

Keynote Address

Delivered by H.E. Augustine Kpehe Ngafuan

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Liberia

At the 1st Career Day Program of the William V.S. Tubman

University,

Harper, Maryland County, Liberia

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Dr. Elizabeth Carbajosa, VPAA/ Acting President of the William V.S. Tubman
University (TU); The Deans and Chairperson of Colleges and Departments;

Mr. Benoir Tarr Grimes

Director of Career Planning and Placement;

Rev. Dr. Laurence Konmla Bropleh,

Corporate Executive, Lonestar Cell/MTN;

Other Representatives of Corporations and Institutions;

Students and Friends of TU;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

In my capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs, the quintessence of my job is to faithfully, conscientiously, and passionately represent the interest of my country abroad by engaging bilateral and multilateral partners in furtherance of our foreign policy thrust of *Development Diplomacy*. What this implies is that I spend a healthy portion of my time in airplanes destined to foreign parts across the globe. But I strongly believe that in order to represent my country effectively, I need to be thoroughly au courant with domestic realities – both urban and rural realities. So though I was advised to take the one-hour flight from Monrovia to Harper to attend this all-important program, I chose the option of traveling for nearly fifteen hours by road so that I could better appreciate the challenges our nation faces as well as take stock of the tantalizing opportunities that beckon in our faces.

Driving from the hustle and bustle in Monrovia to Kakata, to Gbarnga to Ganta to Tappita to Zwedru and then to Fish Town and finally to this exquisitely charming city called Harper, we encountered pot-hole infested highways, but we also had the heart-warming opportunity of driving on parts of the Monrovia-Ganta Highway that have recently been paved (with coal-tar) highways, a road construction project funded via the Liberia Reconstruction Trust Fund (LRTF), a multi-donor initiative

co-chaired by the Government of Liberia. The LRTF attracts funding to address some of Liberia's critical infrastructural challenges. In Ganta, Nimba County, I was thrilled to have slept in a hotel that received electricity from a regional power project through which electricity is transmitted from Cote d'Ivoire to Liberia to Sierra Leone and then to Guinea. I saw newly planted light poles in Nimba, Grand Gedeh, and Maryland counties, which was an eloquent retort to some of our compatriots in Monrovia and in the Diaspora who have drifted to the conclusion that "nothing is happening in Liberia."

Additionally, while traversing five counties on my way to Harper, I saw new structures -some constructed by Government including the magnificent Tappita Hospital Complex and some constructed by individuals or non-governmental actors. I also came face-to-face with realities that were not too heart-warming – I encountered the deep poverty that afflicts many of our people who live in rural parts as reflected in the quality of the huts in which they live as well as the wretchedness of the young ones, not an insignificant number of whom are not in school. But what impressed me the most on my road journey is that in spite of the difficult realities of rural life, the hospitality, generosity, and appreciation of the rural people for the incremental progress they have experienced thus far under this regime, have not flagged a bit. So my road journey, though physically taxing, has also made me a better public servant because it has brought me even closer to the

heart-beat of the challenges confronting our nation, which I and my colleagues in Government – the Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary, working with our citizens out of Government must dedicate our energies and time to addressing.

But before I go any further, I would be remiss if I did not extend my unalloyed gratitude to the Administration, the faculty and the students of Tubman University for the honor you have bestowed upon me by selecting me your keynote speaker at this first Career Day Event hosted by your great institution since it morphed from a Technical College to a full university in 2009. Driving through your campus last night and this morning, as I beheld the many rehabilitated structures, I was truly elated for the transformation I saw. The last time I drove through this campus in 2007 when, in my capacity as Budget Director of the Republic of Liberia, I had joined the President and other members of the Cabinet at a Cabinet Retreat held in Harper. The fact that you have established five colleges, and have over these years attracted top-notch faculty and staff both from across Liberia and abroad, and can now boast of a student enrollment of nearly 1000 from a paltry 200 when you re-opened this institution in 2009; and the fact you will graduate hopefully in June of this year your first set of graduates since the re-opening of the University, are all developments worthy of my profuse commendation. I also lift special thanks to the President of this University, Dr. Elizabeth Davis-Russell and many of you faculty members who left the comfort of high-paying jobs in the United States and

elsewhere to come to this remote part of our country in a patriotic and selfless quest to spread the light of education to some young man or some young woman of Maryland County, of River Gee County, of Grand Gedeh County, of Grand Kru County, or of Liberia or of the world, If this is not patriotism, selflessness, and dedication to humanity par excellence, then let the cynics and the critics tell me what this is? My presence here today also brings me personal joy because I was Minister of Finance when we started to take the giant and bold steps to re-open this institution. Given the depth of destruction that was visited upon this institution during the course of our Civil War and the remoteness of its location as well as all the attending risks that loomed, it really appeared during the beginning days like a big leap of faith to dedicate Government money to what was then regarded by some as a risky venture. But with the support of the President of Liberia, H.E. Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Maryland Legislative Caucus and other important stakeholders, seed money for the re-opening of this noble institution was provided through the National Budget. From the transformation I have seen live on this campus, I can boldly and loudly proclaim that the Administration of this institution has more than justified whatever funds that have been provided for the operation of this institution and are deserving of more Government support. Let me assure you that in my capacity as Dean of the Cabinet, the message I take back to Monrovia and to my Cabinet colleagues is this, “Government is getting the necessary bang

for its bucks at Tubman University; so let's continue to support the institution financially and otherwise so that the *Agenda for Transformation* can take firmer roots at the institution.”

My good friend, Mr. Benoni Tarr Grimes, Director of Career Planning at TU, the Administration, Faculty, and Students of this great institution, you have invited me to deliver the keynote on this Inaugural Career Day Event intended to afford the students and potential graduates of your institution the opportunity to interact with potential employers, which will give the students deeper insights into what may be termed the tricks of the trade and how to navigate successfully in various fields or professions.. The Career Day Event is also aimed at linking students with potential employers who, as a result of the contacts established during the Event, will increase their comfort level to employ some of the students upon graduation or give internship opportunities to some students while they are still in school.

Distinguished Administrators, Faculty Members, and Students of the TU, I know more than aware that some of the distinguished personalities you have invited here as speakers will delve more deeply and technically in some of the issues that relate to this Career Day Event. Therefore, I beg your indulgence to gracefully part with

tradition so that I can have what I like to call a frank conversation with you all, void of high-flown sophistication and a text book presentation. I do not intend to bore you with talks about the balance sheet of an accountant, the forecast of an economist, the seismic data of a geologist or the poetry of a poet. I rather want to talk to you about some deep-seated realities of life and attempt to expose you to some fundamental requirements for confronting these realities. I feel strongly that my coming here would be in vain, if I do not imbue in you a worldview that will enrich your understanding of life and remain a signpost for you whether you elect to become a doctor, an architect, a soldier, or a Pastor. So I will endeavor to give you all, especially these young impressionable students, some key messages, messages from a big brother to his younger brothers and sisters:.

1. Time is the Most Valuable Asset You Can Have. Do Not Squander It.

One of the advantages of being young is that your future, or whether you end up “in the Whitehouse or in the Dog House”, whether you end up as a beggar or as giver, whether you end up as a success story or a sob story, is still largely in your hands. Many of you have not yet taken steps or begun activities that would place you on irreversible paths. By and large, many of you still have a blank slate. You still have many junctions with roads diverging to different and sometimes opposite destinations and destinies ahead. Many of you, luckily, have not embarked on the wrong road yet; and

the mere fact that you still have your options open makes you potentially better off, because as I learned in my Corporate Finance course in university, option brings value. It is an advantage to be young because many of you have not reached the point where you would ruefully look back at your past and lament, as poet Robert Frost would put it, “The Road Not Taken.” In your ledger of life there has not been much debiting and crediting done yet. You have what many old people crave for – time. The old crave for the opportunity to reverse the hands of the clock so that they would go back in time and have the opportunity to correct some of the strategic mistakes they made while young, mistakes that might have led to some depressing outcomes that they cannot easily disentangle themselves from. But unfortunately, one thing is clear: one thing even the most powerful men and women who have ever lived on this earth never succeeded to do was to reverse the hands of the clock, because time marches on –forward ever, backward never. So as the Liberian musician Friday the Cell Phone Man sings, “Simple Mistake, You Out”. Again, remember that Time is your greatest asset. Do not squander it!

2. **The Most Reliable Formula for Success is: Success = Hard Work + Grace of God.** Some others will give you complex, highfaluting,

mysterious, subterranean, and dangerous formulae for success, but the formula I know, because it has worked for me and for mankind since the days of Creation is that success is a combination of hardwork, hard preparation, indomitable courage mixed with the Grace of God. All other formulae for success are fickle and dangerous. Some may lead to temporary success, but later on empty into permanent frustration or shame. At this juncture, I want to tell you something about the word SWEAT. The word SWEAT has encoded within it a little formula that tells an interesting story. If you do some deconstruction by separating the last three letters from the word SWEAT, you end up with the word EAT. In short, there is a symbiotic relation between sweating and eating. Sweating, or what you may call hardwork, hard study, preparation or perspiration, is, in most cases, a sine qua non for EATING, or what we may call success. The tragedy we face is that many persons want to EAT, or succeed, without SWEATING, or preparing. This is a dangerous and untenable course to pursue. But in spite of the fact that hard work or hard study or hard preparation more often than not leads to success, it is only through the GRACE of GOD that any one of us attains our life's goals and dreams. Whether we live today or tomorrow, whether external circumstances will be favorable or not to the actualization of our dreams, or whether we will be there at the right time and moment to

kick the ball in the net, oftentimes depends on the Grace of God. Remember that God deprives us of what we consider our dream because, in His infinite wisdom, the achievement of that specific dream may turn out to be a nightmare.. What we, in our limited, mortal, and carnal minds consider frustration, God considers salvation. So work hard, study hard, be disciplined and let the Almighty do his part, armed with the knowledge and faith that that when God brings you to it, He will take you through it.

3. Maintain Your Focus and Keep Your Eyes Steady on Your Objective:

The good book, the Holy Bible, is truly a rich document. In it, there is guidance on practically every subject or circumstance we face. Again in the Bible, one can find very useful instructions for success. Obstacles, problems, distractions, or difficult circumstances will often dog us, but the way to deal with these challenges is laid out clearly in the Holy Book – keep your eyes on your goal, your objective, your dream. The biblical chronicle involving Jesus Christ and his disciple Peter is very instructive when speaking of keeping focused. In Matthew 14: 22-34, we read that for as long as Peter kept his eyes and mind fixed on Jesus, he remained buoyant- he could walk on water, which was a miraculous feat. But as his mind and eyes began to drift as he bothered more about the wind and from the moment he took his

eyes off Jesus, he began immediately to submerge or sink. Jesus represents your objective, your goal, and your dream. The wind represents challenges, problems, and difficult circumstances. So the moral of the story is that no matter your circumstances, no matter the difficulty of today or tomorrow, keep your eyes on your dream. If your dream is to be a medical doctor, or a pilot, or a Minister of Foreign Affairs, or an Executive Governor of the Central Bank, or a future President of Tubman University, keep focused on that dream regardless of the fact that you are going to bed with an empty stomach today. One day, just as Peter walked on water, you too will achieve your miracle by achieving your dream. Life is not all rosy. The truth is, it has never been, but being decisive as to what you want to make of your life and remaining committed to your objective are very important for success.

4. **Cultivate the Attitude of Success:**” There is a common saying, “when a child washes his or her hands very well, he or she will eat with king”. You all know the biblical story of Joseph and David as well as countless other stories of individuals who came from pauperized, humble backgrounds to being kings and or great leaders of their time. It is often said that *your attitude will determine your altitude*. Being smart is good, but sometimes smartness or book knowledge alone cannot give you the kind of job you

crave. Oftentimes, it is about your attitude – your discipline, your humility, decency, your integrity, your time culture, and your respect for colleagues, both above and below you. Indeed it all boils down to good character.

5. Prepare for Uncertainties: Life is full of ebbs and flows, highs and lows, perennial vicissitudes; it is indeed not a walk in the park. Life can be an uphill journey without a compass or a GPS (Global Positioning System.) During our civil crisis, there were some professional accountants who had to become professional palm cabbage tappers. The lesson is this: Prepare for all weather conditions, especially in this day and age of climate change, which means that the weather will behave erratically sometimes. You have to hope for the best while preparing for the worst because you may never know where life may toss you. So while in university, try as much as you can to grasp the universality of the education and training that this environment may offer. That you are studying Physics should not stop you from sometimes attending a forum held by students of Economics to debate why the US dollar-Liberian dollar exchange rate is behaving the way it is behaving. Versatility matters because one can never speak with the utmost certainty as to what assignment life will give us. My story is a case in point. In terms of degrees formally earned in school, I earned degrees in Finance,

Accounting, and Economics. I hold an MBA in Finance and Accounting. But like Jonah in the Bible, I was swallowed by the whale onto a different destiny and here I am today serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs, a job many would think you require formal degrees in Political Science or International Relations. Some may ask, “How have you been to cope?” The answer is simple – while I was pursuing formal degrees in Finance, Accounting, and Economics during my days in school, I was also pursuing, through workshops, seminars, and extra-curricular activities, many informal degrees, one of which was in Political Science and International Relations. So my advice to you young people is this: To be able to fit in multi-dimensional settings, avoid being stupidly brilliant by imprisoning yourself in the solitary walls of your major. Having interest only in Chemistry because you are majoring Chemistry is potentially risky. Do not isolate yourself. Mix with people from diverse backgrounds and interests who can add value to your life

6. **Finally, Be a Nationalist, a Patriot, a True Liberian.** It is not wrong for any one of us to have our individual dreams or ambitions or objectives, but we should always remember that we live in a country called Liberia; and that if the ambition or dream or vision of Liberia is not achieved, it will be difficult for us to achieve our private ambitions or visions. So in short, my

dear compatriots, *we cannot afford to log out of Liberia; we must remain logged in. We cannot afford to become indifferent to the future of our country, because a good future for Liberia will mostly likely lead to a good future for Liberians. Therefore we should never pursue our personal ambition or objectives to the detriment of the national ambition. We should make our dreams and our visions to be en sync with the national vision – a vision for national development and prosperity, a vision for unity and reconciliation, a vision for peace and security within our border and sub-region and our one world.*

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Former US President John F. Kennedy once said, “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women.” As you, students of TU, pursue your respective career objectives, may the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, and Omniscient Father open His showers of blessings upon you and may you be stronger men and stronger women who would withstand the ever changing climate of life; and may the Almighty bless our Nation, Liberia, as we all work together, to our achieve our national vision of transformation and sustainable progress.

THANK YOU.