



Commencement Address  
UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health  
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*As delivered:*

Class of 2014 – good afternoon!

Thank you, Dean Rimer, faculty, School of Public Health staff, families— especially the moms: Happy Mother’s Day!—and graduates for inviting me back to Chapel Hill. It is so great to be on this beautiful campus. Yesterday, I walked through the Quad and visited the Old Well and Bell Tower again. The best part of being back, though, is – everywhere I go – finding myself in a sea of the only true shade of blue – which we all know is Carolina!

It is also a huge honor – and no pressure at all– to be standing here before you with the task of imparting some “deep wisdom” that will make life after graduation smooth sailing.

Well. I don’t have all the answers.

So I’m going to borrow from an article that I used to go to for wisdom years ago. You see, in 2000 – which was the year I graduated with my Master’s degree – Oprah launched a magazine. In each issue, on the last page, she had a final article called, “What I know for sure.”

Every time a new issue came, I would skip the rest of the magazine and fast forward to this page searching for the latest and greatest guidance. She would always have some powerful insight. Like: “Live so that each day, you can say, I did my very best.”

But what I really took away from those articles was that I have to define “what I know for sure” for myself. So today, I thought I’d share some of what I know for sure—based on what I learned during my studies here and what I’ve experienced since graduation working at the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; working on Capitol Hill; and currently at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

My hope is that some of what I’ve learned might resonate with you, reaffirm an experience you’re having or help you navigate through your own journey.

## **Part I**

At this point in my career, the most common questions people – especially graduates – ask me are: “Why did you get into public health?”

*“How did you get into global health?”*

And, “How do I get a job at the Gates Foundation?”

Let me apologize now – as much as I’d like to, I *cannot* haul 427 resumes back to Seattle with me or finagle a personal interview with Bill, and I have no personal wealth to give away, because – to be clear – my last name is Bates with a “B” not a “G.” The difference between the two is quite a few zeros!

But I do hope that something I say this afternoon will help you to figure out how to build the right career for you.

Graduates, I have to tell you a secret.

I had actually never heard of public health as a discipline until late in my third year of undergrad! (Yes, I was a little late to your party!). But, the moment I read the description of an MPH program—something to the effect of “interdisciplinary solutions to improve the health of individuals and communities” – I knew that this was what I was meant to do.

I heard a whisper that said, “This is me.”

That was so reassuring because it confirmed what I’ve wanted to do with my life since I was seventeen. That was the year my god-sister died of a brain tumor.

Every Saturday, after my soccer games, my mom took me to visit her. At this point, she was bald, blind and her ears were burned by the chemo and radiation. Sitting there, holding her hand – because that’s the only thing left that I could do – made me realize that I hate...yes, *hate* when health is not there and life is taken way too quickly and way too soon.

And that’s why, from an early age I knew I had to 1) give voice to those who don’t have it when they need it most and 2) protect people as much as possible from sickness and death through prevention.

What is that if not Public Health?

I heard “this-is-me” again when I held the first copy of Senate bill 2566. This was a piece of legislation that I had made a small contribution to. If it passed, it would give young children better access to early education programs.

And I heard “this-is-me” again six hours outside of Bamako in Mali where I was meeting with colleagues to discuss the terrible toll that malaria takes on young children. You know, back then, a child died every 30 seconds from malaria. That shouldn’t happen.

On this trip, outside of the city center after hours of nauseating bouncing around the back seat of a 4x4 that was kicking up dust as we lurched by droves of women walking with wood and water piled on their heads, babies wrapped around their backs and young children at either side of them... we went over a hill that I can only describe as “thirsty” – the earth was scorched and cracked. I couldn’t imagine that anyone could possibly live there. But just over that hill, I met a family who was gathered near a structure so simple that it barely qualified for a shanty.

The grandmother sat at the base of the tree. Her legs were straight out in front of her because they were so grossly swollen by lymphatic filariasis. She couldn’t even bend them. She was rhythmically crushing grain with a rock clutched firmly in her crippled hands.

I will never forget that visit.

This family was so welcoming to me, a complete stranger who had imposed upon their life and their home, asking them questions so that I could learn about how often their children got sick and from what – Pneumonia and diarrhea, the leading cause of death among young children. No one should ever die from these common, preventable childhood diseases.

I asked whether the daughter went to school – No; they couldn't afford to send her *and* her brother to school.

And, I asked how far the young girl walked each day for water – Easily two to three miles each way, every day.

At the end of the visit the father shyly looked up and, through the translator, said softly with the deepest sincerity, "Thank you for coming to visit our family." In that moment, my heart locked in on this family and on global health.

And literally every time I visit a village, a slum or a local community...to this day, I am reminded that my part in helping the world is through global health.

And, the whisper that said, "This is me" has changed to "This is why I am here."

That's what I want to focus the rest of my talk on listening for the whisper that says, "This is me. This is right. This is *why* I am here."

## **Part II**

*This is me.*

I firmly believe that in each of us there is a core of who we are and what we believe in. These are our non-negotiables, our absolutes, our non-starters – these are the things that just don't change. It's who we are at our core. That is the first Thing I Know for Sure.

At my core ...I am a hybrid.

I love the comforts and routine of being at home with my family and friends...And, I equally love sometimes being as far away as possible whether trekking to find gorillas on a mountain on the border of Rwanda or perching on the top of an ancient temple in Cambodia.

I am terrified of bugs, yet I've happily sampled grubs in Cameroon. Fish eyes in Thailand. And, I-still-don't-know-what-it-was in Vietnam.

I'm also a hybrid at work.

I've sat at a desk on Capitol Hill drafting national policy – and I've sat on a folding chair at the Carrboro Health Clinic right off of Franklin Street serving homeless women. I know some of you have done this as well!

These days, I sit regularly at a meeting table with Bill Gates updating him on our political efforts to get lifesaving vaccines to children in poor countries – and I sit with an equal sense of inspiration in a learning circle surrounded by street children on a dirt floor in a slum in Bangladesh.

I have the privilege of sitting in influential places, and I bring with me the experiences of those in need. I'm able to use my hybrid sensibility to give voice to those who don't have it and to bring communities and perspectives together around shared goals.

So whether I'm talking to a scientist or a policymaker, a billionaire or someone in the bottom billion...I use my core strength: being a hybrid.

Your exercise, I think, is to figure out what *your* core strengths are. And then determine how you're going to use your superpowers to help others.

*This is right.*

True story. Six weeks into my Master's program, I found myself on the third floor of Rosenau Hall, sitting on the couch of my advisor. She was a brilliant woman who wielded a ruthless purple pen for deeply editing anything placed in front of her.

I had just returned from a class project in the local community, and I was convinced that I had made a *terrible* mistake.

The struggle that I was having was that I couldn't reconcile what I was learning in the classroom about strong program design and the theories of behavior change with the realities of the people I was meeting in the local community.

Inside, I was freaking out! At 21, my academic career was over!! And my professional career would never begin!!!

Not only was I not hearing the sweet, gentle whisper, "This is me," my inner voice was throwing a temper tantrum, "This is *not* me!"

So there I was, sitting with my advisor, my thoughts running together. My tantrum sounded something like this – "I just don't get it!! How on earth is Carissa supposed to eat healthy? She's a single mother of four living in the public housing community. And my project team visits her once a week!

"I think she'll choose getting to her minimum wage job on a half-tank of gas over driving across town to Whole Foods to buy \$2.49/lb. organic, Washington-grown Fuji Apples!

That's *not* non-compliance. It's *not* a character flaw. And it's not *even* poor program design on our part! That's just real life!! And you know what?!? I would make the very same choices if I were her!!!"

I started to go on to verse two of my musings, but my advisor mercifully interrupted me with an acronym: HPAA.

"Huh?" I said.

"Nicole, go over to the Registrar, sign up for a two credit Health Law class in HPAA – health policy & administration, and see what you think."

So, I did. And, in many ways, the rest is history. It's *my* history. Because from that conversation, I discovered that my life was not over, nor was my career. In fact, it was only beginning, and beautifully captures the second Thing I Know For Sure.

Associate with people and experiences that help you to define that sense of "this is right."

I suppose the moral of this story is this: listen to advisors, mentors, family members and friends who are whispering, nudging or telling you: "That doesn't seem like a good fit for you. Try this instead."

So, thank you, Tom Ricketts, Don Holzworth, Ned Brooks, Sue Hobbs and Sandra Greene for helping me to navigate this world of public health.

And special thanks Jo Anne Earp for your purple pen and nudging me to take that Health Law class.

*This is why I am here.*

God has flooded my life with amazing grace; with mercy; and extreme favor. Don't get me wrong. I've worked *really* hard for a long, long time, but anything good you see in me is from him.

At times, though, I struggle to reconcile my good fortune with how so many people I've met live. But, rather than feel conflicted, where I've landed on this is that the best way to honor and serve those with the desire, but not the means to live healthy lives is to give them Voice.

And Visibility.

And Access to the most powerful levels and platforms I can reach.

And, I believe *that* is why I am here.

Final story... I've always known that I would "go all the way" with my education. After getting my Master's degree and working for a few years, I knew the time was right to establish the expertise and credibility that would enable me to be an authority in global health policy. Not just an expert, but an *authority*.

So, I went back to school for my doctorate.

And, I took on student loans...a quick look into your future graduates, I am *still* writing checks to this day.

And here's the kicker – I actually *chose* to do that to myself!

You see, I turned down a full ride– wait, not just a full ride, but a full ride *plus* a stipend – to one of the other top schools of public health in the country.

I did that so I could return to Carolina.

I chose this *specific* path because I remembered my earlier MPH experience at UNC where there was a warmth, laughter and spirit of collegiality among students in the hallways. And, professors took a genuine interest in *all* of me, as I'm sure they've done with each of you.

And, as I was deciding between debt and no debt, that whisper came back: "UNC is me. UNC is right."

Sometimes, to honor yourself, you have to do the unexpected. And the unpopular. And the countercultural. That can be tough especially if you share my "I'm supposed to..." syndrome. It's especially hard if many contrary opinions are coming at you like one of those automatic tennis ball machine gone wild.

My advice: Pray, meditate, go for a run, do whatever you need to do to give yourself the space to hear your voice again whispering, "This is me. This is right. *This* is why I am here."

Then – and this is so important – have the courage to move in that direction, no matter what you think you're "supposed" to do. What your five year plan says you have to do. Or, what people *expect* you to do.

Only *you* know what's best for you.

### **Part III**

What I know for sure is this.

You have long careers ahead of you. Your careers will be full of experiences and accomplishments you can't even imagine right now. People will ask *you* – why did you get into public health? How did you choose epidemiology, environmental health or maternal child health? And how do I get a job with *you*!?!?

What I know is this: You'll each have your own, unique story to answer those questions.

But, what I absolutely, positively know for sure is this: One day... I will be sitting in the audience at a TED conference. Or watching a BBC series. Or reading *The Lancet*.

And I will come across one of you talking about how you've help the needle on some seemingly impossible thing like discovering a new technology. Eradicating a disease. Or, introducing your own local, state or national legislation to improve the public's health.

And the world will be listening to you share the moment where you've whispered to yourself: "This is me. This is right."

And, we will all be celebrating your accomplishments with you because you are making our world not just better – but healthier.

That is *truly* why you are here.

And *that*, Class of 2014, is What I Know For Sure.