

“Fall Forward” – Denzel Washington’s Inspiring Commencement Speeches

Denzel Washington commencement speeches to University of Pennsylvania and Dillard University

You’ve invested a lot in your education, and people have invested in you. And let me tell you the world needs your talents, and does it ever? The world needs a lot and we need it from you. We really do. We need it from you, young people.

I mean, I’m not speaking for the rest of us up here, but I know I’m getting a little grayer. We need it from you, the young people, because remember this: you’ve got to get out there, and you got to give it everything you got. Whether it’s your time, your talent, your prayers, or your treasures. Because remember this: you will never see a u-haul behind a hearse. I’ll say it again: You will never see a u-haul behind a hearse. The Egyptians tried it—and all they got was robbed!

So the question is: what are you going to do with what you have? And I’m not talking about how much you have. Some of you are business majors. Some of you are theologians, nurses, sociologists. Some of you have money. Some of you have patience. Some have kindness. Some have love. Some of you have the gift of long-suffering.

Whatever it is... whatever your gift is, what are you going to do with what you have?

Fail big. That's right. Fail big. Today is the beginning of the rest of your life and it can be very frightening. It's a new world out there, and it's a mean world out there, and you only live once. So do what you feel passionate about.

Take chances, professionally. Don't be afraid to fail. There's an old IQ test with nine dots, and you had to draw five lines with a pencil within these nine dots without lifting the pencil, and the only way to do it was to go outside the box. So don't be afraid to go outside the box. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Don't be afraid to fail big, to dream big, but remember dreams without goals are just dreams and they ultimately fuel disappointment.

So have dreams, but have goals. Life goals, yearly goals, monthly goals, daily goals. I try to give myself a goal everyday. Sometimes just to not curse somebody out. Simple goals, but have goals and understand that to achieve these goals you must apply discipline and consistency. In order to achieve your goals, you must apply discipline, which you have already done. And consistency everyday not just Tuesday and miss a few days. You have to work at it.

Everyday you have to plan – everyday. You've heard the saying that we don't plan to fail, we fail to plan. Hard work works. Working really hard is what successful people do. And in this text, tweet, twerk world that you've grown up in, remember just because you're doing a lot more doesn't mean you're getting a lot more done. Remember that, just because you're doing a lot more doesn't mean you're getting a lot more done.

Don't confuse movement with progress. My mom told me, you can run in place all the time and never get anywhere. Continue to strive, continue to have goals, continue to progress.

I found that nothing in life is worthwhile, unless you take risks. Nothing. Nelson Mandela said there is no passion to be found playing small and settling for a life that's less than the one you're

capable of living. I'm sure in your experiences in school and applying to college and picking your major and deciding what you want to do with life that people have told you to make sure you have something to fall back on. "Make sure you have something to fall back on, honey!" But I've never understood that concept. If I'm going to fall, I don't want to fall back on anything except my faith. I want to fall forward, I figure at least this way I will see what I'm going to hit.

This is what I mean: Reggie Jackson struck out 2,600 times in his career, the most in the history of baseball, but you don't hear about the strike outs. People remember the homeruns. Fall forward. Thomas Edison conducted one thousand failed experiments, because the one thousand and first was the lightbulb. Fall forward. Every failed experiment is one step closer to success. You've got to take risks, and I'm sure you've probably heard that before, but I want to talk to you about why that's important.

I've got three reasons, and then you can pick up your iphones. First, you will fail at some point in your life. Accept it, you will lose. You will embarrass yourself. You will suck at something. There's no doubt about it. I know that's probably not a traditional message for a graduation ceremony, but hey, I'm telling you. Embrace it, because it's inevitable.

And I should know: In the acting business, you fail all the time. Early in my career, I auditioned for a part in a Broadway musical. A perfect role for me, I thought—except for the fact that I can't sing. I didn't get the job. But here's the thing: I didn't quit. I didn't fall back. I walked out of there to prepare for the next audition, and the next audition, and the next one. I prayed and I prayed, but I continued to fail, and I failed, and I failed. But it didn't matter. Because you know what? You hang around a barbershop long enough—sooner or later you will get a haircut. You will catch a break.

Last year I did a play called *Fences* on Broadway and I won a Tony Award. And I didn't have to sing for it, by the way. And here's the kicker—it was at the Court Theater, the same theater where I failed that first audition 30 years prior.

The point is, every graduate here today has the training and the talent to succeed...But do you have the guts to fail?

Here's my second point about failure: If you don't fail... you're not even trying. My wife told me this great expression: "To get something you never had, you have to do something you never did."

Les Brown, a motivational speaker, made an analogy about this. Imagine you're on your deathbed—and standing around your bed are the ghosts representing your unfilled potential.

The ghosts of the ideas you never acted on. The ghosts of the talents you didn't use, and they're standing around your bed. Angry. Disappointed. Upset. "We came to you because you could have brought us to life," they say. "And now we go to the grave together."

So I ask you today: How many ghosts are going to be around your bed when your time comes?

Not only take risks, but to be open to life, to accept new views and to be open to new opinions, to be willing to speak at commencement at one of the country's best universities... even though you're scared stiff. While it may be frightening, it will also be rewarding.

Because the chances you take... the people you meet... the people you love...the faith that you have—that's what's going to define your life. So members of the class of 2011 this is your mission - when you leave the friendly confines of West Philly never be discouraged, never hold back and give everything you've got—fall forward.

Say thank you for grace, thank you for mercy, thank you for understanding, thank you for wisdom, thank you for parents, thank you for love, thank you for kindness, thank you for humility, thank you for peace, thank you for prosperity. Say thank you in advance for what's already yours. That's how I live my life, that's one of the reasons why I am where I am today. Say thank you in advance for what is already yours.

True desire in the heart for anything good is God's proof to you, sent beforehand to indicate that it's yours already. I'll say it again, true desire in the heart, that itch that you have, whatever it is that you want to do, whatever it is you want to do to help others to grow and to make money, that desire, that itch is God's proof to you, sent beforehand already to indicate that it's yours.

And anything you want, you can have. So claim it. Work hard to get it. When you get it, reach back pull someone else up. Each one, teach one. Don't just aspire to make a living, aspire to make a difference.