

Commencement 2007

December 15, 2007

Patrick Awuah, Founder & President
Ashesi University College



Distinguished guest speaker, parents, family and friends, and dear Class of 2007, welcome to the third graduation ceremony at Ashesi University.

Class of 2007, congratulations on reaching this very important milestone; and thank you for giving us the occasion to celebrate your accomplishments and the promise of your future.

You graduate in a year when Ghana celebrates fifty years of independence from colonial rule. As you graduate, this nation closes one chapter and opens a new one for the next fifty years. You will be a part writing this new chapter in the history of Ghana and Africa. And in the twilight of your life, you will have the opportunity to look back at the chapter you helped write. When that time comes, I hope your walk down memory lane will be filled with pride, and the deep abiding peace that comes from knowing that you did your best; that you made a tremendous difference.

I would like to spend a few minutes with you this morning in a conversation about what this new chapter ought to look like, and why the values you have learned at Ashesi will be instrumental in the poetry and the prose that you are about to write with your lives.

But before I do so, I think it is useful to remember what Independence Day meant to Africa and the world. Martin Luther King Jr. was here on that day, and here is how he described the birth of a nation.

When Prime Minister Nkrumah stood up before his people out in the polo ground and said, "We are no longer a British colony. We are a free, sovereign people," all over that vast throng of people we could see tears. And I stood there thinking about so many things. Before I knew it, I started weeping. I was crying for joy. And I knew about all of the struggles, and all of the pain, and all of the agony that these people had gone through for this moment.

After Nkrumah made that final speech, we walked away, and we could hear little children six years old and old people eighty and ninety years old walking the streets of Accra crying, "Freedom! Freedom!" They couldn't say it in the sense that we'd say it—many of them don't speak English too well—but they had their accents and it could ring out, "Free-doom!" They were crying it in a sense that they had never heard it before, and I could hear that old Negro spiritual once more crying out:

*Free at last! Free at last!
Great God Almighty, I'm free at last!*

They were experiencing that in their very souls. And everywhere we turned, we could hear it ringing out from the housetops. We could hear it from every corner, every nook and crook of the community: "Freedom! Freedom!" This was the birth of a new nation. This was the breaking loose from Egypt.

That day, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. felt hope for the liberty of all humankind. When he left the newly formed Republic of Ghana, he returned to the United States and engaged the hard work of writing a new chapter in that country's history.

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He took no short cuts. He paid every price. He led African Americans to accomplish what only they could –to demand an equal place in the fellowship of humanity. America was not alone. Throughout the continent of Africa, a people were moved to demand and attain their inalienable rights in the comity of nations.

This was the meaning of Independence Day: the lifting up of the human spirit from a period of great darkness.

Unfortunately, fifty years on, we still have a lot of work to do. It seems to me that Ghana, and Africa with it, has stood still these past fifty years. Independence Day rescued Africans from the tyranny of colonial rule, but for the vast majority of this continent's citizens, Independence Day did not bring freedom from the tyranny of despotic rule, the tyranny of war, or of poverty and disease. We have stood still for far too long.

Consider a conversation I had with a high ranking official from another African country who attended Ghana's 50th anniversary celebration on 6th March this year. Her impressions of that day were vastly different from Martin Luther King's experience. As she put it, she left Ghana "scared and depressed." She was horrified by the amount of poverty and filth she saw, and she was amazed by how pervasive our flag was in the streets of Accra. She simply could not understand what people were cheering about. About her own country, she could not stop thinking, "Can this happen to us?"

Listen. It will take a tremendous amount of courage from each of us to bring true freedom to the people of this continent. We must have the courage to face our reality, to be humble, and to tackle our condition with the urgency it deserves.

We will need to see our world with new eyes. We will need a new generation of ethical leaders who possess the gift of empathy and the courage it will take to transform a continent. We will need courage to always take the honorable road, instead of taking short cuts.

All around this nation, we see the fruits of dishonorable behavior, and of leaders taking short cuts that lead to dead ends. Let me share some examples with you.

Our leaders have often shunned the difficult path of building stable, competitive markets and have instead taken the short cut of legislating prices. They always get it wrong when they set prices, and they cause the collapse of Ghanaian enterprise, precipitate the loss of jobs, and deprive the government of tax revenues.

Our engineers and city planners continue to take the short cut of building open drains, instead of taking the more difficult path of building underground sewers. As a result, our cities have become large breeding grounds for disease vectors. Our citizens live under a heavy disease burden, which costs our economy huge sums of money in health care. For the most vulnerable among us –the children- it results in death.

Our criminal justice system often takes the short cut of making decisions on the basis of factors other than the just rule of law. The results include undisciplined drivers on our roads, the loss of investment in our economy, and in extreme cases, vigilante justice.

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Our public educational institutions routinely take the short cut of cramming students into classrooms instead of doing the hard work of training more teachers and school administrators, paying them better, and providing them with the right resources to do their work.

Just last week, I visited an educational institution that has huge class sizes. Imagine 1,800 students in a classroom with one instructor. As I looked at those massive lecture halls, with broken furniture piled against the walls, I felt this deep unsettling disquiet within my belly. Why? Because the students being educated in this manner will one day be in positions of enormous responsibility in this country. Will they have the skills that it takes to run a nation? What kind of campus culture is fomenting in that environment?

Our schools are full of students who choose to take the short cut of cheating as a means to get good grades, instead of doing the more difficult and honorable thing of working for their grades. In so doing, they do not learn the material, they cheat themselves out of a good education, and they develop the very habits that have caused so much poverty and despair in this country over the past fifty years.

Yet, in spite of all these problems, I also harbor a great deal of hope for Ghana and for Africa. My hope rests in you. You embody the vision of a continent that will be free of poverty, disease and senseless wars. You embody the idea of a continent whose citizens have the freedom to seek the truth and a more perfect understanding of the human condition.

I know this hope is not misplaced. Many of you have already told me so. What a thrill I have gotten from your letters! I walk this campus with the image of a student who grew up in a mud hut and is now leaving these halls with the long term goal of designing and building affordable homes for the poor. I smile when I think of that student whose Ashesi experience makes *him fly as he walks and sing as he talks*. What a remarkable change I have seen in him these past four years. I get a spring in my step just thinking about it. Words cannot describe how great it feels to have had the privilege of welcoming you to the Ashesi community and to our mission.

As you go out into the world, remember that Ashesi will always be your home. Write to us, and visit often. Remember the meaning of the word *honor*, and let it guide you as you write the next chapter of our history. Remember what Martin Luther King called "*the fierce of urgency of now*."

I feel a great sense of urgency because I believe that this moment is a pivotal one for Africa. First, with the march of democracy and free markets across this continent, we have finally come to a consensus about the right approach for development. The governments of Africa seem finally to have arrived at the conclusion that the state should not be about the denial of human rights. This is an unprecedented opportunity in our history. Second, the most economically advanced countries of this world have moved from a posture of exploiting the weakest nations and are now actively interested in the condition of the African continent. This again, is unprecedented in the history of this continent since the collision of our civilization with Europe.

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But I fear that this window will not remain open for too much longer. The truth is, the West can lend a helping hand, but they cannot solve Africa's problems. Renaissance on this continent will depend on inspired African leadership. If we do not do what we must, the rest of the world will eventually get exhausted, as will the African people. We must begin writing a new chapter with a sense of urgency because the alternative is despair.

The chapter you are about to begin writing will be a difficult one; but it promises to be incredibly lyrical. I look forward to reading about your contributions to our world. I anticipate a chapter full of beautiful prose and verse –poetry whose meter, whose beat, is infused with the irresistible rhythms of the African drum, and the melody of that old Negro hymn:

*Free at last! Free at last!
Great God Almighty, We're free at last!*