

Joyce DiDonato's Commencement Speech

The Juilliard School's 109th Commencement Ceremony

Chairman Kovner, President Polisi, most distinguished honorees, dedicated family, friends, faculty, and to each of the talented, ambitious, courageous, adventurous Juilliard graduates of the class of 2014 before us here today, thank you!

I stand before you this morning, duly humbled, and in awe of the distinguished and hard-earned accomplishment awarded to each and every single one of you on this unforgettable and long-awaited day of your graduation. Look at you: *you are here*. Through that first nerve-racking audition, all those subsequent sleepless nights, the painstaking preparation for your recitals, the endless hours of reed-making and memorization, the blisters and the tears, and now walking side by side with the life-long friendships you have now forged, you are about to be alumni of the acclaimed Juilliard School.

You, my friends, are living the dream. I wish I'd had the foresight when invited to speak here today, to ask them to break with tradition and print my old biography from when I was your age instead of my current one. A great example of contrasts, it would have shown you that despite my "star turn" as the off-stage lover in *Il Tabarro* with my one, single, solitary line (did I mention it was off-stage?); and despite being the only young artist of my class to fail at securing management until the ripe age of twenty-nine; and despite my evaluation sheet for the Houston Opera Studio which simply declared me to possess "not much talent"; and despite many more rejections and dismissals than actual "yeses" (and I could go on...) Despite all of that, I am somehow, miraculously standing before you all today, regaled in an admittedly different kind of designer gown, dispensing tidbits of "wisdom" before a group of artists—and this is no exaggeration—artists whom I never could have been classmates with because there is no way I could have gained admission to your school back in the day. I simply wasn't ready back then. That is the truth. One never, ever knows where their journey will lead. But yours has led you here.

There are a few more hard-earned truths—as I have come to know them—that have arisen on my personal odyssey as a singer, which I thought I might share with you today. At first glance, they may seem like harbingers of bad news, but I invite you to shift your thinking just a bit, or perhaps even radically. You guys are artists, so thankfully you're already brilliant at thinking outside the conventional box. I offer these four little observations as tools to perhaps help you as you go forward, enabling you to empower yourselves from the very core of your being, so that when the challenges of this artistic life catapult and hurl themselves directly and unapologetically into your heart and soul—which they will do, repeatedly—you will have some devices at your disposal to return to, to help you find your center again, so that your voice, your art and your soul will not be derailed, but you will instead find the strength to make yourself

heard, and seen, and felt. Then you will have the power to transform yourselves, to transform others, and, indeed, to transform the world.

My first observation:

You will never make it. That's the bad news, but the shift I invite you to make is to see this as fabulous, outstanding news, for I don't believe there is actually an "it". "It" doesn't exist for an artist. One of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, right here, right now, in this single, solitary, monumental moment in your life is to decide, without apology, to commit to the journey, and not to the outcome. The outcome will almost always fall short of your expectations, and if you're chasing that elusive, often deceptive goal, you're likely in for a very tough road. For there will always be that one note that could have soared more freely, the one line reading that could have been just that much more truthful, that third arabesque which could have been slightly more extended, that one adagio which could have been just a touch more magical. There will always be more freedom to acquire and more truth to uncover. As an artist, you will never arrive at a fixed destination. This is the glory and the reward of striving to master your craft and embarking on the path of curiosity and imagination, while being tireless in your pursuit of something greater than yourself.

A second truth:

The work will never end. This may sound dreadfully daunting—especially today when you are finally getting out of here. But what I have found is that when things become overwhelming—which they will, repeatedly, whether overwhelming via unexpected, rapid success or as heart-wrenching, devastating failure—the way back to your center is simply to *return to the work*. Often times the work will be the only thing that makes sense. And it is here where you will find solace and truth. At the keyboard, at the barre, (the ballet barre, not the wine bar), with your bow in hand, articulating your arpeggios: always return to your home base and trust that you will find your way again via the music, the pulse, the speech, the rhythm. Be patient, but know that it will always be there for you, even if in some moments you lack the will to be there for it. All it asks is that you show up, fully present as you did when you first discovered the magic of your own artistic world when you were young. Bring that innocent, childlike sense of wonder to your craft, and do whatever you need to find that truth again. It will continually teach you how to be present, how to be alive, and how to let go. Therein lies not only your artistic freedom, but your personal freedom as well.

And perhaps my favorite truth:

It's not about you. This can be a particularly hard, and humbling lesson to face—and it's one I've had to continue to learn at every stage of my own journey. But this is a freeing and empowering truth. You may not yet realize it, but you haven't signed up for a life of glory and adulation (although that may well come and I wish, with every fiber of my being, that it will come in the right form for every single one of you.) However, glory is not your destination, for glory is always transitory and will surely disappear just as fleetingly and arbitrarily as it arrived.

The truth is, you have signed up for a life of service by going into the arts. The life-altering results of that service in other people's lives will never disappear the way fame unquestionably will. You are here to serve the words, the director, the melody, the author, the chord progression, the choreographer. And above all, most importantly, with every breath, step, and stroke of the keyboard, you are here to serve humanity.

You, as alumni of the 109th graduating class of The Juilliard School are now servants to the ear that needs quiet solace, the eye that needs the consolation of beauty, the mind that needs desperate repose or pointed inquiry, the heart that needs invitation to flight or silent understanding, and the soul that needs safe landing, or fearless, relentless enlightenment.

You are a servant to the sick one who needs healing through the beauty and peace of the symphony you will compose through blood-shot eyes and sleepless nights. You are an attendant to the lost one who needs saving through the comforting, probing words you will conjure up from the ether, as well as from your own heroic moments of strife and triumph. You are a steward to the blocked one who needs to feel that vital, electric, joyful pulse of life that eludes them as they witness you stop time as you pirouette and jettè across the stage on your tired legs and bleeding toes. You are a vessel to the angry, confused one who needs a protected place to release their rage as they watch your eyes on the screen silently weep in pain as you relive your own private hell. You are a servant to the eager, naïve, optimistic ones who will come behind you with wide eyes and wild dreams, reminding you of yourself, as you teach and shape and mold them, even though you may be plagued with haunting doubts yourself, just as your teachers likely were. And you will reach out to them and generously invite them to soar and thrive, because we are called to share this thing called *art*.

You are also serving one other person: yourself. You are serving the relentless, passionate, fevered force within you that longs to grow and expand and feel and connect and create; that part of you that craves a way to express raw elation and passion, and to make manifest hard-core bliss, rapture and –please, I beg of you, never forget this–*fun*. Don't ever abandon that intoxicating sense of fun in your art. Through that, you are serving your truth. My hope for you is that you will let this truth guide you in every moment. If you can find that, you have everything. That's why “making it” is, in the end, utterly insignificant. Living it, breathing it, serving it: that is where your joy will lie.

I want to share with you a quick email from a soldier on the front lines of our Arts: a school teacher from Salt Lake City, Ms. Audrey Hill, who is fighting the great fight. She brought her students to the recent HD telecast of “La Cenerentola”, and wrote the following note to me:

One of my boys...a 5th grader...wrote in his review this morning that one of his favorite parts (besides the spaghetti food-fight scene) was where at the end you were singing

about getting revenge, and how he really liked that your revenge was going to be forgiveness. This boy was new to our school this year, has a beautiful singing voice, and has been teased a lot. I have seen him getting more and more angry as the year was coming to a close and today it seemed like all that had disappeared. It was very moving for me to experience.

That's exactly who you are serving as you now go out into the world. How lucky are you?

Okay, I lied. I think this last one may be my favorite truth:

The world needs you. Now, the world may not exactly realize it, but wow, does it need you. It is yearning, starving, dying for you and your healing offer of service through your art. We need you to help us understand that which is bigger than ourselves, so that we can stop feeling so small, so isolated, so helpless so that, in our fear, we stop contributing that which is unique to us: that distinct, rare, individual quality which the world is desperately crying out for and eagerly awaiting. We need you to remind us what unbridled, unfiltered, childlike exuberance feels like, so we remember, without apology or disclaimer, to laugh, to play, to fly and to stop taking everything so damn seriously. We need you to remind us what empathy is by taking us deep into the hearts of those who are, God forbid, different than us, so that we can recapture the hope of not only living in peace with each other, but thriving together in a vibrant way where each of us grows in wonder and joy. We need you to make us feel an integral part of a shared existence through the communal, universal, forgiving language of music, of dance, of poetry and art so that we never lose sight of the fact that we are all in this together and that we are all deserving of a life that overflows with immense possibility, improbable beauty and relentless truth.

What an honor it is to share in this day with you. Savor every single moment of it—even this long speech—and then fly out of this building, armed with the knowledge that you make a difference, that your art is necessary, and that the world is eagerly awaiting to hear what you have to say. Go on, make us laugh, cry, dance, feel, unite, and believe in the incredible power of humanity to overcome anything.

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