



## **Seanne Reyes Clemente Valedictorian Speech**

University of Guam  
Fãñomnãkan 2019 Commencement Ceremony  
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To President Krise, the faculty and staff of the University, esteemed guests, my fellow graduates and their friends and families – I thank you for giving me the great honor of speaking to you today.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word *cliché* is defined as “something that has become overly familiar or commonplace.” So don’t worry – if you thought I was heading in that direction, I hope you are pleasantly surprised.

On a more serious note, I’d like to begin with the most important stuff – saying thank you. A big shoutout to my professors, my off-island mentors, my academic advisor, my friends, my biology and chemistry classmates, and my family for all of your support these past four years.

This is a *commencement* ceremony, so I see it fitting to talk about the commencing – what will happen to us in the future. And by “future” I don’t mean “where are we going to eat after this lengthy commencement ceremony,” of course. Fellow graduates, we are living in a time of change. In such a short amount of time, we have seen amazing advances in technology, medicine, and social change. Here are a few examples – in 1950, the 10-year breast cancer survival rate was less than 30%. Today, it is close to 90%! In 1950, identifying as a member of the LGBT+ community could potentially get you imprisoned, institutionalized, or killed. Just four years ago, I was so proud of our island when we legalized same-sex marriage 3 months *before* the landmark Supreme Court case! And for an example that I’m sure will resonate with everybody – look at the smartphone in your hand, pocket, or bag, and compare it to the first-generation iPhone. That one doesn’t need explanation. There is still so much to do, and as the children of this generation of change, it our responsibility to perpetuate that change for the better.

And then, of course, there is the negative aspect of change. We are inevitably going to face the normal anxieties of fresh college graduates like job security, career uncertainty, and student loans; but on top of that, we represent the front line against climate change. We have a big role in determining whether our children and grandchildren will have a

habitable Earth to live in. Whether it be climate change, our careers, or any other obstacle we stumble upon in life, there will be times where we feel helpless and are tempted to give in to cynicism or apathy. You might say “Seanne, I am only human and there’s only so much I can do!” Other times, we surrender our confidence to the naysayers and haters.

I am not qualified nor wise enough to tell you how to deal with this asphyxiating uncertainty. I struggle fighting it myself. So as a parting message, and so we don’t end on a sour note, I want to share the words of someone who has taken fear head on: the late Wangari Maathai, renowned environmentalist, women’s rights advocate, and Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Referring to pessimism, she famously shared this story:

*There was once a great forest that was one day consumed by a terrible fire. All the animals fled for their lives, and watched helplessly as the forest burned. All except a small hummingbird, who flew to the nearby stream, carried a single drop of water in her beak and dropped it over the fire. She flew back and forth, doing this again and again. Some of the other animals tried to discourage the hummingbird, saying things like “your beak is too small and your wings are too tiny – you can’t possibly put out this fire on your own, what are you doing?!” The hummingbird turns around, and without stopping says “I am doing the best I can.”*

Fellow graduates, in the face of fear, become a hummingbird, and do the best you can. Congratulations on your achievement, and above anything else, I hope you find fulfillment and happiness.

Thank you.