Mister President, Board of Trustees, faculty, students, families, friends of students, and particularly the distinguished graduating class of 1983, thank you. Mary Patterson was a member of the graduating class of 1862. She was the first black woman in America to receive the bachelor of arts degree. She received it here at Oberlin. So I want to speak to the graduating class of 1983 through the voice of Mary Jane Patterson, 1862.

Quote:

"The days were dark and nights darker still. Human souls shuddered at the war within and the war raging without. Hate had blinded the eyes and hardened the heart as the wings of greed blew down our land; brothers severed familial bonds with other brothers with the audacity of furious harvesters mowing rank weeds. In that maelstrom, Oberlin stood and stood firm--more a moral concept than architecture, more a spiritual commitment to be God's college than an institution where intellectual ideas could be studied in vacuum.

"The issues which faced my graduating class differ only slightly from those which are bound in your time. One hundred and twenty one years ago there were factions who loved peace, wished and worked to an end to all hostilities, of every sort--and there were those whose madness for war turned our countryside into an abattoir. This generous land, rich in resources and filled with promise drove sober men into a frenzy of acquisition: buy this, exploit that, get more, own more, and more, and more. The nation 121 years ago was already falling away from God and becoming exiled to things. One hundred and twenty one years ago men and women were oppressed because of the color of their skins and forced, like social pariahs, to live apart from
the good folks, to be separated from the good life. Native Americans of 121 years ago were pushed from the land, separated from the good folks, and apart from the good life. They were deceived by false treaties, fooled by bad promises, and forced to become social pariahs. The Asian, 121 years ago, servant to Gold Mountain, valet to the frenzied 49'ers, was forced to live apart from their women, good folks, and the good life. They were considered inscrutable, unknowable, alien, other. One hundred and twenty one years ago the Jew was made into myth, reviled, sometimes accepted in public by the good folks and hated in private by the same good folks. The poor whites, 121 years ago, the lower classes, were impugned, ignored--fuel for the machinery of war and grists for the mills of hate. One hundred and twenty one years ago woman was considered--if she was considered at all--to be a liability to her family or an appendage to her husband, to be used for her serviceability or raped for her weakness.

"Now those were the conditions in my day 121 years ago. You will have to decide individually how much things have changed since then. At Oberlin my classmates and I were taught, along with our academic lessons, temperance, moderation, and sacrifice. We learned to be responsible to God, humanity, and to ourselves. We were urged, encouraged to commit our souls and lives to the higher calls.

"Personally, I left Oberlin and taught for seven years in Philadelphia at the Institute for Colored Youth. Then in Washington, D.C. I became the first colored woman principal of the preparatory school, high school for negroes. That institution still stands today in your time and is called Dunbar High School.

"The graduating class of 1862, as were all students at Oberlin, was charged with the order to build a nation founded on Christian principles and vigorous
with the love of right action. John Mercer Langston, a black Oberlin graduate, Class of 1849, went on to become a successful lawyer here in Oberlin. He was minister to Haiti and founded the law school at Howard University. He later become president of Howard University. Langston Hughes, the twentieth century poet, was great-nephew of Oberlinian John Langston, and Mr. Hughes captured the theme of my 1862 graduating class:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plains
Seeking a home where he himself is free,
Now America never was America to me.
Let my land be a land where liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.
There never has been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this homeland of the free.
Say, who are you who mumbles in the dark
And draws your veil across the stars?
I— I am the young man full of strength and hope
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain,
Of grab the land, grab the gold,
Work the men, take the pay,
Of owning everything for one's own greed,
I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker, soul to the machine,
I am the negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, hungry, hungry yet
Today, pioneer, despite the dream.
Yet I am the one who dreamt that basic dream,
In that old world while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true
That even its mighty daring sings in every brick and stone,
In every furrow turned that's made America the land it has become
Let America be America again.
The land that never has been yet must be.
Oh I say it plain, America never was America to me.
And yet I swear this oath: America will be.
We, the people must redeem the land, the rivers,
The endless plain, all, all that stretch of great green states
And make America America again.
"Now in 1862 my schoolmates clearly understood the assignment of making America America again. We understood we had to flesh out dreams of greatness through goodness. Certain Oberlinians traveled throughout Ohio, and bravely into Kentucky and Tennessee, speaking to slaveholders about the evils of slavery. Some were tarred, others beaten, some Oberlinians faced death, while too many—one would have been too many—went to prison, holding strong to the Oberlin ideal of all attempts to enslave one human being are attempts to enslave us all. Fletcher in his thorough history of Oberlin notes that Oberlin established its free soil policy in a time when such a stand was legally treasonable. Oberlin was Republican during decades when Republicanism threatened the status quo. Founders, teachers, preachers, supporters and students realized that their world would be endangered—they would call down upon their heads the vitriolic responses of an enraged and armed opposition. But Oberlinians were convinced that there is no thing so powerful as an idea whose time has come, that there is no person so right as one who struggles for the rights of others, and that just one person with God constitutes the majority.

"What I learned at Oberlin through the teachings of my professors, the conduct of my classmates and the examples of the ministry, prepared me to love right for its own sake, to risk being good for my soul's sake, and to dare to be courageous for God's sake. I hope it has been the same for you. Thank you."