



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG SUBTITLES



MATT DAMON

WHAT WE DO MATTERS

https://youtu.be/RaLXDIJW3_M

It is such an honor to be part of your day. It's an honor to be here with you, with your friends, your professors and your parents. But let's be honest this is an honor I didn't really earn. I'm just going to put that out there. I mean, I've seen the list of previous commencement speakers, Nobel Prize winners, the U.N. secretary general, president of the World Bank, president of the United States — and who did you get? The guy who did the voice for a cartoon horse. If you're wondering which cartoon horse, that's Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron, a movie some of you might have grown up watching. It's definitely one of my best performances as a cartoon horse.

Well, look, I don't even have a college degree. As you might have heard I went to Harvard, I just didn't graduate from Harvard. I got pretty close but I started to get movie roles and I didn't finish all my courses. But I put on a cap and gown and I walked with my class. My mom and dad and brother were there and everything, I just never got an actual degree. So you could say I kind of fake graduated.

So you can imagine how excited I was when President Reif called to invite me to speak at the MIT commencement. And then you can imagine how sorry I was to learn that the MIT commencement speaker does not get to go home with a degree. So yes, for the second time in my life, I am fake graduating from a college in my hometown. And my mom and my dad and my brother are here again. And this time I brought my wife and my four kids. So welcome kids to your dad's second fake graduation. You must be so proud.

So as I said, my mom is here. She is a professor, so she knows the value of an MIT degree. She also knows that I couldn't have gotten in here. I mean Harvard, you know, barely or a safety school like Yale. Look, I'm not running for any kind of office, I can say pretty much whatever I want.

No, I couldn't have gotten in here but I did grow up here. I grew up in the neighborhood in the shadow of this imposing place. My brother Kyle and I and my friend Ben Affleck, brilliant guy, good guy never really amounted too much. We all grew up right here in Central Square, the children of this sometimes rocky marriage between this city and its great institutions.

To us, MIT was kind of like the man, this big impressive impersonal force, at least that was our provincial kneejerk teenage reaction anyway. And then Ben and I shot a movie here and one of the scenes in Good Will Hunting was based on something that actually happened to my brother Kyle. He was visiting a physicist that we knew at MIT and he was walking down the infinite corridor. He saw those blackboards that lined the halls. And so my brother who's an artist picked up some chalk and wrote an incredibly elaborate totally fake version of an equation. And it was so cool and completely insane that no one raised it for months. This is a true story.



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG SUBTITLES

Anyway, Kyle came back and he said, “You guys, listen to this. They’ve got blackboards running down the hall, because these kids are so smart they just need to drop everything and solve problems”. And it was then we knew for sure we could never have gotten in. But like I said, we later made a movie here which did not go unnoticed on campus. In fact, I’d like to read you some actual lines, some selected passages from the review of Good Will Hunting in the MIT school paper. If you haven’t seen, Will was me and Sean is played by the late Robin Williams, a man I miss a hell of a lot.

So I’m quoting here. “Good Will Hunting is very entertaining but then again any movie partially set at MIT has to be”. But there’s more, in the end the reviewer writes, “The actual character development flies out the window. Will and Sean talk, bond, solve each other’s problems and then cry and hug each other, after sad crying and hugging, the movie ends. Such feel good pretentiousness is definitely not my mug of eggnog”. Well that kind of hurts.

But don’t worry, I know now better than to cry at MIT. But look, I’m happy to be here anyway. I might still be a kneejerk teenager in key respects but I know an amazing school when I see it. We’re lucky to have MIT in Boston, and we’re lucky it draws the people that it does, people like you from around the world. I mean, you’re working on some crazy stuff in these buildings, stuff that would freak me out if I actually understood it – theories, models, paradigm shifts.

I am going to tell you about one that’s been on my mind: simulation theory. Most of you’ve probably heard of this, maybe even took a class with Max Tegmark. But for the uninitiated, there’s a philosopher named Nick Bostrom at Oxford. And he has postulated if there is a truly advanced form of intelligence out there in the universe, it’s probably advanced enough to run simulations of entire worlds, maybe trillions of them, maybe even our own. So the basic idea as I understand it is that we could be living in a massive simulation run by a far smarter civilization like a giant computer game and we don’t even know it.

And here is the thing. A lot of physicists, a lot of cosmologists, they won’t rule it out. I just watched a discussion online a few weeks back, it was moderated by Neil deGrasse Tyson of the Hayden Planetarium. And by and large the panel couldn’t and wouldn’t give a definitive answer. Tyson himself put the odds at 50:50. And I’m not sure how scientific that was but it had numbers in it, so I was impressed. But it got me to thinking. What if this, all of this is a simulation. I mean it’s a crazy idea but what if it is. And if there are multiple simulations, how come we have to be in the one where Donald Trump becomes the Republican nominee for president? Can we like transfer to a different one?

Well, Professor Tegmark has an excellent take on all of this. My advice, he said recently, is to go out and do really interesting things, so the simulators don’t shut you down. Now then again what if it isn’t a simulation. Either way, my answer is the same. Either way what we do matters, what we do affects the outcome.

So either way, MIT, you’ve got to go out and do really interesting things, important things, inventive things, because this world, real or imagined, this world has some problems that we need you to drop everything and solve. So go ahead and take your pick from the world’s worst buffet. Economic inequality, that’s a problem. How about the refugee crisis? Massive global insecurity, climate change, pandemics, institutional racism, a pull to nativism, fear-driven brains working overtime, here in America and in places like Austria,



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG SUBTITLES

where a far-right candidate nearly won the presidential election for the first time since World War II.

Or the Brexit, for God's sakes, that insane idea that the best path for Britain is to cut loose from Europe and drift out to sea. I mean, what is Europe even going to look like in 25 years? And add to that an American political system that's failing. We've got congressmen on a two-year election cycle who are only incentivized to think short term, and simply do not engage with long-term problems.

And add to that a media that thrives on scandal and people with their pants down, anything to get you to tune in so they can hawk you products that you don't need. And add to that a banking system that steals people's money. It's all right. I'm not running for office.

By the way while I'm on this, let me just say this to the bankers, specifically the ones who brought you the biggest heist in history: It was theft and you knew it. It was fraud and you knew it. And you know what else? We know that you knew it. So yeah, you sort of got away with it. You got that house in the Hamptons that other people paid for, as their own mortgages went underwater. And you might have their money, but you don't have our respect. And just so you know, when we pass you on the street and look you in the eye, that's what we're thinking.

And I don't know if justice is coming for you in this life or the next. But if justice does come for you in this life, her name will be Elizabeth Warren.

All right. So before my little banking digression, I rattled off a bunch of big problems. And a natural response is to tune out and turn away.

But before you step out into our big, troubled world, I want to pass along a piece of advice that Bill Clinton offered me a little over a decade ago. Actually, when he said it, it felt less like advice and more like a direct order. What he said was "turn toward the problems you see". You have to engage and turn towards the problems that you see. Except it sounded like turn towards the problems that you see.

But when he said this to me, he literally turned his body for emphasis towards me. No, listen, it seemed kind of simple at the time, but the older I get, the more wisdom I see in this. And that is what I want to urge you to do today: turn towards the problems that you see and engage with them. Walk right up to them, look them in the eye and then look yourself in the eye and decide what you're going to do about them.

Now in my experience, there's just no substitute for actually going and seeing these things. I owe this insight, like many others, to my Mom. When I was a teenager, Mom thought it was important for us to see the world outside of Boston. And I don't just mean Framingham. She took us to places like Guatemala, where we saw extreme poverty up close. And it changed my whole frame of reference.

I think it was that same impulse that took my brother and me to Zambia in 2006, as part of the ONE Campaign — the organization that Bono founded to fight desperate, what he calls stupid poverty and preventable disease in the developing world. And on that trip, in a small community, I met this girl and I walked with her to a nearby bore-well where she could get clean water.



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG
SUBTITLES

She had just come from school. And I knew the reason that she was able to go to school at all is clean water. Namely, the fact that it was available nearby, so she didn't have to walk miles back and forth all day to get water for her family, like so many girls and women do around the world.

So I asked her if she wanted to stay in her village when she grew up. And she smiled and said, "No, no, I want to go to Lusaka and become a nurse!" So clean water — something as basic as that — had given this child the chance to dream.

And as I learned more about water and sanitation, I was floored by the extent to which it undergirds all these problems of extreme poverty. The fate of entire communities, economies, countries is caught up in that glass of water, something the rest of us get to take for granted.

People at ONE told me that water is the least sexy and cool aspect of the effort to fight extreme poverty. And water goes hand-in-hand with sanitation. So if you think water isn't sexy, you should try to get into the shit business.

But I was hooked already. The enormity of it, and the complexity of the issue, it just hooked me. And getting out in the world and meeting people like this little girl is what put me on the path to starting Water.org, with a brilliant civil engineer named Gary White.

For Gary and me both, seeing the world and its problems, its possibilities heightened our disbelief that so many people, millions, 660 million in fact, can't get a safe, clean drink of water or a clean, private place to go to the bathroom. There are more people with a cell phone than access to a toilet on our planet. And this heightened our determination to do something about it.

Now you see some tough things out there. But you also see life-changing joy. And it all changes you. There was a refugee crisis back in '09 that I read about in an amazing article in the New York Times. People were streaming across the border of Zimbabwe to a little town in northern South Africa called Messina. Well, I was working in South Africa at the time, so I went up to Messina to see for myself what was going on.

I spent a day speaking with women who had made this perilous journey across the Limpopo River, dodging bandits on one side, crocodiles in the river, and bandits on the other. Every woman that I spoke to that day had been raped. Every single one. On one side of the river or both.

And at the end of my time there I met a woman who was so positive, she was so joyful. She had just been given her papers, so she had been granted political asylum in South Africa. And in the midst of this joyful conversation, I mustered up my courage and I said, "Ma'am, do you mind my asking: were you assaulted on your journey to South Africa?"

And she replied, still smiling, "Oh, yes, I was raped. But I have my papers now. And those bastards didn't get my dignity."

Human beings will take your breath away. They will teach you so much but you have to engage. I only had



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG
SUBTITLES

that experience because I went there myself. It was difficult in many ways, but of course that's the point.

There's a lot of trouble out there, MIT. But there's a lot of beauty, too. And I hope you see both.

But again, the point is not to become some kind of well-rounded, high-minded voyeur. The point is to eliminate your blind spots — the things that keep us from grasping the bigger picture. And look, even though I grew up in this neighborhood — in this incredible, multicultural neighborhood that was a little rough at that time — I find myself here before you as a middle aged American, white, male movie star. I don't have a clue where my blind spots begin and end.

But looking at the world as it is, and engaging with it, is the first step towards identifying our blind spots. And that's when we can really start to understand ourselves better and begin to solve some problems.

And with that as your goal, there's a few more things I hope you'll keep in mind.

First, you're going to fail sometimes, and that's a good thing. For all the amazing successes I've been lucky to share in, few things have shaped me more than the auditions that Ben and I used to do as young actors, where we would get on a bus, we show up in New York, we'd wait for our turn, we'd cry our hearts out for a scene, and then be told, "OK, thanks." Meaning: game over. We used to call it "being OK thanked." Those experiences became our armor.

All right. Now you're thinking, great, thanks Matt. Failure is good. Thanks a ton. Tell me something I didn't hear at my high school graduation. To which I say: OK, I will.

You know the real danger for MIT graduates? It's not getting "OK thanked." The real danger is all that smoke that's been blown up your ... graduation gowns about how freaking smart you are. Well, you are that smart! But don't believe the hype that's thrown at you. You don't have all the answers. And you shouldn't. And that's fine. You're going to have your share of bad ideas. For me, one was playing a character named "Edgar Pudwhacker." I wish I could tell you I'm making that up.

But as the great philosopher, Benjamin Affleck, once said: "Judge me by how good my good ideas are, not by how bad my bad ideas are." You've got to suit up in your armor, you've got to get ready to sound like a total fool. Not having an answer isn't embarrassing. It's an opportunity. Don't be afraid to ask questions. I know so much less the second time I'm fake graduating than the first time.

The second thing I want to leave you with is that you've got to keep listening. The world wants to hear your ideas — good and bad. But today's not the day you switch from "receive" to "transmit." Once you do that, your education is over. And your education should never be over. Even outside of your work, there are ways to keep challenging yourself. Listen to online lectures. I just retook a philosophy course that I took at Harvard when I was nineteen. You go to MIT OpenCourseWare. Go to Waitbutwhy.com, go to TED.com.

I'm told there's even a Trump University. I have no earthly idea what they teach there. But whatever you do, just keep listening. Even to people you don't agree with at all. I love what President Obama said at Howard



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG
SUBTITLES

University's commencement last month: he said, "Democracy requires compromise, even when you are 100% right."

I heard that and thought: here is a man who has been happily married for a long time. Not that the First Lady has ever been wrong about anything. Just like my wife. Never wrong. Not even when she decided last month that in a family with four kids, what was missing in our lives was a third rescue dog. That was an outstanding decision, honey. And I love you.

The third and last thought I want to leave you with is that not every problem has a high-tech solution. Now if anybody has a right to think we can pretty much tech support the world's problems into submission, it's you. Think of the innovations that got their start at MIT or by MIT alums: the World Wide Web; Nuclear fission; Condensed soup. That's is true, you should be proud of that.

But the truth is, we can't science the you know what out of every problem. There is not always an app for that. I mean take water again as an example. People are always looking at some scientific quick fix for the problem of dirty and disease-ridden water. A "pill you put in the glass," a filter, et cetera. But there's no magic bullet. The problem's just too complex.

Yes, there is definitely, absolutely a role for science. There's incredible advances being made in clean water technology. Companies and universities are getting in on the game. And I'm glad to know that professors like Susan Mercott at D-Lab are focusing on water and sanitation. But as I'm sure she'd agree, science alone can't solve this problem. We need to be just as innovative in public policy, just as innovative in our financial models. And that's the idea behind an approach we have at Water.org called WaterCredit.

It's is based on Gary's insight that poor people were already paying for their water and they, no less than the rest of us, want to participate in their own solutions. So WaterCredit helps connect the poor with microfinance organizations, which enables them to build water connections and toilets in their homes and communities. And this approach is really working, helping 4 million people so far and it's only the start.

Our loans are paying back at 99% and above which is a hell of a better deal than those bankers I was talking about earlier. And I agree it's still not sexy but it is without a doubt the coolest thing I've ever been a part of.

So thanks – so let me ask you this in closing: What are you going to be a part of? What is the problem that you'll try to solve? Whatever your answer, it's not going to be easy. Sometimes your work will hit a dead-end. Sometimes your work will be measured in half-steps. Sometimes your work will make you wear a white sequined military uniform and make love to Michael Douglas. All right, maybe that's just my work.

But for all of you here, your work starts today. And seriously, how lucky are you? I mean, what are the odds that you're the ones who are here today? In the Earth's 4.5 billion year run, with 100 billion people who have lived and died, and the 7 billion of us here now, here you are. Yes, here you are, alive at a time of potential extinction-level events, a time when fewer and fewer people can cause more and more damage, a time when science and technology may not hold all the answers, but are indispensable to any solution.



**ENGLISH
SPEECHES**
WITH BIG
SUBTITLES

What are the odds that you get to be you, right now, The MIT Class of 2016, with so much on the line? There are potentially trillions of human beings who will someday exist or not, whose fate, in large part, depends on the choices you make, on your ideas, on your grit and persistence and willingness to engage.

If this were a movie I was trying to pitch, I'd be laughed out of every office in Hollywood. Joseph Campbell himself would tell me to throttle down and lower the stakes. But I can't. Because this is a fact, this is not fiction. This improbable thing is actually happening. There's more at stake today than in any story ever told. And how lucky you are that you're here, and you're you. And how lucky we are that you are here and you are you.

So I hope you'll turn toward the problem of your choosing.

I hope you'll turn toward the problem of your choosing. I hope you will drop everything, and I hope you'll solve it.

This is your life, Class of 2016. This is your moment, and it's all down to you.

Ready player one. Your game begins now. Thank you. Congratulations.