

Good morning graduates, families, parents, loved ones, faculty and staff, my name is Sheila Afnan, and I am one of the MACSME and MUSE students who are graduating today. For us this day marks the moment that we complete our transition out of graduate school and into our lives as teachers.

The commencement ceremony is a symbolic mark of a process that has already begun to take place. The words we spoke as students have been moved into the realm of action as we begin our teaching careers. If we've spoken of equity, then our operating understandings of that word must now be manifested daily in our work, rather than exist as singular acts sprinkled here and there.

This ceremony is meant to highlight and celebrate our work and achievements while here at this university, but I dare say that our work and the achievements that come after today take on greater importance. Cesar Chavez has said that "The end of all knowledge is service to others." The knowledge we have garnered here takes on real meaning when we give it life in the classroom. Without expression in action, the knowledge stored in our minds is useless, as it has achieved no effect in this world. Our importance does not culminate in this moment. Rather, it is what we need to be after today, what we need to be for our students in the coming years.

Looking back, One of the first questions that many of us were asked was Why do you want to be a teacher? This question is deceptively simple, and I've always found it hard to answer. However, this poem by Rumi sheds some light on it for me.

He says:

I've said before that every craftsman
searches for what's not there
to practice his craft.
A builder looks for the rotten hole
where the roof caved in.
A water-carrier
picks the empty pot.
A carpenter
stops at the house with no door.
Workers rush toward some hint
of emptiness, which they then
start to fill.

I think about the emptiness that's referred here, and I feel that emptiness in moments when I see students disempowered from the work in the classroom. I feel that emptiness when I hear educators talk about students as the source of issues, seeking for simple explanations rather than grappling with its true complexity. Though the emptiness is painful; as teachers, educators, and administrators, that emptiness is why we are here. That emptiness pushes us to define who we are. This emptiness perhaps better outlines our job descriptions for us than any individual can. The answer to what kind of educator we need to be does not lie in any idyllic image created in our minds, but we have to look for it in the shapes and outlines of that emptiness.

As beginning teachers, we look towards our first year of teaching with hope, amongst other emotions. We look towards teaching with a sense of wonder, and that sense of wonder gives us the courage to try new things. Tangible in our work is a sense of justice, and I don't want our hope, our wonder, our sense of justice to be weathered down when we are met with moments of challenge. We will be broken down in order to be built up again. For the betterment of our students, we need to be strong enough to resist pernicious effects of apathy and despair, and work to disrupt the status quo that doesn't serve so many students in our schools. Each year of teaching will humble us and show us what it means to be a teacher, and each year we need to emerge with even more hope and a stronger belief in a brighter future. If our hope is diminished, then so will be our ability to fill the emptiness Rumi describes.

So, with hope embedded into our hearts, I know we will experience many positive confirmations going into the coming school year. I want to extend my eternal thanks to my family; with their support I have felt ready to take on a profession as powerful as teaching. I also want to extend my love and thanks to everyone in this room. The faculty and staff in the GSE, the graduates, and their loved ones, for without their support we would not be walking this stage today. All of us believe in a world that can be changed. The world is just waiting for us to act. In the words of Arundhati Roy, "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

(Commencement speech of Sheila Afnan, May 26, 2019, Zellerbach Hall)