorance. Willful ignorance, and a desire to give way to unthinking rage lie behind today's terrorists in Africa and the Middle East, who bomb schools and whose name translates as "Down with western education."

Willful ignorance also catches up with us here at home. Every time a state government slashes education budgets—and states all across the Union are making deep cuts to education--I weep: governments are sacrificing the long term health of the Republic for very minor fiscal savings.

The spirit of open-minded inquiry is how change happens for good, in our individual lives and in the larger world. The book of *Exodus* would tell a different story if Moses had seen the bush and said, "oops, scary fire, think I'll take my sheep a different way," or even worse, if he'd been texting and hadn't seen the bush at all.

The inquiring mind, the open mind, lies behind every discovery that changed lives for the better, from Arthur Fleming noticing the mold in his petri dish and turning it into penicillin, to Rosalind Franklin noticing the double helix in X-rays of DNA, which opened the field of modern genetics.

Learning to question, rather than to fear, isn't something you get from Google. You definitely don't get it by building walls of pre-judgment and anger around you. You learn by digging deep—by understanding the minds of the people you work with, understanding the deeper issues underneath the surface tweet.

We humans all live both alone, and in community. If this age could be called the Age of Fear, it could equally be called the Age of the Selfie. But it is only when we unplug ourselves from our devices and respond to community that we thrive most successfully.

We wouldn't have this university if not for the spirit of community that inspired the Robinsons and Amos A Lawrence to share their wealth. Like many of you here, I owe my own education to Elizabeth M Watkins generosity. I feel an obligation to my writing gift to let my spirit soar, and I feel an equal obligation to the community that educated me to make that education possible for others.

A questing spirit, and a generous heart offer a cure for the narcissistic rage that threatens to consume our nation today. When you are seeking, and when you are sharing, you overcome the rage that blinds all of us at times. That spirit, that heart also free you to take risks, to jump off that high dive.

May all of you dare mighty things in the years to come. May you find strength for the next step on your journey. May you find joy along the path. Take chances. Don't settle for the easy thing, insist on the good thing. Take nothing for granted. Above all, stop to ask the hard question: why does the bush burn, and yet is not consumed.