

Dean Uehara, Faculty, Staff, guests, and above all – GRADUATES.

It's my very real pleasure to have some time with you this afternoon – I THANK you for the opportunity.

I want to get right down to business.

It isn't often that a graduating class can know in advance that it is heading out into extraordinary times, but, your class can.

By now we know that the next few years will bring critical, world-changing decisions about every thing from global warming and revolutionary new digital technologies ... to major reforms in health care, transportation, energy ... and much in between.

But this **election year** has already signaled that we are living in a life-altering time. We've just come thru primary campaigns with the first woman to have a serious run at the presidency, the first African-American to have a serious run at the presidency, and one of the few military heroes serving in the US Congress.

The primary is just the beginning of the story. Next year, six of the nine Justices of the Supreme Court will be over the age of 70 – so the next President will name not just one -- but possibly several – members of the Court. That will determine how matters of “**rights,**” and “**justice,**” are defined for decades.

The Congress will also change. This year an unusually high number of U.S. Senators and Representatives have decided not to run again. Plus, every election year, some incumbents lose. Collectively then, all those new members will re-shape the US Congress. (And those newly-elected Senators get to confirm – or reject - any nominees to the Supreme Court.)

Finally, voters in states like ours are also being asked to vote for **Governor, state legislators,** and statewide **ballot initiatives.**

The result? By this time next year there will be: a new president; a very different Congress; some sense of how the Court will be re-shaped; along with new leadership in many of the states. And that's just in the first year after you graduate.

That may sound daunting, but it is also exciting.

My graduating class didn't know we were also heading into extraordinary times, even though life in the US was very different then.

When I graduated from college in 1963, there were...

- **no Head Start, WIC or food stamp programs,**
- there was **no Medicaid,** or **Medicare,** no **Older Americans Act,**
- There was **no Civil Rights Act:** in many places, **segregation by race** was legal;
- there was **no Voting Rights Act** – people of color were routinely denied the right to vote;
- There was **no Americans with Disabilities Act,** no **I-D-E-A** to improve access for people with disabilities;
- There was **no consumer law** (Ralph Nader was still a teacher in Connecticut).
- The **Violence Against Women Act** was decades away; so was **Mental Health Parity,** and any attempts to protect **gender and sexuality rights.**

### And women!

- You could find women in education, social work, or nursing ... but not much else. There were almost no women in: law, medicine, business... you name it.
- **Few women** competed in any sports (there were no athletic scholarships for women until the 1970's);
- Women **in politics** were VERY rare: in the US Congress, **women held just 18 of the 535 seats**, and there were **no female governors**. None.  
And for those who wanted to change any of this??? – good luck. Hardly any **advocacy organizations even existed** to help fight for change.

But..., within 20 years..., virtually all of those laws had been put in place, and all of our lives had been dramatically changed.

So here's my first challenge to you. Since we KNOW you are heading into extraordinary times, times ripe for major, significant change –

- ➔ Which forms of **DISCRIMINATION** do you want to help end?
- ➔ What **PUBLIC POLICIES** do you want to help add or change?
- ➔ Which **GROUPS** do you want to empower?

In short: What will YOU do to make the most of this extraordinary time? ...since you know the choices you make will have the power to transform all of our lives...

It's heady stuff....

Now if you're wondering why I am directing these questions to YOU, people getting degrees in **SOCIALWORK**, just think back to what you learned about the founding mother of social work: **Jane Addams**.

I know Jane Addams is **best** remembered as the founder of Hull House, that amazing social services agency she established in her immigrant neighborhood on Chicago's West side.

But Addams knew that helping individuals was only part of what's needed. She understood the need to also be an activist in the political arena – to work for better laws and public budgets.

At a time when few women were active in public life, Jane Addams:

- ➔ Started the first **juvenile court**, and helped reform services for the **mentally ill**,
- ➔ At the LOCAL level, she was a **Sanitation Officer** for her immigrant neighborhood, and served on the **Chicago School Board**;
- ➔ At the STATE level she worked for laws on **child labor, occupational safety, and workers' pensions**;
- ➔ At the NATIONAL level she helped **enact unemployment insurance**, and a **woman's right to vote**;
- ➔ She was a founding member of the **Women's International League for Peace and Freedom**, and...
- ➔ In 1931, Jane Addams was the first American woman to win the **Nobel Prize for Peace**. Among other things.

Just in case anyone missed the point: Jane Addams did all this for people that others had marginalized or written off. She used her voice on behalf of **troubled youth...**, the **mentally ill...**, **people who couldn't vote...**, **low-wage workers...**, **immigrants...**, **people of color.**

So it is no surprise:

- that the **first woman elected to Congress** in her own right – Jeannette Rankin – was a social worker;
- that the **first woman appointed to serve in a President's Cabinet** – Frances Perkins – was a social worker;
- that **President Roosevelt's closest aide** – Harry Hopkins – was a social worker; or
- that **leading figures in every one of America's social reform movements** right up to the present time ... include Social Workers.

Now, if you are thinking that none of this applies to you because you're planning to teach or do research ... (yes you... getting a PhD...), think again.

- Jane Addams was widely published.
- Hull House staff carried out careful studies and taught classes.
- People flocked to Hull House from all over the world precisely because the work going on there was so exciting, so challenging, so "cutting edge."

One last word about Jane. She once said that, "Action is the sole medium of expression for *ethics*." Right. Ethics and values are of little use in the abstract; they must be put into *action*. Addams understood that the real crime isn't that there are some bad laws, or bad actions by bad people. The real crime occurs when good people remain **silent, do nothing** in the face of those bad laws, in the face of injustice.

That's why our **Social Work Code of Ethics** devotes an entire section to: "Social and Political Action."

My second challenge to you follows from that fact:

No matter where you work, or the nature of your jobs..., never forget that as social workers, our roots are in Policy Advocacy..., in being a voice for others...,  
in working to influence the political process.

For the record, I know how all those laws I mentioned earlier got enacted.

It was because of **Advocacy ... It works!**

- ⇒ True, we face obstacles;
- ⇒ granted, we don't always win; and,
- ⇒ yes, there is much that seems stubbornly undone.

But so much has changed for the better. One thing is certain: NONE of the laws now on the books - good OR bad - got there by accident. The men & women in Congress didn't just wake up one morning and decide to enact all the laws now in place. It happened because people like us called up, and spoke up, and wrote up, and voted up... until the guys in Congress said, "OK, OK. If that's what you want, that's what we'll do."

Next time you doubt that you can make a difference, I want you to remember this next story – it's a political classic - and tell it to others.

## Understanding Butter

Once upon a time there was a fellow who was newly elected to the United States Senate. He was so pleased with himself after his election that the first time someone invited him to a fancy banquet, he showed up early (he was sure everyone would come early... just to see HIM).

In fact, he was so early he was practically the only one in the place. The only other person was the waitress, and she was doing her job: she was putting out the butter.

Nothing else was going on, so he watched her, and she went methodically about her work. Every time she saw a butter plate, she put one pat of butter. Around the room she went: one plate got one pat of butter... one plate, one pat of butter... one plate, one pat of butter....

Finally she got to him. Giving her his best smile he said, "I really like butter. Think I could have another pat of butter?"

"Sorry sir," she said. "I treat everyone the same: one plate gets one pat of butter." She went on about her work.

He was not pleased (that's the polite version). He sat there for a moment, thinking about this, but when he looked around the room there still wasn't anybody in the place. So he got up and *he followed her* – she was at another table by now.

"Excuse me," he said, looking right at her, "maybe you don't know who *I am* -- I'm a *United States Senator!*"

"Maybe you don't know who *I am*," she replied. "*I'm* the one who gives out the butter."

The reason I tell you this story is because **votes** are like butter – and *you are the ones that give out the butter*. You have something that every candidate for every position in America – from school board right up to President of the United States – wants ... they want your butter!

Every time we shake an elected official (or candidate's) hand and say, "Hi, I'm (Nancy) and I live in your District..." a little voice in their brain mutters: "butter." If we mention belonging to a group in their District e.g., "... I'm part of an active group of about 30 social workers in your District" – that little voice says: "butter butter." And if we can further identify with a coalition or some larger organization, e.g., "we're also part of about 200 social agencies touching the lives of thousands of people every day...." Then that little voice turns into a ROAR – and you've just made a political cholesterol hit!

Ask any elected official which is more important to them: money? Or votes? The answer is always the same: **votes**.

And the reason is also always the same: they can always go outside of the District (where their voters live) for money, but they can never go outside of the District for votes. To get and stay in office, they have to win over 51% of the people with the butter, a.k.a. **us**.

That's why advocacy works: we've got the **butter!!!**.  
At some level you know this. And you know you should be involved.

The real trick is: how can anybody fit advocacy into lives that are already very busy?

So, as a parting gift, a final assignment if you will, here are five easy “**Rules for the Road.**” Remember them as you put your new degrees to work.

1. Never forget: **Advocacy just means speaking up.**

You can: **Call, Write, Visit...** do it in Letters-To-the-Editor, with strangers in elevators or grocery store lines, with friends at meetings or at work....;

OR, just talk into your cellphone while you’re sitting on the bus.

Mention something the legislature’s doing... and give out the number to the Capitol.... Nobody has to know there’s nobody on the other end.

Choose the method that is easiest for you – that way you’ll do it.

2. Never base your vote solely on a paid political ad.

Read newspapers and blogs; follow the news; talk to friends. Always get multiple sources.

3. **Be part of an advocacy group.**

You’ll know more by pooling information; it will be more fun; and it will be more effective. Plus, these days the good advocacy groups monitor what’s happening where the laws are made, and they’ll tell you when your voice is needed. Most also provide a sample message. Sign up.

4. **Remember:**

If we give up... others lose: Children will lose. Families will lose. Whole communities will lose. Getting involved doesn’t guarantee success, but **NOT** getting involved means ...

**...you have NO right to complain.**

But -- if we speak up, then we have a chance to change things for the better.

5. Last, **Advocacy is not optional** – not for social workers, and not for anyone who values the privilege of living in a representative democracy.

Here in the United States we are very lucky. We get to choose our elected representatives, and then, we get to tell them how we wish to be represented – it’s that simple ... and that intoxicating! Don’t throw that power away.

Martin Luther King once said that the remarkable thing about Rip Van Winkle isn’t that he slept for 20 years, but that he slept through a revolution.

Today’s revolution, the one starting this year, is yours for the shaping....

Don’t sleep through it. Use your butter. Use your voices.

**MAKE NOISE for justice....**