Convocation Address 2013

Your Superhero Moment

Oxford College, Emory University

Professor Kenneth E. Carter

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President Wagner, Provost Sterk, Deans Bowen and Forman, SGA President Williamson, Reverend Pace, honored guests, faculty, staff, and students. I feel most honored and privileged to have been invited to give this Convocation Address. I know I’m supposed to say that…but it’s true. I do feel honored.

It wasn’t that long ago, or least it doesn’t feel that long ago, that I was sitting exactly where the students are right now. In August of 1985, before pagers, and before any cellphone that you’d want to carry, before air conditioning in the JRC and even 20 years before Facebook, I was a first-year student here at Oxford. I had no idea who the Convocation speaker was, or why he or she felt so honored to be there. But now, I can tell you.

It’s an Oxford tradition for the faculty member who has most recently been promoted to what we call “full professor” to address the college during convocation. We get to talk about whatever we want. I’m going to tell you about some of the important lessons I have learned here at Oxford and beyond and tell you about my hopes for you, as well. In short, I hope that you will all be superheroes.

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My journey to Oxford began on the floor of the den in my parents’ house. On the bottom bookshelf was the World Book Encyclopedia: think Wikipedia, written by experts and printed out. On the floor, I read every volume, cover to cover. I picked several careers from that encyclopedia. In first grade, I decided to become a scientist—until I read that I needed to study Latin. By fourth grade, I had made the switch to disc jockey. In fifth grade, I had chosen the field of psychology. I had no real idea what a psychologist did, but my friends always told me I was a great listener. I probably figured that psychologists listened to people complain and then told them how to best live their lives. They don’t, by the way.

My first real step to being a psychologist began here at Oxford where I began to discover my strengths and weaknesses and the role that my own effort had in developing them. My first semester, I enrolled in Personality Theories, Biology, English, American History and Swimming. I’ll never forget getting my first essay back in English. I worked so hard on that five paragraph essay. I was 100 per cent certain I would get an A. I didn’t. What I got was my essay covered in what seemed like thousands of scribbled purple comments, about three comments for each of my own sentences. I was crushed. But I continued to work on it, and I improved. Through work and
probably gallons of purple ink, I gradually earned success, and I also learned my strengths and weaknesses. These experiences helped me to realize that there were things I was really, really good at doing, and that I liked doing, too. And while there were definitely other things that didn’t come so easily, I learned to play to my strengths. More than that, I turned many of my strengths into my own personal power.

Everyone has strengths. Maybe yours is understanding complex connections, or helping people to get along better, or being persuasive, or writing well, or finding where commas should go, or finding flaws in others. Understand and nurture your strengths. When you use them well, they become your powers that make you a better version of you.

Graduate school helped me to turn my strengths into superpowers as I learned to apply those strengths to help others. A few schools of psychological thought shaped my view of the world. From the Freidians, I learned that sometimes there’s more to a person than meets the eye. From the cognitive-behaviorists, I learned that the way you think molds your reactions to the things around you. And from the humanists, I learned to look for the natural goodness in others. Most importantly, from my advisor, Christopher Peterson, a pioneer in positive psychology, I learned his mantra: “Other people matter—period.”

Graduate school taught me the importance of empathy and humility. As a therapist in training, you sit with a person in emotional and often physical pain, and you feel you are expected to know exactly what to say. Most times you don’t. Often the curative power has to do with sitting with another person as they struggle with the things that life has thrown them and uncover new tools to combat often lifelong scars.

The lessons of this training directly apply to daily life. Here’s an example. I’m sure many of you have been behind someone who was going pretty slowly down the highway. I bet you’ve come with more than a few ideas of why they are driving that way: they are idiots, they are stupid, and the most common, “They are driving that way just to annoy me.” If that’s the case, chances are one of you here today has gotten out of bed and thought to yourself: “You know what I feel like doing today? I really want to drive down the road and find someone to annoy.” Please raise your hand if you have done this recently. If you raised your hand, please give the rest of us a five-minute head start on driving home at the conclusion of the program.

If you ever take a moment to glance at that slow driver as you speed past them, take a look at their faces and read their emotion. You might see that they are terrified. Maybe they are in an unfamiliar city, in an unfamiliar car, or driving with an emergency spare or fix-a-flat foam in their tire. Maybe, just maybe, they are doing the very best they can. You’ll see that if you engage your empathy. Remember, other people matter, and it matters to be aware of what other people around you need. Graduate school taught me that even if you don’t see how, most people, a great
majority of them, are probably doing the best they can given what they believe to be true. And it matters to understand their perspective and what they need.

Understanding people in this way can be an amazing strength. Acting on it takes courage and is sometimes difficult. But when you do, you become the best version of yourself. Being the best version of yourself, even when doing so is difficult, turns a strength into a superpower. Let me explain why.

I eventually found my way back to Oxford College after working for a while at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That first semester back here as a professor at Oxford, working side by side with many of the professors I had in college in the setting that I came to know and love so much, terrified me. It’s not easy teaching at the same place where you went to college. I still have flashbacks to being an undergrad whenever I enter Lil’s (for you psychology students, these are technically “intrusive distressing recollections”). And after 18 years of being back at Oxford, I haven’t yet found the courage to step a foot into Bonnell Hall, my residence hall for my two years here. By the way, anyone here live in Bonnell 214? I left a treasure hidden in the walls.

One assignment I gave my students that first year teaching here at Oxford was to analyze archetypes, universal thought forms, found in children’s stories and cartoons. I found myself viewing lots and lots of cartoons that semester. One cartoon sticks in my mind more than any other. Here’s the scene: Daffy Duck is in bed and can’t get to sleep. He can’t get comfortable; he tosses, turns, punches his pillow and tries to count sheep, literally. Then he realizes he has to go to the bathroom (apparently cartoon ducks use bathrooms), and then he says “I guess I’d better get up; no one can do this but me.”

Be honest: How many of you have ever been in bed and realized you had to go to the bathroom and tried to talk yourself out of it? “Maybe I don’t REALLY need to go to the bathroom; okay I do. Maybe not. Yeah, I do”. The thing to do is just to get up and go and realize that no one else can do this but you. In fact, you don’t really want someone else to do it for you.

Daffy Duck’s comment stuck with me. “No one can do this but me.” A life lesson from a cartoon duck. Think about how much struggle comes from hoping that someone else will act.

I’ve been guilty of that evasion myself. We all have. We all try to talk ourselves out of it: especially with assignments “I don’t feel like doing it now.” I have a bit of news of all of you who have ever felt that way. Odds are you’ll never feel like doing it. No one will do it for you. I have never met anyone who suddenly sat up and thought, “You know, I really feel like writing a
paper.” You can do something even if you don’t feel like doing it. And most likely, no one can do it but you.

Superheroes recognize this. That’s why they act so quickly. You are driving along late to work and you notice a bus skidding in the rain. Does the superhero think, “Oh, maybe someone ELSE with super speed will save those kids. Surely someone else who can fly can help”? No. The superhero knows that in this moment only he or she can do it—and they act.

There will be times when you will get the call—not the call of nature—but that call for something only you can do. Maybe the call comes because of your superhero power, the power you have from your rank or knowledge or privilege, or simply because you are there. Everyone has gotten that call, or will get that call. I have, too.

I’ve had the same best friend since 5th grade. We made terrible, often inappropriate, jokes in class. We talked about music, television shows, books, pretty much everything. We went to the same elementary school, middle school, and high school. While I was here at Oxford and then in Atlanta, he was at Georgia Tech studying engineering. We even took summer jobs at the same place in our hometown of Columbia, South Carolina. Eventually, we moved apart. I moved to Michigan for grad school and then eventually back to Atlanta. He moved to New Jersey to work for AT&T. But we always talked every week.

One day I got a call—not from him, but about him. My best friend was in the hospital, and he was very sick. By the time I got to see him, he was frail, amazingly pale, and had a feeding tube in his nose. He was in the hospital for what was a fourth round of tests and another recommendation from a specialist.

That night, several of his friends who had come from all over the country and I slept on the floor of his hospital room. In the morning, we assembled to hear the recommendation of the doctor and the results from the latest tests. The doctor wasn’t optimistic, but offered yet another treatment suggestion. Everyone left except for me.

My friend had already lost his ability to speak and could only make slight gasps. We agreed that one gasp was no and two gasps would be yes. I could tell from his face that he was discouraged and exhausted.

“Are you feeling okay?”
“No.”
“Are you uncomfortable?”
“Yes.”
“Do you want to go through the treatment the doctor suggested?”
“No.”
“Do you want a second opinion?”
“No.”
“Do you want to go back to your other hospital?”
“No.”
“Do you want to go home?”
“Yes.”
“Is there something I can do?”
“Yes.”
I understood. He was tired. He didn’t want any more treatments. He was ready to die. And it was up to me—only me—to let his mother know.

I didn’t want to tell her. Who would? I was overtaken with my own grief. How could I go to his mother, who has known me for so long, too, and tell her something so devastating?

I had to choose. I could honor my friend’s wishes, even though it would be very painful for me. Or I could evade what he had asked me to do and put my own feelings first. I knew that if I allowed myself to evade this responsibility, it would haunt me, and rightly so. I remembered; other people matter—period. I was so scared. So I did it scared. It was something only I could do for my best friend and for his mother. So I did. I didn’t feel like a hero, I still don’t today. But to my friend and to his mother, for that moment, I was.

I’m sometimes frustrated when I think of people who don’t speak up for or don’t do what they know is right, even when they have absolutely nothing to lose. I’m disappointed when I see that someone could make an important difference with a skill that they have, and they let the moment pass. Then I remember my own words: Even if you don’t see how, people are doing the best they can given what they believe to be true. Maybe they haven’t realized that sometimes they are the only ones who can step up. The times when I have had that realization, and when I’ve had the courage; and when I’ve used that thing I know I do well, my superpower, to help someone who needs it at that moment—those have been the defining moments in my life. I haven’t always had the courage to act on those opportunities, but when I have, it has been an amazing gift to another person.

Maybe your superpower is something as simple as a smile, coming to a friend’s defense, or a hug. Life will call upon your superhero power. It calls on you to have empathy for others and to see their perspective. It calls on you. Remember, you have superpowers; other people matter; use those superpowers to help others. Sometimes you will do it gladly and sometimes you’ll do it with tremendous terror or with tears in your eyes. Forgive yourself for the times you didn’t act in the past. Know your superhero power, that thing you are awesome at doing. And when the bat signal or your Spidey sense alerts you that someone needs your help, act. Because sometimes the only one who can be that superhero for that moment will be you.