

## **Commencement Keynote**

**May 26, 2023**

**André Robert Lee**

Good morning, everyone.

I want to first express my gratitude for the invitation to join you all this morning. I recognize this as a great honor and privilege.

As I reflect upon this wonderful morning, I ask the question: *How did I get here?*

### **I. A History of ARL**

GWEN

RUTH

EUGENIA

&

JUANITA

These are the names of four incredible women that raised me and shaped me to be the person I am today.

I want to call into this space and recognize ALL my ancestors. I ask them to stand with me as I make an effort to communicate and share with everyone here. I want all of you to know more about how I came to be here...standing in front of you today. We all have ancestors. I believe they are with us in many ways.

I am the descendant of enslaved people. While the little research I have been able to do gets very murky, I did know my grandparents on both my mother's and father's sides.

I want to tell you about my maternal grandmother. She was a woman named Juanita Marcus. She was a quiet and mysterious woman. Recently, I have been reflecting on the fact that I never heard her say the word “parent.” I never heard her talk about a mother or father. I know she had to have one of each, but it was simply never discussed.

In her late 20s, she packed up her kids and moved to Philadelphia. Her kids were my mother, her sister, and her brother. She migrated from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I don’t know the exact circumstances that led to her jetting from the South to the North.

I can imagine them, but I never got specifics.

I did ask. I was just never told.

I do know that the back-breaking work she did in the northern factory where she found work while in Philadelphia was a step up and an improvement from the harsh working conditions in the sharecropping fields she was rumored to have worked in in the South. She did not talk about her past much. I imagine it was dark, terrifying, and horrible in many ways.

I also have to believe there was joy. I feel that joy because somehow, somehow, I’m here in front of you today.

It is no small moment that I am standing here in front of you. Concord Academy is now 100 years old. (More about that and a personal reference to its significance later.)

## **II. A History of Concord Academy**

Today marks Concord Academy’s Commencement.

I love the word commencement. It comes from the late 13th century. The ‘Old French’ word is *comencement* (*ko-man-se-man*). The modern French word is *commencer*. We use it to describe the ceremony we all find ourselves in right now. For many, it is thought of as the end. The final

event. Time to say goodbye. It does have that energy, but the denotation of this word is “the beginning of something.” And that is what today is.

On this 100-year anniversary of Concord Academy, I think I am right where I. . . . *we* are supposed to be. I like surprises. And I like being surprised by surprises. Let me explain. I came across one of them...a surprise...while thinking about what it meant to be here today. I want to talk—just briefly—about *Little Women*. I bet every person that comes to visit Concord Academy mentions that book or one of the movies. Today, I am thinking now about the author, Louisa May Alcott.

A quick aside:

I went to a school similar to Concord Academy. It is a private school in Philadelphia called Germantown Friends School (GFS). I went there on a scholarship. I attended a basketball reading clinic the summer after graduating from my Catholic elementary school. To be clear: The camp was a basketball *and* reading clinic. I was terrible at basketball. Terrible. I was 14, and no one had ever taught me how to do a layup. I excelled for half of the day. I did win a prize at the end of the camp... for being the best reader.

I got a copy of Ursula K. Le Guinn’s *The Arm of the Starfish*. I loved the book. I did not love the status of being the biggest dork at camp. This was pre-dotcom. Nerd culture was not as celebrated back then as it is today.

*This* was the summer when I was no longer going to be the *last* player picked for a scrimmage. We had a thing called Word of the Day. At the beginning of the day, the word of the day was used in a sentence. During the end of the day scrimmage, the coach would blow the whistle and the first team to use the word of the day in a sentence would get bonus points.

All of a sudden, I was a valuable member of the team. Bonus!

Now, back to Louisa May—

GFS is in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Louisa May Alcott was born across the street from GFS at 5425 Germantown Avenue. The setting of *Little Women* was based on her childhood home which is about 1 mile from here. Her family made the trek from Philadelphia to Concord after she was born. That surprised me.

I don't think it is a mistake. I believe it is fate that I am here in front of you. The ancestors have taken care of me in all kinds of incredible ways. Juanita Marcus's migration, hard work, and sacrifice landed me here. I doubt she read *Little Women* nor understood Quaker education, but she knew her boy was special and needed education to have it easier than she did. That woman who never said much and never talked about her parents or her past had vision and foresight that led to me being here today.

### **III. The Current Moment (2023 x 100 Years)**

A lot happened 100 years ago. The Lincoln Memorial turned 1 year old. On May 28, 1923, it was determined that it was legal for women in the United States to wear trousers. Walt Disney was created. And the first Concord Academy Commencement was held "outdoors, in the gardens back of the academy buildings." There were just a handful of students graduating from this "all-girls school" that day. And look at us now. Change and growth are hard. But we must accept them both as we move forward and through life.

It's important to note that change and growth relate in a cause-and-effect dynamic. History is riddled with moments of change that didn't feel like growth until time had done its work and gifted us all her/his/their (see, it's not hard to use pronouns) her/his/their most profound gift: hindsight. I believe that much in our current moment will follow the same legacy. As books are being banned and restrictions are being placed on people's minds and bodies, it's hard to feel like this is a moment of growth, or of change in any positive way. But we must be optimistic about what it can yield. It is only through hindsight that we will be able to see the change and growth of our current moment clearly, but if the masses of individuals across this country who choose to speak truth to power are any indication—there is reason for hope and optimism.

My grandmother, Juanita Marcus, one day witnessed me saying something that was off-color or inappropriate. I was a teenager. I don't remember what I said. But I do remember her response and message. She said that I needed to think before [words] just "came out of my mouth." The message was simple and clear. **Think before you speak.**

Personally, I think that is what being "woke" is all about, but let's not get caught up in nomenclature. We have all said things we wish we had not or...had thought a little bit more before we blurted them out. It's one of the many things we all have in common as humans. This lesson from my grandmother was one of my most powerful ones.

I give it to you. How many times have you won an argument in the shower? You remember what you could have said in a tough moment. I offer you this. When possible, **pause**. Think about your response and exercise those critical skills you have been trained to use over the past four years at Concord in your everyday life. It works. Trust me.

#### **IV. Commencement Advice**

As you are about to enter many new spaces and experiences, let's discuss the power of the word *no*. I have received some very hard nos in my life. I have been passed over for jobs, opportunities, acceptances, and experiences I was sure I deserved. My films have been rejected by numerous film festivals. Every single one of those nos was the correct no. They all led to other greater and better moments AKA YESES!

One of my most intense and incredible jobs was working as Diana Ross's personal assistant in my 20s. One of her biggest hits was "*I'm Coming Out*." She was the darling of Motown. Add her to your playlist. She has some great tunes. My time with Miss Ross The Boss was just a short gig, but it was incredible. I could tell stories, but I signed a FIERCE Non-Disclosure Agreement AKA NDA.

I will share this, though: Miss Ross The Boss fired me six times. I had not been fired from many jobs. Each firing was met with a call the next day with an invitation to come back. I would return and get back to it. The last time I was fired it was after a sit-down meeting, we had been going over some materials. She looked up at me and said “Baby, you don’t need to be someone’s assistant. You are creative and have stories to tell and things to make. You must go out in the world and make.” I pushed back and pleaded, saying that I understood working with her was an important stepping stone. The folks that called her house on a daily basis alone felt like life-changing opportunities. I placed the King of Pop on hold multiple times a day when he called his godmother. She also lived down the block from a former President of the United States. He had two golden retrievers that would come to Miss Ross’ gate every morning, wagging their tails and looking in her gate with a “save us.” look in their eyes. I would walk them back up the road to their home. I got it. I would want to be in this Boss’s house as opposed to the other one. It was incredible.

But she pushed back and said, “No baby. I need to release you.” As I rode the train home, I thought about the job and Miss Ross’s words. They were hard to hear but true. When she called the next day and invited me back, I said, “no.” I explained that I thought she was right. I needed to be on my own and creating. I walked away from what felt like a grand opportunity, but it was the right thing to do. My career has been fabulous, and I owe much of it to what she saw in me. ... what she insisted upon, in me.

## **V. Speak Truth to Power**

I will conclude with a factoid about one of my heroes. Bayard Rustin. I hope you know who he is, but I would not be surprised if some of you do not. He is the architect of the Civil Rights Movement.

At the 1963 March on Washington that took place in front of The Lincoln Memorial, he gave the first 45-minute-long speech that framed the day. He organized the entire march. One of his strategies for the day was to place police officers of color in plain clothes inside the march and

uniformed white police officers outside of the march. It worked. There were no major incidents involving police that day. It was just one of the reasons the march was so successful.

Rustin also gave us a phrase that we still use to this day. He was the first person to suggest that we need to “*speak truth to power.*”

It sounds like such an obvious platitude, doesn't it? Especially in times like we're in now: *Speak truth to power...*

Nowadays people hear that and what they think is probably synonymous with “Twitter rant.” But *when* Bayard Rustin said “speak truth to power” it wasn't about public declarations for the sake of vanity. It wasn't a call to the masses—it was a call to each of us, as individuals, to ensure that those in power *can't* pacify us into complacency. When we're complacent, we lose sight of the glaringly obvious: that we are all in this together. When systems of power make us lose sight of that, they grow stronger. Speaking truth to power means harnessing our individual conviction that we are stronger together.

When Head of School Henry Fairfax called and asked me to give this commencement address to the Concord Academy community, right away I started thinking about and working on what I would say. And of course, my social media started algorithming me with images and clips of the greatest graduation speeches ever. I chose to not pay too close attention to those speeches. I wanted to craft something for this community. For this day. I thought about the significance of the fact that Henry is calling me to come speak with y'all. I jokingly said that he and I could just stand on the stage and say 100. And that would be the whole tweet.

I spoke to a very successful artist friend of mine about it, and he said I should just Chat GPT it. I thought to myself, “never!” This is good hard work that Juanita Marcus prepared me for. I have come with a meeting of my heart and mind in an effort to express and encourage love as a way forward. That is the way we achieve change. I believe that with an army of change agents, we can turn this world around. We can reduce all the 'isms.

So the big message and takeaway is LOVE

GWEN

RUTH

EUGENIA

&

JUANITA

All loved me. They are not here in the physical form, but they are here in the most important form. They are within me.

I want to say again how humbled and inspired I am to be invited here to spend this significant occasion with you. All of you—marking a 100-year legacy.

My ancestors made it so that I could be here with you today—

Your ancestors made it so that you could be here today.

This school is ready for the new world because of your participation, contributions, and presence.

This is your Commencement.

Let's go.

Our ancestors are waiting.