

# VALERIE OWENS

## SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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This will not be a speech of beginnings or endings, nor will I not quote Dr. Suess. What I wish to speak of today is continuations—particularly the continuation of education. Today, you are graduating from Southern Utah University, but your learning is far from over. Welcome, if you have not already applied, to the university of experience.

The curriculum of experience's university is simple: the continual attainment of knowledge and endless personal progression and improvement. The campus is the largest in existence. It includes every library ever built, every home ever lived in, every mountain ever climbed, every museum ever constructed. From the North Pole to the South, there is not one inch of this vast and varied world that is not part of the university of experience.

Every person that walks this earth with you is, alternatively, a student, a fellow classmate and a teacher. You, as well, fulfill all three of these roles. As a student, be humble, be open, be attentive. Your “teachers” in this university may not be dressed in academic garb. Perhaps their vernacular is that of the common man. Perhaps they do not speak at all. You see, you are a student to every man, woman, and child you will ever meet. In the words of Galileo, “I have never met a man so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him.” You may hate your boss, but trust me, he or she has something to teach you in a way no one else can. You may resent your landlord, but a page out of his or her life book will teach you a lesson that you could not learn from a thousand years of living. You may assume the hired help to be simpleminded, but they have truths to reveal that are beyond your present comprehension. Listen. Pay attention. Ask questions. The best lectures you will receive from your time at this university will not be handed to you on a silver platter—you must ask for them.

As a fellow student and classmate, remember to be kind. The university of experience can be a rough place. You, as much as anyone else, know this. Sometimes, the lessons learned here are seared into our memory by the white-hot heat of pain that accompanies them. It was Plato who cautioned, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Remember these words and respect your fellow classmates.

When life calls you to perform the role of teacher, do not hesitate to rise to the occasion. You know more than you think, more than you are willing to admit. Educator and performance poet Taylor Mali laments that it has “somehow become uncool to sound like you know what you're talking about.” Mali's challenge to each of us is to “Speak with conviction / to say what

you believe in a manner that bespeaks / the determination with which you believe it.” You have had the privilege of a university education—an impossible dream to millions of others across the world. Claim the knowledge you have gained and share it with those who have not been similarly advantaged.

While enrolled in the university of experience, you are free to choose to never pick up another book in your life, but I implore you not to make such a foolish decision. American author Louis L’Amour is well-known for having written over 100 novels. Yet what many are unaware of is the rich life that he led outside of his time as a writer. His numerous jobs included seafarer, lumberjack, elephant handler, miner, professional boxer, journalist, and lecturer. More notably, L’Amour was one of the most prolifically read authors of our time. His personal library contained 17,000 volumes. If there was ever man that understood what it meant to live a life of continual education, L’Amour was that man. His advice to new readers is simply this: “Yet for those of you who have not been readers, my advice is to read what entertains you. Reading is fun. Reading is an adventure. It is not important what you read at first, only that you read.”

I echo the words of L’Amour. Start anywhere, but start somewhere. Begin to read—anything. From manuals on motorcycle maintenance, to comic books, to romances, begin somewhere and move upward from there. The higher the quality of what you read, the higher the quality of your thoughts, and the greater your thoughts, the greater your character.

What of tests and grades in this university, you might ask. The tests you will recognize as they come—they be will those moments when you are called upon to prove to yourself that you are a stronger, wiser person today than you were yesterday, than you were a year ago. The grades, you will assign yourself, but trust me, this is not a mercy. You are inevitably your own harshest critic. Take these opportunities to truly evaluate yourself and mark where improvements are needed. Author Sterling W. Sill notes that “One of our human weaknesses in life is that when we are losing the game, we don’t always like to keep track of the score.” Keep score. Notice when you are prepared for the tests of life and when you are not and what makes the difference. Give yourself feedback. Challenge yourself to be better prepared the next time a test comes along.

Above all, enjoy your time in the university of experience. This life is a beautiful thing to be living and the knowledge you gain will only make it all the more worthwhile. As our SUU motto states, “Learning lives forever.” At age of 87, Michelangelo, stated simply, “I am still learning.” I hope his words will be a continually true statement in the life ahead of you—I am still learning.

You are truly remarkable. I feel privileged to be among you today. In this audience, there are some the most intelligent minds I have ever known, some of the kindest souls I have ever met. I am excited to see the different paths we will take and truths we will find. May we never cease to learn. Congratulations, class of 2014.