

Commencement Address, Berkshire Hills Music Academy, May 19, 2013
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We are assembled here on this cool May morning to celebrate the achievements of eight graduates of the Berkshire Hills Music Academy: Michelle, Dylan, Amanda, Robert, Daniel, Adam, Heather, and Gareth. To each one of you I want to extend my heartfelt congratulations on your worthy accomplishments during your time here. I have to admit to being a little envious of you. I love to play piano and guitar and compose a little, and the fact that you've been able to spend two whole years at a school where you get to be musical every day is like a dream come true! Or to paraphrase a Berkshire Hills student, Emily Webster, it feels like you have truly won the musical lottery!

We are especially proud of you today because you are now part of an elite group of post-secondary graduates around the United States who have completed studies in music. Scientists who research musical education say that having this musical background brings with it several advantages. Among other things, we know that people who have had musical training, as you have, possess larger vocabularies and better reading skills than students who have not had such an education. Research shows that music develops the brain in the same way that physical exercise develops the body. People with musical training do better on math and English tests, they have better critical thinking skills, they work better in teams, they have higher levels of self-confidence, and they are better equipped to express themselves and their ideas than those who have had no music education.

And I'm sure you know this already, but I just want to state it for the record: music is not just good for *these* particular reasons. It is good because music is one of the most important activities in all of human experience. It's not just a talent or a skill. Dr. Howard Gardner, a professor at Harvard University has told us that music is an intelligence, and that it's just as important as word intelligence, number intelligence, social intelligence, or any of the other intelligences he has written about. M.Q., or "musical quotient" is just as important as "I.Q." Maybe even more important, especially when you think about the things that really give meaning to life.

Music has its own unique areas of the brain that have to be working well in order to ensure good musical ability. Music has its own unique symbol systems such as reading the notes of the base and treble clef, something that is not easy to do, and something that I've actually had a hard time with in my life. Music has its own unique patterns of development from the novice level all the way up to the master level. Music has its own culturally valued products in virtually every culture in the world.

There are some groups around the world, in fact, where music is a *central part of their culture*. Among the Dagomba in Western Africa, for example, learning to perform and understand the language of drumming is far more important than learning how to read and write. The drummers there are among the most important people in society. And if you grew up among the Anang of southern Nigeria, by the age of five you'd be expected to sing hundreds of songs, play several percussion instruments, and perform dozens of intricate dance movements. There are actually

some cultures, where, if a person isn't very musically intelligent, a musical master will literally sit on them and beat rhythms into their body and soul! I don't suggest that you try this with anybody!

Imagine a world where there was no music. In such a world, we'd look at our iPods and iPads and there would be no songs on them. We'd show up at auditoriums expecting to hear a musical concert, and the stage would be empty. We'd open our mouths to sing, and nothing would come out. We'd try to find a music teacher, and no one would be available. We'd go to a music store to buy an instrument, and the store would be empty. Truly, our world would be a sadder place, an emptier place, a more isolated place to live in, if there were no music in it. For how would we be able to express the depths of our joy, our sorrow, our longing without the gift of music?

Sad to say, there are people out there who do have musical disabilities – who have amusia or dysmusia, which are the scientific terms for those disabilities. These are people who can't appreciate the value of listening to music, who don't have a good sense of rhythm, who can't sing on tune, or who don't even care to learn how to become musical. I was reading a book by the neurologist Oliver Sacks last week. It was his book on music called Musicophilia (which means "love of music"). At one point he mentioned that there is no reference to music in any of the works of two famous brothers William James and Henry James, who lived and worked in Massachusetts a hundred years ago. Now, William James was the founder of modern psychology, and Henry James is considered by some to be the greatest writer in American literature. Yet, they had no music in their lives. This might be one reason why I have such a hard time reading them. I feel the absence of music in their words.

There are many other thinkers and leaders who've had musical disabilities over the years, including the naturalist Charles Darwin, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and former U.S. presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Ulysses S. Grant. They were really great in some things, in understanding nature or dreams, or in leading a country, but not, unfortunately, in music. They were essentially "tone deaf." And I should point out, that not being able to hear does not mean that a person will be musically disabled. Quite the contrary. One of the world's greatest percussionists, Evelyn Glennie is deaf. Music goes deeper than just being able to hear. It is embedded deeply within our bodies, within our brains, and within our souls.

So as I speak to you this afternoon, I ask you to think about how blessed you are to have musical ability and musical intelligence, and to have gone through the musical education that you've had here at Berkshire Hills Musical Academy. This musical background can serve you in so many ways as you go out into life to make your mark on the world.

Music can serve as the basis for a part-time or full-time career, as a member of a band or singing group, as a solo singer, as an instrumentalist, as a song writer, as a music therapist, as a music teacher or coach, as a piano tuner, a sound engineer, a disc jockey, and so much more!

Music can serve as a way of helping others, which I know is something that you have already been doing here at Berkshire Hills, through volunteer activities like playing music for the elderly, teaching children music in the schools, showing teenagers who need direction in life how to play a musical instrument, or helping those who are musically disabled learn how to develop their

musical intelligence. For even people who are musically disabled can learn to enjoy and perform music if they work hard at it, especially if they are taught by someone with a musical education who loves to teach. Someone like you.

There are many other ways in which music can help you as you go off to live your own lives. Music can also inspire you when you feel down. It can relax you when you feel stressed out. Scientists have long known that music has a powerful influence on how we feel, and can be one of the best ways to help people become happier, more productive, or more satisfied with their lives.

Music can help you learn things more effectively. You can take information that you'd like to remember – like a shopping list, for example, and put it into a musical phrase, which can make daily chores easier and more pleasant. Or you can use music as a background to help you read or study better. I'm sure that you've learned many of these techniques while you were studying here at Berkshire Hills.

Music can open new worlds for you, as you learn about different genres of music from around the world: from hip-hop and bluegrass to calypso and choro, from jazz and samba to Tejano and Klezmer. And you can share what you've learned about these styles with others to expand their own worlds.

Music can make you more creative, as you experiment with different kinds of sounds, rhythms, tempos, and tunes, and use the things you've learned in music to be more creative in other areas of your life.

There's really no end to the possibilities that are opened up for you because of your musical intelligence and the education you have had here at Berkshire Hills Music Academy.

So let me finish by suggesting three things that might help you as you go forth into the world.

First, *remember to focus on your strengths* – not just the musical ones, but the others as well including your love of life, your love of friendship, your desire to help others, your courage, your patience, your appreciation for beautiful things, your spiritual or religious feelings, your imagination, your vitality and exuberance, your special interests, and other strengths that make you who you are. By focusing on your strengths, you will gain the inner confidence that you need to handle the inevitable disappointments, obstacles, frustrations, and problems that will come your way as they come to everyone in life.

Second, *follow your passions*. A professor of mythology, Joseph Campbell once said: "follow your bliss, and doors will open for you where you didn't even know there were doors." That passion may be your music, or a special job, or a friendship, or a trip you want to take, or a program you'd like to be a part of, or some other special goal that you think about a lot. If you really believe in your passion with all of your heart and soul, then you CAN make it happen, even if there are obstacles in the way, as, of course, there always are.

And finally, *respect yourself as a unique person* who has something valuable to contribute to the world – something that nobody else can give. I can imagine that you've heard the word "disability" a lot in your life. But what I'd like to suggest is that instead of, or perhaps in addition to holding an image of yourself as a person with a disability, you think about yourself in a different way: as part of the great diversity of life. There's a term I discovered several years ago that I think may be helpful to you. The term is neurodiversity. Neurodiversity says that conditions like autism, dyslexia, ADHD, Down syndrome, and Williams syndrome, are part of the normal variation of human life that takes place within the Human Genome, which is the genetic endowment of all human beings. Neurodiversity suggests that just as we honor biodiversity and cultural diversity in the world, so too should we honor and celebrate the diversity of brains that are out there, including your own neurodiverse brain.

When we think about biodiversity, we realize that there are plants out in the rain forest that we don't even know about that could provide the answer to curing cancer or eradicating other diseases, and there are fish in the ocean that we haven't discovered yet who could tell us about how life began. By the same token, with *neurodiversity* we understand that there are human beings in this world who have unique brains and unique ways of living, communicating, socializing, and expressing themselves who can make a huge difference in helping the world become a better place. And you are part of this neurodiversity. You have the ability and now the opportunity to help heal the hurt, the pain, and the disorder that has become such a part of the world around us.

As you go forth into life, just think about what great things you are capable of doing, what lives you will touch, what songs you will sing, what projects you will create, what goals you will achieve! My very best wishes go out to you as you take your musical intelligence, your neurodiverse brain, and your many gifts, talents, and abilities into this amazing world of ours. There is no one in the world exactly like you and nobody in the world who can make the kind of impact that you can make to create a better world for everyone. Congratulations again on your graduation, Michelle, Dylan, Amanda, Robert, Daniel, Adam, Heather, and Gareth. May your future be bright, and may the spirit of life bless you in everything you do!

