Class Day Speech Thursday, June 4, 2020

“Never forget where you came from, and always praise the bridges that carried us over.” Fannie Lou Hamer born in 1917 in Mississippi to sharecroppers

My grandmother’s name was Fannie - Fannie Morning Brown in fact. She was born on March 21, 1927 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina to Nina and Norman Hinton. She attended college and was a teacher in Washington DC before becoming a nurse. She was called “Punch” by my grandfather, William H. Brown Sr., and they had three children. The oldest was William Brown Jr. who I call “Uncle Brownie”, my mother Nina - she was a middle child like me, and the youngest was Leona whose nickname is Dee”. My aunt Dee was named after my grandfather’s mother. I remember that “Punch” - of course to me she was grandma - she loved beer, spoke some French, and we watched Dallas, Love Boat, and Fantasy Island together. Who shot JR was an exciting and exhilarating time for us both. My grandmother did not cook. My grandfather was the cook in the family making all of our holiday meals and even made all the food at my parents’ wedding, which was hosted in their backyard. My grandmother was married at 22 years old in 1949. I can only imagine how she must have experienced the world. We never talked about race, racism or any sexism that she faced. I never thought to ask and she did not offer it. We talked about books and what I was studying in school. She cared a lot about my achievement and because I was an honor roll student through middle and
high school - class president too, I like to think that I was her favorite. When I went away to college in Massachusetts my grandmother and grandfather mailed me care packages of snacks and essential items along with a post office money order for $40 almost every month. She died May 11, 1998 just two years after I started at Bryn Mawr. Fannie Brown was 71 years old. I remember how loving and supportive this community was for me in that moment and when my other three grandparents died too and especially when my father died on New Year’s Day, less than three months after the birth of my daughter. My daughter, Inez, is named after my father’s mother’s mother. My father’s mother was Margaret and her mother Inez Edwards Duncan. And, so I come from these women, Inez, Margaret, Fannie, and Nina. I have not said their names enough since their passing but because of lockdown, I had a little time on my hands to go through old photos, obituaries, and share the stories of these four women with my daughter.

“Never forget where you came from, and always praise the bridges that carried us over.” Fannie Lou Hamer, 1960’s civil right’s leader

The luxury of being in your grandparent’s home and at their table is that they make the world seem so simple. They cook for you, clean for you, and most often bend to your every desire. But, as I have gotten older the world seems to become more complicated - - but in reality, the more you study history the more you know that the world has always been complicated. And maybe even more so for a Black woman coming of age in
the 1940’s. I wonder what my grandmother thought of the black intellectuals of her day and the activists who were blazing trails as she entered motherhood. My grandmother certainly participated in the collective mourning of Black Americans everywhere when Emmett Till was lynched in August of 1955 for reportedly whistling at a white woman. I wonder what my grandmother’s relationship was like with white women. I wonder what advice she would give to me in navigating the current moment as there have been more Emmett Tills including Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others whose names never made headline news. I come from Fannie Morning Brown and I come from this history. And, all of us here who live in America come from this history too just as surely as we come from our mothers and grandmothers.

Black women. Black bodies. Whiteness. We are witnessing a complicated truth about our country and its institutions. And that TRUTH, as I see it, is that this place has been the oppressor just as often as it has been a champion of the oppressed. I have offered the names of the Black women from which I come and the names of the black souls they - and I - have mourned not to condemn white people. But rather, to celebrate Black joy, Black families, Black resilience, Black life, and to intentionally reject the assumption - sometimes spoken, sometimes not that White is right, closer to God, holy, all knowing, beautiful and the epitome of being.
“Never forget where you came from, and always praise the bridges that carried us over.” Fannie Lou Hamer, organizer of the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign

The world is complicated, and it has always been complicated. As we mourn - we also celebrate. We often seek to present as strong and invincible but it is often our vulnerability which connects us to one another. The class of 2020, you have had phenomenal commencement speakers all spring - people such as President Obama, my forever first lady Michelle Obama, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, and Malala Yousafzai to just name a few who wanted to offer you inspiration in this moment of uncertainty. They have wanted you to feel strong and invincible and to smile. And yet, I wonder if their words fall flat for you. I suspect that you - the class of 2020 - would trade all of this fanfare to be in the graduation garden again - entirely occupied by the shape of the trees behind me and the sounds of the birds or the random noise on Northern Parkway during this speech. You will soon have your high school diploma in hand, evidence of your hard work, achievement, and mastery of skills and content, and yet there are so many more questions to ask and lessons to learn. What stories will you tell our granddaughters about this moment?

“Never forget where you came from, and always praise the bridges that carried us over.” Fannie Lou Hamer, organizer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
This place - Bryn Mawr - with its rich, cherished history - and complicated past - is where we come from and it has been a bridge connecting us to one another and to a future in which the voices of girls are heard. A future in need of truth-seekers. A future in need of bright, dynamic, powerful, generous, creative, resilient, and compassionate girls and women. The world needs more humans like you - all of you - at every leadership table. It needs you to create art and prose. It needs you to create laws and systems that work to honor our humanity. This world needs you to play, laugh, achieve, investigate, organize, and teach. We need you to believe that this country can be better and do better. We need your talents to make it so. Should you accept the challenge, we need you to have faith in yourself and in your vision for a future in which we can all have what we need. The safety, comfort, and opportunities you want for yourself - they are the same ones that Asian and latinx people have been fighting for. Gay and queer people have been fighting for. Muslim and Jewish Americans fighting for. Indigeneous people and immigrants have been fighting for. It has been what Black people have been leading the way on and fighting for since 1619. I come from a people whose strength is unmatched. What will you teach your daughters?

To the class of 2020, this is your time. You have the skills, the tools, a network of diverse friends, and an awareness of your power and how to use your privilege to make a difference in the world. Lean in to our complicated truths, know our history, and create the world our daughters and granddaughters deserve. Thank you to my family, friends, colleagues,
current and past students, my advisees and Bryn Mawr for carrying me over. And to the class of 2020, “Never forget where you came from, and always praise the bridges that carried us over.” Fannie Lou Hamer, founder of the National Women’s Political Caucus.

THANK YOU!