

Convocation Address for Class of 2016¹

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(as prepared for delivery)

Where I come from, we have a Swahili proverb that says: “Mtaka cha mvunguni, sharti ainame.” It literally means that if you want something that’s under a bed, you have to bend and reach for it.

My name is Peggy Walenda Mativo, and I went to an all-girls boarding high school in the small town of Limuru, in Kenya. Although we did not have the world’s best resources, the community in my school used to refer to it as the “land of opportunity.” We knew that the best chance we had to make anything of ourselves was to memorize the textbooks.

For college I yearned for something greater than sitting around in a shadowy classroom, memorizing books. Harvard was a dream-come-true. Apart from my interviewer, I’d never met anyone from Harvard. So when I got that admission letter, I excitedly packed all my imaginations and expectations into my suitcase and took my first international flight to get here.

When I arrived, I vaguely thought I wanted to help people through science but I was still not sure what area I wanted to work in. I shopped several life science classes, and finally settled on Life and Physical Sciences A because it would challenge me, without ripping me to shreds. I distinctly

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remember the first day when I walked into this class's lab. Everything from the pipettes to the weighing balances looked totally different from what I had seen before. It both intimidated and excited me. It's in this adrenalin rush that discovered that I wanted to discover.

My journey took two parallel paths: one in class, and the other, outside it. In class I realized that it was more important to follow my own interests, goals and dreams, than to follow the herd. For instance, in addition to the 2 science classes I was enrolled in for the spring, I chose to take Expos 40: the Public Speaking Practicum. I chose this class because it seemed interesting. I'd also heard that the teacher, Rebekah Maggor, loves what she does, and works closely with students to develop their passions and ability. It's in this class that I realized that my Harvard education was never just about the grades, but also about forming those deep, honest relationships that live beyond the semester. Yes, just so you hear it: here an A is not a mark of excellence, and a B is not a stamp of failure- both are just transient summaries of how much you meet a course' requirements in a semester. Grades are not the full story of you.

On the outside I faced a different set of challenges: I really wanted to learn how to do lab research, but for that, I had to find faculty mentors, connect with them, and convince them that I was interested enough and competent enough to work with them. Yet, in my background it is culturally accepted, and even expected that there would be a reverent distance between professors and students. Overcoming this fear was probably the largest challenge I faced here. In fact by the time I reached out to Dr. Gregg Tucci, I

was so awfully nervous that I had to give myself a pep talk before emailing him; and another before meeting him.

I rehearsed over and over what I would say to him- but after we met, I slowly realized there was no need for that. Greg Tucci became a hero in my life for the number of times he was available, really listened and spoke with me .He also gave me great, actionable advice, including sending me to meet Ann Georgi, the undergraduate research advisor for the life sciences.

Ann Georgi was wonderful; we spoke and planned a lot in that one meeting in freshman year. One meeting, because I was too scared to go meet her again; and I held on to this fear for two years. I told myself I was not ready- I didn't really know enough science to do research, but essentially, I was just procrastinating. Later on, after getting over my guilt for 2 years of procrastination, I went to meet her. To my surprise she still remembered me: she asked about the field hockey team, the Chinese class I was in and whether my love for science had changed.

It had not.

When we spoke the second time, I followed through: I searched for professors I wanted to work with, I wrote my string of introductory emails- and waited, (and then I emailed reminders saying I was still excited to work with them). I also applied to the PRISE research program that I completed this summer in the lab of Professor Chad Vecitis. I found a mentor who wanted to develop a genuine relationship. I found that electrochemical water filtration was extremely fascinating. I found lab-mates who were curious about research and working to save the environment- and I found a grad

student, Mary, who was willing to teach me everything that I needed know, celebrate the success and cheer me on when experiments failed. In my fellow PRISE-lings, I found a community I could enjoy anything from egg drop competitions to museum tours with.

I've come a long way from the days of nervous pep talks but I'm still not done with my journey, or the lessons that come with it. When our wise ancestors said: "Mtaka cha mvunguni, sharti ainame," they were not just speaking of finding the sneaker you threw somewhere under there last night. They were reminding all of us to stretch, and try doing something completely different than ever before, to follow those small interesting steps and to persevere. So I urge you 2016, to chase your own true interests, to find your own Greg Tucci, your own Ann Georgi, you own Rebekah Maggor and Mary and Vecitis. People who want to connect with you; opportunities that are right for you are out there, in the arts, sciences and humanities. You just have to stretch to get to them. Welcome, to Harvard.