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Remarks to Graduates by Laverne McKinnon
Northwestern University School of Communication 2010 Convocation

Congratulations to the Northwestern University School of Communication Class of 2010!

I am truly honored to be here today, and to be a part of this ceremony that honors you and your immense accomplishments. I love that we will be forever connected because of our shared experiences of having attended NU, and also for being here today. Who knows what it will lead to — if anything — but what I'm really enjoying, right now, in this moment — is celebrating you.

I'm curious if you've ever heard of a wonderful, provocative belief in certain Asian cultures that centers around the idea of "an invisible red thread."

This invisible thread connects people who belong together. Whether it be lovers, colleagues, friends, parent and child, husband and wife, student and teacher. And nothing will ever sever this thread — not time, distance or circumstance. If it's meant to be, it will happen.

I believe in this invisible red thread when I think about how my husband and I adopted our daughter Mitzi from China. How is it that we all found each other despite being 1000's of miles apart?

I also think about it in terms of my parents — my dad was an American, my Mom was Japanese, they met during the Korean War when he was stationed in Osaka. They got married despite not speaking each other's language. My dad called it the language of love!

There's harmony in these connections — and sometimes they are meant to last a lifetime, and sometimes they are just for a moment of time.

I actually wound up at Northwestern because of one of these connections. Both my parents valued education tremendously, but neither ever graduated from high school. So they weren't able to provide with me a lot of guidance about where to go or how to apply. It was my junior high school social studies teacher — Mrs. Rodkin, who herself is an NU alum — who said I should go here.

A lot of my memories of NU are a blur, but one thing I do remember vividly about this university was that it empowered you. Northwestern rewards you for getting engaged, for connecting, for creating and for being an entrepreneur. I learned if you had initiative, this school encourages it, giving you support and, often, money to do what you want to do. In my case, I was involved in the Waa-Mu show, and worked for Studio 22 and WNUR.

And recently, in the past few years, I've been able to see firsthand how that tradition of empowerment has continued to grow exponentially. So many of you have shared your NU experiences with me because we've worked together on your internships, or I've met you from workshops I've led, or you were in the class I taught on campus this past Fall. You guys have accomplished quite a bit in your time here. And through all these various interactions, I've learned many many things about you.

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The main thing I've learned? You guys are awesome. Really. That's not just a convocation speaker buttering you up before they kick you out the door. It's for real. You are wickedly smart, and fiercely ambitious. You set the bar high, you dream big. You excel at almost everything you do.

But here's the really interesting thing from my perspective. When I've talked to you, and when I've asked you what's next, what will be your first steps in creating a legacy, your answers suggest that while so much has changed in the world, in our country, in our culture, and at this university since that day 23 years ago when I sat where you are now – some things haven't changed. Some things remain remarkably the same.

Many of you have told me that as you graduate...you are afraid of what's next.

You've been preparing for this day for quite a long time – and now you're on a high dive, ready to take a leap into the future, you look down... and there's no water in the pool.

You might chalk it up to the economy, which may show signs of recovery, but certainly not fast enough.

Then there's the fact that while there are so many wonderful things about technology changing our lives, it also makes us wonder if the jobs or paths we choose will lead to careers that exist in twenty years.

And also for many of you, your ambitions and passions are guiding you into fields where the road to success isn't always so evident.

It's scary. I get it. You're scared of the unknown. And you're scared of the unknown because you worry that what waits for you on the other side... is failure.

To be quite honest, fear has ruled my life since I've been out of the womb. It's been my primary driver. I simply don't want to fail and the fear of that has made me into the classic NU over-achiever. Super goal-oriented. Sorta compulsively driven to succeed. Does any of this sound familiar?

The fear of failure has haunted me so much that I actually had a tattoo put on the inside of my right wrist. The letters are kanji and mean "love" and "harmony." To give me a constant reminder to make choices from a place of love, not fear.

When I graduated in 1987, I was filled with so much fear that it took me four years to follow my dream of moving to Hollywood. Thank God there was another great NU alum like my junior high school teacher who mentored me — Gerry Rogers. He gave me a fabulous job in Chicago writing and producing educational films.

When I finally made the move to LA, I was lucky enough to call on other NU alums who helped me get a series of interviews and I got a job as an assistant at a talent agency.

Talk about fueling fear. Every day was a hazing, but you know what — it wound up being sorta fun and it was a bit like surviving a war zone and now I'm extremely close to the people I was an assistant with — some who are now heads of studios and agencies.

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My career really took off though when I landed a job at CBS in the children's department. It wasn't a prestigious job, necessarily, but there was room for growth. CBS' children's programming was being slaughtered at the time by a young upstart called Nickelodeon. So no one expected success from my department.

After a couple of years, I was promoted to CBS primetime programming, and oversaw shows like *Cosby* and *The Nanny*.

And apparently, I did well enough to earn myself one of the most plum jobs in Hollywood. A slot in Primetime Drama Development at CBS. I was one of the people who got to influence the decision makers about what shows end up on the air.

I developed and worked with amazing writers who created shows like *Without a Trace*. *Cold Case*. *CSI*. *CSI Miami*. *CSI New York*. And *NCIS*.

CBS moved from last place in the ratings to first. I was promoted from Director to Vice President to Senior Vice President and head of the department. The shows I was developing were the highest testing CBS shows in twenty-years. My boss and one of my mentors became the President of the entire network. My bosses' boss became CEO of the parent company, Viacom. I was on fire!! My fear of failure finally began to dissipate after working for ten years at the network — they actually seemed to like me. After all, I'd been promoted four times!

And then out of nowhere. I was fired.

People get fired a lot. But try consoling me with that, back then.

I just wanted to crawl into a ball. And while I'd like to tell you that I immediately dusted myself off, faced my fears, got back onto the horse — I spent a little time in a bunker in my pajamas.

What was most appealing to me was to hit the road with my husband and my recently adopted daughter and hide. We visited family and friends all over the US. I needed to lick my wounds and figure out what and who I was without this identity I had created for myself — this identity that was so intertwined with my professional career.

After nine months of hiding — a former colleague, the director Mike Newell, who you might know from *Harry Potter IV* and *Prince of Persia* and *4 Weddings and a Funeral* — and his producing partner Cam Jones, asked if I would start a television division for their company. I was still filled with fear, but I took the job because my family needed to eat.

My job was to sell TV ideas to my former colleagues and competitors at the Networks. I hit the ground running in my new job and set up 26 pitch meetings. How do you think I did?

I got twenty-six no's.

I don't think there has ever been a producer who failed as miserably as me. Twenty-six no's. All in a row. It wasn't like someone said yes, and then there were a bunch more no's. It was just no after no after no. It was truly horrible.

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So in keeping with the theme of hiding and licking my wounds — I went to Mike and Cam asked them to let me quit. To release me from my contract. They said “No.”

That’s twenty-seven no’s if any of you are keeping track.

My colleagues forced me to figure out what I was doing wrong, and what I discovered is that I was so frightened of failing as a producer, at running a part of this company, that I was playing it safe. That I wasn’t following my heart and taking risks. I was trying to sell ideas that I thought would impress the networks, as opposed to developing and producing ideas that I actually believed in. So I followed my heart and went out on a limb. And now this is where the story finally gets happy: I sold eight projects in a row.

When the economy tanked, Mike’s company went under. But I felt I had hit a groove. I found a greater passion and connection with my work than ever before — and, what’s more, I realized that it required my having lost that CBS job to have discovered this new passion.

And because I was having so much success as a producer, I decided to do something that I would have been too scared to do years before — I hung out my own shingle, and started my own company called Shibui Entertainment.

Shibui is a Japanese word that has many meanings, but the meaning I relate to the most is “beauty in the imperfect.” It’s the same principle that motivates Japanese to create rock gardens, using misshapen, uneven rocks. It’s the same principle that makes one of our alums Cindy Crawford so beautiful.

You know what I mean – that mole on her face. You see, the truth is, symmetry or perfection actually takes away from beauty. Cindy is more beautiful for her “flaw.” It makes her unique.

And if I have learned anything in my career, it is that a creative process is imperfect. Whether we’re creating a business, a piece of art, a family, a life — we cannot succeed or truly value success without making mistakes, without failing. And often times we stumble upon incredibly unique discoveries precisely because of our failings.

What truly defines us as human beings though, what develops our character, is how we bounce back from our failures. How we recover. Every bounce is unique — sometimes they happen quickly, sometimes they take months or years.

And this brings us back to the invisible red thread. The connection that we have others — again whether it’s a lifetime, or just a moment — is what can help to sustain us in times of difficulty. That our connection with others fuels, revives, replenishes us — in both the giving and the receiving.

I don’t remember who spoke at my graduation. I’m guessing you may not remember that I spoke here today. But I want to share with you with an image that I hope will last longer than my face or my name or even my words.

There’s a fabulous artist by the name of James Turrell who works with light and sound. He builds these installations that can be the size of a giant hill or a small mountain. I once had the opportunity to spend time inside of an art house he created in Japan.

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When you walk inside the house, it's completely pitch dark. It swallows you up and you are instructed to feel your way through the corridors until you encounter a small stool on which to sit. And then you just sit. Doing nothing. You just sit, alone, in the dark — in the fear. Many people can't take the stillness and darkness and leave.

However, if you are patient and can wait — eventually your eyes adjust and you begin to see light. You sit in your fear, you listen to it — and soon, you see the light. You see what your fears are trying to show you, and it is *light*.

It's not always easy to be patient. And it's not always easy to run toward what scares us. But I promise you, you do that, and you'll make amazing discoveries about your work, about each other, about yourself.

When I lost that job at the network, one of my best friends sent me a card. It said, "She went out on a limb, had it break off behind her, and discovered she could fly."

Right now you are out on that limb.
Don't back off. Don't run away.
And should that limb break, and it probably will, be patient.
Look for that light.
And then,
perhaps unsteadily at first,
you'll look around and realize:
you're in flight.
And then ... You will soar.

Thank you with all my heart, and congratulations to the AWESOME class of 2010!
