

Excerpt from Jason Reynolds' commencement speech to Lesley University, Class of 2018

I'm willing to bet the commencement speech opened with a scholar or a celebrity stating, *You made it*, followed by some exceptionally intelligent rhetoric, all bending into a narrative arc landing comfortably on, you guessed it, a charge of leadership. And, honestly, all these speeches can be boiled down to a simple cliché: Get out there, spread your wings, and change the world.

That is what I am going to tell you in about five minutes.

But before I try to inspire you to take on the characteristics of the animals that fly above us, I need to first tell you a story about the animals that dwell beneath.

See, when I was in high school, I had this teacher, Mr. Williams. He was an odd gentleman, dressed in neon Oxford shirts, knitted ties, and dingy Nikes. He had an actual bowl cut, which was especially funny given that his hair was porcelain white. He taught a class (that he made up) called Global Studies, which every senior had to take in order to graduate.

One day, in the middle of the year, we all filed into class. Mr. Williams trailed us, entering the room last — sneakily sidestepping — holding something behind his back.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said, dramatically revealing a plastic bag with a tropical fish in it. He held it up and explained that this fish would be our class pet, which none of us was particularly enthused about because we were seniors and therefore deemed ourselves far too old to have a class pet. But Mr. Williams insisted.

After putting the fish in a tank, he asked us to name it and feed it every day. There was only one rule — a non-negotiable. We could not, under any circumstance, touch the fish. Mr. Williams warned us that if he caught any student with their hands in the tank, or if our fingers even came close to those technicolor scales, in any way, we would be suspended for two days, no questions asked. This didn't seem like anything worth fighting him on. I mean, think about it, what high school student wants to open his or herself up to the obvious onslaught of jokes that would ensue from handling a fish in the middle of the school day? None. So...*no problem*.

Day after day we'd come to class, feed the fish, sometimes press our faces up to the glass watching this rainbow in motion swim back and forth. Over time, we even settled on a name for

it: Confucius. But about a month into Confucius's residency, just after its daily feeding, Mr. Williams casually walked over to the tank and, using a net, removed the fish and set it on the floor.

It flipped and flopped and flapped, gasping, inflating, deflating, dying in front of us. We gathered around to watch it, mortified, afraid, confused, until finally two young ladies shuffled into the circle, scooped Confucius up like a live grenade, and tossed the fish back into the tank.

Of course, we were all relieved — including those of us too cool to show that we cared — until Mr. Williams suddenly told those young ladies to pack their bags and head down to the principal's office.

"The rules are the rules," he said. "And I made it very clear that under no circumstance are you to touch the fish. So, unfortunately you're both suspended."

We were all outraged. Riddling our teacher with "Are you serious?" and "Is this some kind of joke?" But Mr. Williams was absolutely serious, and this was definitely not a joke.

The young ladies burst into tears, and as they left the class and walked down the hall, Mr. Williams poked his head out the door.

"Hey," he called. "Pick your heads up. You have no reason to hang them because you, in fact, did the right thing. But sometimes doing the right thing has consequences."

As for the rest of us, we then had to sit through the remainder of the class, wallowing in our guilt, in our fear, shifting uncomfortably in our skin.

That day with Mr. Williams was the single most important day in my entire academic experience, and one of the most transformative moments in my life. It has haunted me ever since. It has affected the way I approach my work, but more importantly the way I choose to live. Every day is a day of decision-making. A day for me to actively decide what I'm willing to sacrifice, what I'm willing to risk. A day for me to continue to parse the difference between irreverence and irresponsibility. A day to continue to assess the insignificance of being told over and over and over again to spread my wings and change the world, without ever addressing the fact that not everyone has wings.

There are those of us whose wings have been clipped. Those of us who dwell in unknown

spaces. Those of us who are beautiful beyond belief, but that sometimes exist in environs too deep and murky to be seen from any stable surface. Those of us from raging waters, and crashing waves; beached, but trying desperately to breathe. Flipping, and flopping, and flapping, inflating, deflating, dying, only to be met by mortified and confused faces.

So the question is, what good is it for me to fly so far above them, when they'll only look smaller to me the higher I go? And how exactly will my grossly distorted perspective change the world...for the better? Is there a way to tether ourselves to one another? A way for us all to catch the wind?

That is the challenge. That's what we must think about in our work, in our art, in our writing, our research, our activism and advocacy. If not, our degrees will be nothing more than paper-thin pedestals. Talismans of ego, connected to more of the same blanket rhetoric about change that we will conveniently use to readjust the comfort level of our ill-fitting skin during moments of apathy.

So if you really want to change the world, return to the chorus of your elementary school. But this time, when you sing out, "This Land Is Your Land," or "This Little Light of Mine," spread your wings, those broad wings you've been developing — the ones you've been fortunate enough to be reminded of over and over again — spread them as widely as possible, and in every direction, and ask if anyone else could use a feather or two.

Maybe then, more of us might also have a moment to say, *We made it.*

Congratulations, now let's get to work.