Thank you faculty, guests, families, friends, and graduating class of 2019 for having me here today. I am truly humbled.

When I was asked to consider being a speaker for today, I wanted to make a list. I love making lists. Go on vacation? Make a list. Plan out the summer? Make a list. Clean the house? Make a list. You get the idea. I love lists.

So I made a list for today. A really great list. A list of all the wonderful things I've learned about this business. Those tidbits shared with me that helped me be successful along the way. How to schmooze. How to own your own voice. How to work in the room. When to say no to a project. And don't get me wrong. Those things are really important.
But at the core, what has really helped me in my work is being kind. Being the type of person I want to work with... with whom I want to work...

So I set aside the list for a bit. Just a bit. It's still there. If you wanna meet up for coffee sometime and talk shop let me know. I'd love to share my list. But tonight what I want to emphasize to you the most, what I really want to make sure I share is... be kind. Be decent. Be a good human. And I mean be kind to everybody. That's right. EVERYBODY. Even those that really make you mad. Perhaps especially those that make you mad.

Wait, what?!? Hold up, Sunam. Isn't that naive? Isn't this a cutthroat business? Don't you have to demand what you want? Take no prisoners? Be a badass?

Sure. But you can do this with kindness.

Really? You can be a badass with kindness, you might ask? Why yes. Yes, you can. You can create change. You can be a strong person. A person to listen to. You can demand what you want. You can keep your dignity. All while being kind.

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I am a mama. I have three beautiful, sassy, brilliant kiddos. I have to say, for me, motherhood has been the single best thing to happen to my acting. Wanna learn about discovery? Watch kids for a while. Ha! Can you imagine if my keynote speech was, “have babies! Have all the babies!” Then I could make lists about having babies. I could take you through what helped me be successful making the babies. It would be a very interesting evening.

Anyway...

My husband and I have a big responsibility with our three kiddos. We must try to teach them to be good humans. Oof. If I'm being completely honest, it's not the best deal for the kiddos, because we're teaching something we haven't really perfected ourselves. At times we fail. And when I say fail, I mean FAIL. So inevitably, all parents screw this up in some way, which gives us the opportunity to be examples of humility. Yay...

Some kids are really sweet and kind and lovely. Some kids are evil, awful bullies. Most kids are a mixture of both. You know, like adults. So, as we work on being better humans, I made up a family motto: may the words you say, and the actions you take, bring out the best in others.

And I'm pretty proud of this motto I have to say. Because it kind of reflects how I want to work. I want to work in a way that brings about the best kind of response from those in the room with me: be that a fellow actor, a director, a choreographer, a designer, a stage manager, etc. etc. It's not always about me. It's about creating an environment that provides space for those around me to be their best.

May the words you say and the actions you take bring out the best in others.

Think about it. It is our job to be vulnerable. We tell stories: get to the hearts of things, strip away walls and get to the truth. We are ambassadors of empathy. We climb into the skin and core and bones of stories, find the humanity (sometimes in the darkest corners), struggle with the most existential questions of a person's quest, then present that to an audience, a community. As if the stories were our own. All this profound, soul-searching – often in mere weeks. I don't know about you, but I could be in therapy for a lifetime and still struggle with "who am I." But we dig fast and deep for these stories.

I was once in a four-hander, and our lead didn't know their lines. While working a scene they would say, "I had this at home; I don't know what's wrong with me." I understand that learning lines is a very real struggle for some actors. I've had my moments when lines don't wanna stay in my head. So, I want to be sympathetic. But in this instance I was not. They looked every bit the tortured artist. But I had a problem. When not on stage, this person would goof around, tell jokes, and regale us with tales of their most recent late-night shenanigans.

I understand the need to make space for your life. I have three kids and a husband. I am always balancing work and personal life. So I have to be creative in how I get the work done. While in rehearsal, if I'm not in a current scene, I might learn lines, drill lines, study the dramaturgy, and anything else to use the time for work. That way I can be more focused on family when I'm home. But I have to say no to my family a lot in order to get work done. Have your fun. Live your life. But do your work.
So the rest of us were pretty upset with this actor. We had a week until we opened, and they didn't know their lines? Our off-book day was a couple weeks prior, so they have to stumble through without their script. The rest of the cast must adlib to fill in the holes. The big, gaping holes. We are frustrated and angry. The last thing we are feeling is kind.

Screw them! Why can't we be the leads? We'd learn our lines. We wouldn't have excuses. We'd be professional. You know what? Maybe we should let them flounder. Let them look terrible.

But that's not what we end up doing. Even though we were seething, we gave our lead kindness. It was not an easy choice. We took an evening and walked around town as a cast reciting our lines, teaching them their lines, cheering them on. We ran through heated scenes over dinner at a local restaurant. Re-enacted a party scene as we walked down a crowded street. We laughed at the goofy looks we received. Crazy actors! We came together. We found rhythm and relationship.

Why? Why would we make this choice? Because, it's about the story. It's a four-hander. If that actor looked bad we all looked bad. We could rally together. This was only a few-week commitment. We could find generosity for that time, and then go from there. I'm sure the powers that be noticed that this actor didn't have their lines. They noticed the energy of the rehearsal. The preparation... or lack there of.

They also saw that the rest of the cast put aside some well-earned frustration in order to take care of the story. To take care of the room. Because this is a group endeavor. Usually, if one falls, we all fall. And with a small cast and crew, that is particularly true.

Don't forget that this is a business where people want to work with people they know will do the work. It's a small, small, small world. And that's true whether you're in LA, New York, Seattle, or Poughkeepsie. I'm constantly amazed how small our world is. And our memories are long. Ten years after an unfortunate incident, a friend of mine is still struggling to regain the trust of certain theaters.

I want to be clear. I don't think we need to suck it up whenever we deal with unprofessional people in the room. That's not what being kind means to me. It's taken me a while to understand this lesson.

My last few years have been profound for me in finding my voice. I'm still coming into my own. And while I'm working toward kindness, I've learned some things that being kind doesn't mean.

Ooooo! What do we have here? Is this a... list? Yes!

Being kind doesn't mean...

1. Being a doormat.
2. Telling everybody good job, when the opposite is true (though this is when you can practice tact and compassion).
3. Letting the bully/ignoramus own the room to spread unhealthy viewpoints.
4. Taking the blame for someone else's problems.
5. Presenting yourself as less intelligent than you are.
6. Compromising your moral core (don't you dare).

Being kind is none of these things. It can be strong. It can be the bravest choice. It can produce change. It can bring out the best in others.

I've witnessed a couple moments in which people spoke out... in kindness, with respect. One case involved confronting an actor who declared “nekkie time” as he sat down and watched a fellow actor's quick-change off-stage. Another called out men dominating the discussion about the portrayal of women and women experiences on stage. Another addressed the lack of a break after four hours of work. I could go on. These confrontations were moments of kindness. Of taking care of the room. There wasn't a shaming in the process. Just a calling out and a request for change. And in all these instances, changes were made. In the instance of the ogling actor, the artistic director now reads the company's “Statement of Values” out loud at the first rehearsal for all productions, and clearly outlines the expectations of the room.

It's important to take care of our rooms. To make those rooms safe. This is a craft that thrives on freedom of expression. But being a theater artist doesn't automatically make a person more or less comfortable with sex-related talk. More or less familiar with LGBTQ themes. More or less accepting of racially charged language.
More or less capable of handling whatever sensitive topic that comes up. Though I've been in plenty of rooms where some assume otherwise. There's judgment and derision. There's impatience. Sometimes there's a fluffing of feathers to show how woke we are, when in reality we still have so much to learn. We have to make a conscious effort to get to an elevated place of kindness.

Last year I was in a production of Hand to God directed by Kelly Kitchens. It's a dark comedy that takes place in a church basement. I played a woman who copes with her life spinning out of control through sexual aggression with a teenager. It's hilarious. There are puppets.

In one of these aggressive encounters, my character demands the teenager rip open her dress.

Okay, let's pause.

In my career I have kissed another character a handful of times. All of these kisses have been sweet, chaste, gentle. Like a kiss from a G-rated movie. And clothes? Always on. Once, I had a scene wearing a towel. But realized that's like wearing a strapless dress, right? No big deal. So this is definitely new territory.

Can I remind you that I'm a mother of three? My body has lived some life. My body has supported some life. You know what I'm saying? I have all the body issues. All the doubt. And I have to ask this very attractive, oh-so-young man to rip open my dress. And make it so the audience doesn't see Sunam Ellis terrified out of her mind; they see her firmly demanding to be seen and touched and obeyed. Great.

Back to the story.

We're in tech. It's the first time my dress will be ripped open to reveal me in my bra and bottom slip. This move is done with me on a bench, which increases the feeling of exposure. It's supposed to. It allows everybody in the theater in on this moment. I look around. The people in the room are figuring out cues and design elements. I feel my breath get shallow and the sounds get louder. My heart is thudding. I am a far cry from where my character is supposed to be.

"Um Kelly?" I say. She turns to me and asks what I need. "I have feelings." That's all I said. That's all I had to share with her. She saw it. She knew.

It was the last scene we would be able to do that night. She released all actors not in that scene. She removed tech from the first rows, so I would have distance. She asked non-essential people to leave the theater. She set up the space to feel as safe as possible to help me take this vulnerable step.

That is kindness. She was kindness in that moment. She was generosity. And because of that, I would move mountains for her. I play harder in the space, because I know that if I fall, she's got me.

Kelly is brilliant. She's a smart storyteller. You'd be silly not to work with her. But there are other brilliant, smart storytellers who aren't so kind, and I'm not fighting to be in those rooms. Why would I? I want to rid my world of toxicity, not invite it in. Life is too short to deal with petty, jealous, angry, bitter, unkind people. Too short. So, let's keep the drama on the stage.

But I understand the resistance. Kindness? People read it as weak. Kindness is not our culture. We live in ugly, angry times. We live in a time when fear is used as a propaganda tool. When "who screwed who," “what celebrity fell from grace,” “what dregs of humanity can we flash around,” “who cheated on / manipulated / killed...” is the entertainment of choice. We live in a time when conversations of identity are being offered, with some acceptance and a lot of responses of hate. We live in a time where owning your sexuality can result in death. We live in a time when kids are taking their lives, and the lives of others at an alarming rate. We live in a time when kindness is needed more than ever.

So I invite you to tell the stories that get at the heart of our journeys with a different kind of energy than what permeates our current world. And yes, some of those stories are not kind. But maybe the storytellers are. People are watching. Be strong. Be a badass. Be brave. Stand up for what is right. But above all else, be kind.

May the words you say and the actions you take bring out the best in others.

People Involved: Sunam Ellis
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