

## Kwesi Jones - Commencement Speech

If this year has taught me anything it would be to never start talking before you check to see if you are on mute.

Greetings, everyone. Class of 2021, We've made it! We are here. Now to be quite honest, I am not really sure where “here” is. The “here” *should* be in a large auditorium full of the smiling faces of our classmates, family, friends, faculty and staff but we find ourselves distanced from each other, celebrating our big moment through the virtual walls of a computer or phone screen. I could have never guessed that in my senior year I would be taking my classes, having graduation and binge watching “WandaVision” all on the same device, but here we are.

Like many of us, I had grand visions of where I saw myself by senior year. I figured I would have grown from 5’6” to at least 6 feet, I would have a full beard, a six-figure job lined up for me right after graduation and would be best friends with Beyonce. I imagine we all had our dreams or ideas of what our senior year would be like, no matter how unrealistic, but I bet that none of them included a global pandemic, impending ecological collapse, constant social upheaval and our professors asking if they are sharing their screen every five seconds. And yet here we are.

This is our day of celebration and Class of 2021, if no one else deserves to celebrate, we certainly do. Not only have we survived through at least 15 major historical events since 2020 alone but we have also survived four long, grueling, exciting, tiring, inspiring, tear-jerking, humbling, rewarding years of our undergraduate experience. We have triumphed over barriers that we often thought we would never get past. Ones that we braved together or alone. But today I want you all to rejoice in the fact of your triumph over whatever, how big or how small, may have stood in your way. Even if it feels like we crawled instead of sprinted across the finish line, we’ve made it to the other side, and I am so proud of each and every one of you.

It is scary to stand on this precipice with one foot in the world we knew and one dangling off the edge of an uncertain future. I know that many of us yearn for the normalcy that we felt should have been granted to us in our final year. The normalcy of Spring Fest and the Stein and the Boston shuttle and big cultural events and Midnight Buffet and dorm parties and everything else that we thought we would have in our senior year.

I know many of us just want normal again.

But Class of 2021 I am here to tell you today that we can not return to normal, not just because we are graduating but because we must envision a new world better than the one we called normal. As Brandesians we are taught to seek the “truth, even unto its innermost parts” and if we have learned anything in our years at Brandeis it would be the sad truth that our “normal” world is in dire need of replacement.

Yes, we mourn the loss of the world that we knew but the world that we knew is also one in which hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives by a pandemic that should have been preventable.

That is not a world I wish to return to.

Our normal world is a world in which the lives of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and Elijah McClain and Ahmaud Arbery and Atatiana Jefferson and too many more are stolen by the vicious hand of state-sponsored anti-Black violence.

That is not a world I wish to return to.

Our normal world is a world in which 6 Asian women can be in their place of work when they are slaughtered by a terrorist whom police say was “Just having a bad day.”

That is not a world I wish to return to.

As Brandesians, we must leave the world better than we found it. And the world that we find ourselves in does not just need a makeover or renovation but a complete restructuring. There are not just a few bad apples in the batch of our society. We have to understand that the apple tree itself is rotten from the root. And so, let’s plant anew.

Class of 2021, we all have dreams and goals and aspirations of what the grand work of our lives will be once we leave Brandeis, but I ask that you join me as I take up my new profession as a gardener. Let’s walk into the scorched fields of the world that we knew and replace the brittle dirt of society with the fresh soil of possibility and imagination. Let’s pull back our sleeves of inhibition and fear and plant deep within the earth seeds borne from our collective ingenuity. Seeds of knowledge and truth. Seeds of community and love. Seeds of change. And while the sky may be clouded with the uncertainty of our future, let’s tend our garden until the sun comes out and our new world blossoms and blooms with everything we have planted.

In 2019, I got the chance to meet Brandeis alum and revolutionary activist Dr. Angela Davis at the 50th Anniversary of The Brandeis Department of African and African American studies. After taking a picture with her, which is now my most prized possession, I asked her, “How can I

be a revolutionary in my daily life?” She said, “You will have to make your own way to be a revolutionary through whatever you are passionate about.”

Brandeis Class of 2021, each of us will create our own paths to be revolutionary. We will need the artists and the biologists and the lawyers and the activists and the mathematicians and the filmmakers and the scholars to tear down the old rusty bricks of inequity that form the world we knew and replace them with a new material that makes the values of liberty and justice for all not just aspirational but universal and unconditional.

We will take with us the seeds and the tools we have picked up from our community along the way. I will be taking with me the intellectual tools I have gained from the Brandeis African and African American Studies Department, the community I gained from the Brandeis Black and African Student Organizations and from my Posse, the advocacy of the Intercultural Center and the everlasting support of my family, my friends and my ancestors whose hands guide me every step of the way.

Class of 2021, whichever direction the winds of life shall blow you, all I ask is that you remember your garden. When this world seems unfit for the vastness of your imagination, remember the seeds you hold. And remember that you can plant them and watch the world you desire grow and grow and grow until it encapsulates the fullness of your dreams.

Thank you.