

**COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS DELIVERED BY AUGUSTINE KPEHE NGAFUAN AT THE  
GRADUATION CEREMONY OF THE WILLIAM BOOTH SALVATION ARMY HIGH  
SCHOOL**

**PAYNESVILLE, MONROVIA, LIBERIA**

**JULY 5, 2014**

Hon. William Twehway, Representative of District No.3, Montserrado County;

Maj. Samuel Amponsah, Gen. Secretary of the Salvation Army Education Board  
& Secretariat;

Mr. David Massaquoi, Director of the Salvation Army School System;

Mr. Levi S. Nyumah, Principal of the William Booth Junior. & Senior High School  
and Faculty and Staff of the School;

Members of the Class of 2013/2014 of the William Booth, the "Pa-Da-Stra-A-Das-  
Tra" Class;

Distinguish ladies and gentlemen,

Before I launch into the task for which I have been invited, I will like to extend thanks to the graduating class, the faculty, and the Administration of the William Booth Salvation Army School for showering such a great honor upon me by selecting me to speak to you all on this auspicious occasion. When I received your invitation to be your guest speaker, I could not have refused to honor it because as a young man who values education, I always relish the opportunity to share my thoughts and counsel with the younger folks of my generation.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you may know, because of my extremely hectic national and international engagements, it was only two days ago that it became clear that my schedule could accommodate this speaking engagement. So as I contemplated on what message I would give you on this great occasion, I decided to scour through some of my recent speeches, as I have over the years spoken to many different groups of young people on many different themes. One of the speeches that triggered my interest was the one I delivered some two months ago at the launch of the Inter high school national debate competition at the Centennial Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia. I spoke on the theme, "Building a Scholarly Character in the Liberian Student." And because of the profound relevance of this topic to young people of today, I have again decided to speak on the same topic here today.

The late iconic and legendary freedom fighter, former South African President Nelson Mandela once said, "No country can really develop unless its citizens are educated." Education or proper intellectual cultivation is not only acquired within the rectangular walls of a classroom. Proper education comes from years of positive socialization and conditioning acquired from different sources,

different experiences, and different places. Again the philosopher and novelist George Satanyana was so right when he said, "The child educated only at school is an uneducated child."

The Liberian student is a subset of the Liberian society. Positive attributes of the Liberian society, will more often than not, be imbibed by the Liberian student; conversely, negative attributes of the Liberian society usually leads to negative attributes in the Liberian student. So if we will succeed in building a scholarly character in the Liberian student, we must also endeavor to build a scholarly character in the Liberian society.

Various players and stakeholders of the society impact on the development of a young person. So the task of building a scholarly character in the Liberian student is a multidimensional one which requires the combined efforts of the family, the schools, the media, the students themselves and the national government.

**The family** has a great responsibility in this process of building a scholarly character in the Liberia student because the family is the individual's first point of contact with his community. The family in order words is the foundation-stone of society. It is within families that the initial formation of the thought processes of young people is begun. A young person's outlook, interests and habits are deeply influenced by what he/she experiences at the level of the family. If a

child sees his father or mother reading a book every day, the inquisitive nature that is inherent in everyone will likely spur that child's interest in trying to find book to read as well. On the contrary, if a child does not see his mother or father reading a book or even caring to keep one, that child will most likely think that books are anathema to his or her development or wellbeing. Children will exhibit in school what they are taught at home and that is why the parents must rise up and give more attention to what their children do.

The family must show a sense of appreciation for scholarly things in order to inspire in their children the consciousness for scholarship. This does not necessarily mean that parents must have PHDS before they inspire their children aspiring to have PHDs. I have heard breathtaking stories of poor and uneducated fathers and mothers who in spite of their poverty and lack of education struggled and sold the charcoal, the bitter-balls and pepper and sometimes even afforded to go without a day's meal just to pay the tuition of their children.

There are some fundamental questions that we must pose: what gifts do parents buy for their children? How many parents buy news papers for their children to read and become au courant with current events that are obtaining in Liberia, on the African continent and in the world as a whole? How many parents take up at least fifteen minutes of their time to sit down with their children after work

to review their copybooks and run a general diagnostic inquiry of how their children are doing in their studies?

In every child there is an intellectual void and a burning thirst that calls for quenching and parents at the family level must lead the way in providing the necessary guidance and mentorship that imbue in the young and impressionable minds the love for scholarly accomplishments.

To build scholarly character in students would mean that parents must ensure that **the peers** that their children follow must themselves pass the parents evaluation of deportment. Parents must never refrain from engaging their children at all levels of their development especially during their formative years. Any responsible and caring parent would like to know what kind of peers your children mingle and interact with. Who are the friends of our children? Do they have scholastic characters that can impact positively on them? If a child does not do well in say mathematics, it is only rationale that a friend who knows mathematics is at the top of his friendship list so that he benefits from the mathematical prowess of his friend.

**Institutions of learning** can build scholarly character in students by creating the ambience that promotes scholarly and academic culture. Schools must build libraries and research centers that are conducive for learning. We need places for our students that can compete with the cinemas and the beaches. There must be fantastic reading rooms and recreation centers that can compete with

the fantastic Fridays that see our students flood the beaches and beer bars expending their youthful energies and exuberance on things that will accrue little benefits to them in the future.

Many persons may not have the means to purchase a ticket to travel out of the country; and certainly, the generation of today cannot interact with the generation of the past. However, through the magic of reading one can travel to the far flung corners of the world and take a flight in time and interact with the great philosophers of Athens. Through books and research students could travel through the ages and interact with the likes of Socrates.

Students do not have to go to Mali to know about Mansa Kanka Musa and the ancient scrolls in the libraries at Timbuktu, students do not have to go to France to know about Voltaire who is famous for saying "I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it," students do not have to go to Germany to know about Martin Luther and the protestant revolution. Students, if they must know these things, must cultivate the scholarly character of reading, research, cross-examination. Institutions of learning can help build a scholarly character in the Liberian student by providing them with the incentives that stimulate their interest in research. Schools should institutionalize and regularize the practice of awarding prizes to students for their academic performances. Students develop what I call "positive envy" for their colleagues

when they see them being recognized and put on the pedestal for academic excellence.

Recognizing students for academic excellence has a double barrel effect. Firstly, it encourages high performers to do better and motivates the low performers to buckle and put in their all. When we recognize our students we give them our approbation that what they are doing is desirable and in the best interest of themselves and our country, but when we are insensitive or indifferent to their achievements we derail their self-confidence and demoralize them.

We also need to promote the culture of debates as a way of building a scholarly character in the Liberian student. The more debates people engage into, the more tolerant they become of opposing views and perspectives because they realize that what matters is not their physique or skin color or the depth of their pockets but the soundness and validity of their ideas and arguments. When the culture of debates is institutionalized people tend to disagree agreeably, thereby reducing the possibility of violent confrontations and increasing the possibility of peaceful co-existence. The person who quickly throws a blow or fires a gun in an argument or a contentious situation is a person who quickly runs out of solid ideas and arguments that can debunk their opponents.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this age of globalization and technological advancement, it is almost impossible to build a scholarly character in students if the media does not play a pivotal and responsible role. The media has a very critical role because much of what students hear and read every day comes from the microphones and pens of journalists. The stories that journalists write and the stories that they read help to inform the thinking of students. The words or phrases commonly used by journalists on radio may sooner than later become the words and phrases used by many young people in their conversations; and the quality or standard of writing journalists employ in their newspapers will soon be adopted by many young people as the acceptable standard of writing. Therefore, journalists must be conscious of their critical role in society and never back pedal on professionalism.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

A scholar is one who is inquisitive, curious, researching, analyzing, computing, as well as reporting. A scholar is like an oasis in the Sahara Desert providing water for thirsty travelers. A scholar is someone who takes up assignments or homeworks not assigned by the instructor. A scholar must be conscious, and must not be superficial or fake; and above all, a scholar must have integrity.

National Government

Building a scholarly character in the Liberian student will require the dedication of more and more of the nation's resources to education. And as the budget debate heats on and various priorities are being advanced by various stakeholders, I call on all the governmental stakeholders in the process to lend budgetary support to the many interventions that are critical to the improvement of the educational sector including continuing support to teacher training initiatives and the proper remuneration of our teachers. We must dedicate more and more of our nation's resources to education because of a simple and somber truth, ***if Liberia does not put an end to illiteracy, illiteracy will put an end to Liberia.***

So my young brothers and sisters of the graduating class, I salute you for your historic achievement. After more than twelve years of toil, more than twelve years of burning the midnight candle, you have reached this historic point in your young lives. I am proud of you and Liberia is proud of you.

Young brothers and sisters of the graduating class, the Liberia you are entering is getting increasingly competitive. How do you survive in this harsh competitive environment? My first advice to you is to move on with your education because acquiring a high school degree is no guarantee for success in the new Liberia. Do not allow this little success to make you drunk. No one ever finishes school. **As Newton D. Baker put it, "the man who graduates today and stops learning tomorrow is uneducated the day after."** Even the PHD holder is always learning.

My advice to you is to read, read, read, and read. Your commencement today is the first step. As I look in your eyes, I see hope. So press on. I see great men and women in this class. I see renowned politicians, renowned doctors, renowned scientist, etc. Know that if you have the ability to earn a doctorate degree, you cheat yourself and your country for settling for a master degree. If you have the ability to earn a master, you cheat yourself by settling for a bachelor degree. If you have the ability to earn a bachelor you cheat yourself by settling for a high school diploma. In short, be greedy for knowledge because as Alexander Pope says, "A little learning is a dangerous thing."

So as you leave the **high** school of William Booth and venture into the **hard** school of life, I give you this big brotherly advice, **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. 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: NO ONE CAN REVERSE THE HANDS OF THE CLOCK.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Henry Adams once said, "A teacher affects eternity: he can never tell where his influence stops." So to those of you man and women who have chosen to man our schools and our classrooms, I say congratulations for your great patriotic services to your dear nation. Continue to abide by the ethics of your noble profession. Do not damage your reputation or integrity. Make sure that the grades your students reflect the actual performance of your students. The exams are meant to be a form of diagnosis such that the results therefrom will lead to corrective actions. To put it crudely, it is dangerous for a patient who has undergone testing to be told that he has malaria when in fact he has Ebola. Schools administrators and teachers should never forget that as mind molders, the future of our country is in your hands.

To the parents and guardians of the graduates, I say thanks to you for spending your last dime and your last nickel so that these young men and women we go to and remain in school. Doing so affirms to your realization of the fact that the best legacy you can bequeath to your nation and your world is to leave behind well-educated and properly groomed children.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Before I dismount this podium, I will like to leave you with the words of Victor Hugo who once said, "You can defeat an army of warriors, not an army of ideas." Thus, if we are to make our nation strong, if we are to make our nation prosperous, if we are to make our nation peaceful, if we are to make our nation proud among the comity of nations, we must build a scholarly character in the Liberian society generally and in the Liberian student specifically.

*Finally, as a way of recognizing and promoting excellence in the school system, I am hereby committing to personally pay the tuition and fees of the Valedictorian and the Salutatorian of this graduating class in any local university of their choosing. This offer is valid from the time of their admission to the time of their graduation.*

Thank you very much.

