

2016

Commencement

Address

UNIVERSITY  
OF  
CALIFORNIA,  
BERKELEY

May

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2016

Sheryl

Sandberg

Thank you, Marie. And thank you esteemed members of the faculty, proud parents, devoted friends, squirming siblings.

Congratulations to all of you...and especially to the magnificent Berkeley graduating class of 2016!

It is a privilege to be here at Berkeley, which has produced so many Nobel Prize winners, Turing Award winners, astronauts, members of Congress, Olympic gold medalists.... and that's just the women!

Berkeley has always been ahead of the times. In the 1960s, you led the Free Speech Movement. Back in those days, people used to say that with all the long hair, how do we even tell the boys from the girls? We now know the answer: manbuns.

Early on, Berkeley opened its doors to the entire population. When this campus opened in 1873, the class included 167 men and 222 women. It took my alma mater another ninety years to award a single degree to a single woman.

One of the women who came here in search of opportunity was Rosalind Nuss. Roz grew up scrubbing floors in the Brooklyn boardinghouse where she lived. She was pulled out of high school by her parents to help support their family. One of her teachers insisted that her parents put her back into school—and in 1937, she sat where you are sitting today and received a

Berkeley degree. Roz was my grandmother. She was a huge inspiration to me and I'm so grateful that Berkeley recognized her potential. I want to take a moment to offer a special congratulations to the many here today who are the first generation in their families to graduate from college. What a remarkable achievement.

Today is a day of celebration. A day to celebrate all the hard work that got you to this moment.

Today is a day of thanks. A day to thank those who helped you get here—nurtured you, taught you, cheered you on, and dried your tears. Or at least the ones who didn't draw on you with a Sharpie when you fell asleep at a party.

Today is a day of reflection. Because today marks the end of one era of your life and the beginning of something new.

A commencement address is meant to be a dance between youth and wisdom. You have the youth. Someone comes in to be the voice of wisdom—that's supposed to be me. I stand up here and tell you all the things I have learned in life, you throw your cap in the air, you let your 2 family take a million photos –don't forget to post them on Instagram —and everyone goes home happy.

Today will be a bit different.

We will still do the caps and you still have to do the photos. But I am not here to tell you all the things I've learned in life. Today I will try to tell you what I learned in death.

I have never spoken publicly about this before. It's hard. But I will do my very best not to blow my nose on this beautiful Berkeley robe.

One year and thirteen days ago, I lost my husband, Dave. His death was sudden and unexpected. We were at a friend's fiftieth birthday party in Mexico. I took a nap. Dave went to work out. What followed was the unthinkable—walking into a gym to find him lying on the floor. Flying home to tell my children that their father was gone. Watching his casket being lowered into the ground.

For many months afterward, and at many times since, I was swallowed up in the deep fog of grief—what I think of as the void—an emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even to breathe.

Dave's death changed me in very profound ways. I learned about the depths of sadness and the brutality of loss. But I also learned that when life sucks you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again. I learned that in the face of the void—or in the face of any challenge—you can choose joy and meaning.

I'm sharing this with you in the hopes that today, as you take the next step in your life, you can learn the lessons that I only learned in death. Lessons about hope, strength, and the light within us that will not be extinguished.

Everyone who has made it through Cal has already experienced some disappointment. You wanted an A but you got a B. OK, let's be honest—you got an A- but you're still mad. You applied for an internship at Facebook, but you only got one from Google. She was the love of your life... but then she swiped left. *Game of Thrones* the show has diverged way too much from the books—and you bothered to read all *four thousand three hundred and fifty-two pages*.

You will almost certainly face more and deeper adversity. There's loss of opportunity: the job that doesn't work out, the illness or accident that changes everything in an instant. There's loss of dignity: the sharp sting of prejudice when it happens. There's loss of love: the broken relationships that can't be fixed. And sometimes there's loss of life itself.

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Some of you have already experienced the kind of tragedy and hardship that leave an indelible mark. Last year, Radhika, the winner of the University Medal, spoke so beautifully about the sudden loss of her mother.

The question is not if some of these things will happen to you. They will. Today I want to talk about what happens next. About the things you can do to overcome adversity, no matter what form it takes or when it hits you. The easy days ahead of you will be easy. It is the hard days—the times that challenge you to your very core—that will determine who you are. You will be defined not just by what you achieve, but by how you survive.

A few weeks after Dave died, I was talking to my friend Phil about a father-son activity that Dave was not here to do. We came up with a plan to fill in for Dave. I cried to him, “But I want Dave.” Phil put his arm around me and said, “Option A is not available. So let’s just kick the shit out of option B.”

We all at some point live some form of option B.  
The question is:

What do we do then?

As a representative of Silicon Valley, I’m pleased to tell you there is data to learn from. After spending decades studying how people deal with setbacks, psychologist Martin Seligman

found that there are three P's—personalization, pervasiveness, and permanence—that are critical to how we bounce back from hardship. The seeds of resilience are planted in the way we process the negative events in our lives.

The first P is personalization—the belief that we are at fault. This is different from taking responsibility, which you should always do. This is the lesson that not everything that happens to us happens *because* of us.

When Dave died, I had a very common reaction, which was to blame myself. He died in seconds from a cardiac arrhythmia. I poured over his medical records asking what I could have—or should have—done.

It wasn't until I learned about the three P's that I accepted that I could not have prevented his death. His doctors had not identified his coronary artery disease. I was an economics major; how could I have?

Studies show that getting past personalization can actually make you stronger. Teachers who knew they could do better after students failed adjusted their methods and saw future classes go on to excel. College swimmers who underperformed but believed they were capable of swimming faster did. Not taking failures personally allows us to recover—and even to thrive.

The second P is pervasiveness—the belief that an event will affect all areas of your life.

You know that song “Everything is awesome?” This is the flip: “Everything is awful.” There’s no place to run or hide from the all-consuming sadness.

The child psychologists I spoke to encouraged me to get my kids back to their routine as soon as possible. So ten days after Dave died, they went back to school and I went back to work. I remember sitting in my first Facebook meeting in a deep, deep haze. All I could think was, “What is everyone talking about and how could this possibly matter?” But then I got drawn into the discussion and for a second—a brief split second—I forgot about death.

That brief second helped me see that there were other things in my life that were not awful. My children and I were healthy. My friends and family were so loving and they carried us— quite literally at times.

The loss of a partner often has severe negative financial consequences, especially for women. So many single mothers—and fathers—struggle to make ends meet or have jobs that don’t allow them the time they need to care for their children. I had financial security, the ability to take the time off I needed, and a job that I did not just believe



in, but where it's actually OK to spend all day on Facebook. Gradually, my children started sleeping through the night, crying less, playing more.

The third P is permanence—the belief that the sorrow will last forever. For months, no matter what I did, it felt like the crushing grief would always be there.

We often project our current feelings out indefinitely—and experience what I think of as the second derivative of those feelings. We feel anxious—and then we feel anxious that we're anxious. We feel sad—and then we feel sad that we're sad. Instead, we should accept our feelings—but recognize that they will not last forever. My rabbi told me that time would heal but for now I should “lean in to the suck.” It was good advice, but not really what I meant by “lean in.”

None of you need me to explain the fourth P...which is, of course, pizza from Cheese Board.

But I wish I had known about the three P's when I was your age. There were so many times these lessons would have helped.

Day one of my first job out of college, my boss found out that I didn't know how to enter data into Lotus 1-2-3. That's a spreadsheet—ask your parents. His mouth dropped open and he said, “I can't believe you got this job without knowing that”—and

then walked out of the room. I went home convinced that I was going to be fired. I thought I was terrible at everything... but it turns out I was only terrible at spreadsheets. Understanding pervasiveness would have saved me a lot of anxiety that week.

I wish I had known about permanence when I broke up with boyfriends. It would've been a comfort to know that feeling was not going to last forever, and if I was being honest with myself... neither were any of those relationships.

And I wish I had understood personalization when boyfriends broke up with me. Sometimes it's not you—it really is them. I mean, that dude never showered.

And all three P's ganged up on me in my twenties after my first marriage ended in divorce. I thought at the time that no matter what I accomplished, I was a massive failure.

The three P's are common emotional reactions to so many things that happen to us—in our careers, our personal lives, and our relationships. You're probably feeling one of them right now about something in your life. But if you can recognize you are falling into these traps, you can catch yourself. Just as our bodies have a physiological immune system, our brains have a psychological immune system—and there are steps you can take to help kick it into gear.

One day my friend Adam Grant, a psychologist, suggested that I think about how much worse things could be. This was completely counterintuitive; it seemed like the way to recover was to try to find positive thoughts. “Worse?” I said. “Are you kidding me? How could things be worse?” His answer cut straight through me:

“Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia while he was driving your children.”

Wow. The moment he said it, I was overwhelmingly grateful that the rest of my family was alive and healthy. That gratitude overtook some of the grief.

Finding gratitude and appreciation is key to resilience. People who take the time to list things they are grateful for are happier and healthier. It turns out that counting your blessings can actually increase your blessings. My New Year’s resolution this year is to write down three moments of joy before I go to bed each night. This simple practice has changed my life. Because no matter what happens each day, I go to sleep thinking of something cheerful. Try it. Start tonight when you have so many fun moments to list— although maybe do it before you hit Kip’s and can still remember what they are.

Last month, eleven days before the anniversary of Dave’s death, I broke down crying to a friend of mine. We were sitting—of

all places—on a bathroom floor. I said: “Eleven days. One year ago, he had eleven days left. And we had no idea.” We looked at each other through tears, and asked how we would live if we knew we had eleven days left.

As you graduate, can you ask yourselves to live as if you had eleven days left? I don’t mean blow everything off and party all the time— although tonight is an exception. I mean live with the understanding of how precious every single day would be. How precious every day actually is.

A few years ago, my mom had to have her hip replaced. When she was younger, she always walked without pain. But as her hip disintegrated, each step became painful. Now, even years after her operation, she is grateful for every step she takes without pain—something that never would have occurred to her before.

As I stand here today, a year after the worst day of my life, two things are true. I have a huge reservoir of sadness that is with me always—right here where I can touch it. I never knew I could cry so often—or so much.

But I am also aware that I am walking without pain. For the first time, I am grateful for each breath in and out—grateful for the gift of life itself. I used to celebrate my birthday every five years and friends’ birthdays sometimes. Now I celebrate always. I

used to go to sleep worrying about all the things I messed up that day—and trust me that list was often quite long. Now I try really hard to focus on each day's moments of joy.

It is the greatest irony of my life that losing my husband helped me find deeper gratitude— gratitude for the kindness of my friends, the love of my family, the laughter of my children. My hope for you is that you can find that gratitude—not just on the good days, like today, but on the hard ones, when you will really need it.

There are so many moments of joy ahead of you. That trip you always wanted to take. A first kiss with someone you really like. The day you get a job doing something you truly believe in. Beating Stanford. (Go Bears!) All of these things will happen to you. Enjoy each and every one.

I hope that you live your life—each precious day of it—with joy and meaning. I hope that you walk without pain—and that you are grateful for each step.

And when the challenges come, I hope you remember that anchored deep within you is the ability to learn and grow. You are not born with a fixed amount of resilience. Like a muscle, you can build it up, draw on it when you need it. In that process you will figure out who you really are—and you just might become the very best version of yourself.

Class of 2016, as you leave Berkeley, build resilience.

Build resilience in yourselves.

When tragedy or disappointment strike, know that you have the ability to get through absolutely *anything*. I promise you do. As the saying goes, we are more vulnerable than we ever thought, but we are stronger than we ever imagined.

Build resilient organizations.

If anyone can do it, you can, because Berkeley is filled with people who want to make the world a better place. Never stop working to do so—whether it's a boardroom that is not representative or a campus that's not safe.

Speak up, especially at institutions like this one, which you hold so dear. My favorite poster at work reads, "Nothing at Facebook is someone else's problem." When you see something that's broken, go fix it.

Build resilient communities.

We find our humanity—our will to live and our ability to love—in our connections to one another. Be there for your family and friends. And I mean in person. Not just in a message with a heart emoji.

Lift each other up, help each other kick the shit out of option B—and celebrate each and every moment of joy. You have the whole world in front of you. I can't wait to see what you do with it.

*Congratulations, and Go Bears!*

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