

Hello! And a blanket congrats to everyone, especially the Class of 2017!

I think of myself as a bookend professor, as I mostly teach first-year students and graduating seniors. Thus, I've had an up-close, front seat from which to participate in and view the transformative journeys many of these graduates have gone through during their time at Skidmore. Being part of this ride is extremely cool and rewarding, and, frankly, it's the best part of my job.

To bring this transformative journey to life a bit, let me share a few stories with you.

So in the fall of 2013, Nicole is taking an exam in my first-year Human Dilemmas seminar and it happens to be 2 or 3 days before her MB107 group is scheduled to give their Executive Presentation, or EP as we say here on campus. For those of you not familiar with the MB107 EP, it's the final experience of our introductory Management and Business course where teams of 4-5 students develop a strategy for a real company and present it to real executives who give the students 25% of their final grade in the course. It's a stretch experience as well as a stressful experience for these young students. It's a big deal – or at least it seems like a big deal to the students at that time. Anyway, after she finishes the exam, Nicole comes out into the hallway and proceeds to break down in tears saying something to the effect "our EP is only a few days away and my team doesn't have a realistic strategy, our financial projections are all out of whack, we're completely lost." She's convinced that her team is going to flunk the EP, she's going to fail MB107, be kicked out of Skidmore, and have to go back to Long Island with her life in shambles. Fast forward 4 years, and Nicole shows up to my capstone strategy class this past fall in which she performed at an exceptionally high level (well except on that simulation quiz). Apparently, she did not fail her MB107 EP and she did not get booted out of Skidmore. Indeed, she sits here today as an honors student, has been thoroughly engaged with all kinds of activities on campus, and soon will be heading to Thomson Reuters to work in their Finance and Risk Division. Congrats Nicole! Looking back, that EP hurdle doesn't seem so insurmountable does it? Hurdles are made to stretch us and to successfully jump over.

Then there's Kai, a citizen of the world who came to us from Germany. Freshman year Kai shows up to my MB107 class with his side-kick Kenny from Clarkston GA, who is about twice as big as Kai, which is saying something about each of them. Anyway, Kai and Kenny, who I soon learn are inseparable, proceed to sit next to each other in the back row of Palamountain 202 and stay in those same two seats (like most students) the remainder of the semester. I think it would be a fair and an accurate assessment to say that Kai was a good, solid student that semester. In short, coming out of MB107 my impression of Kai was that of a nice guy, a solid student -- basically a fairly typical first-year student at Skidmore. Fast forward 4 years and he, too, shows up for my capstone Strategy course this past fall. The first two things I noticed were (1) Kenny was no longer with him and (2) Kai moved front a few rows. (And by the way, Kenny was in my other section of Strategy that semester and is a fantastic person and student, too). In addition to the lack of Kenny and moving up a few rows, I quickly noticed more profound changes. Kai asked probing questions; he made insightful and integrative points in class discussions; he responded to essay questions on our exams better than I could have. In

short, he blossomed into an amazingly talented, thoughtful, and articulate student who earned only the 2nd A+ I've ever given in my 20+ year teaching career. Kudos Kai! for seizing the academic opportunities Skidmore has to offer. (And I think Kai is headed to the prestigious London School of Economics in the fall in their Master of Science Program in Accounting and Finance.)

And then there's Bare, who came to us from Nigeria. I've had Bare in three classes, so our paths have crossed quite a bit, and I'll cut to the chase here. Bare's like the naughty kid on the playground who you frequently need to reprimand but due to their infectious, mischievous smile you only half-heartedly discipline while you yourself are smiling inside. But every now and then you really need to, and do, give them the metaphorical kick-in-the-butt. Bare, you may never be categorized as an "A" student (indeed...), but your development and growth have been just as profound as Nicole and Kai's, just different. You've learned that you can't always charm and BS your way through class discussions and exams (although you still try to do so) and that you actually need to read the assigned materials (at least most of the time). I gotta be honest with you Bare, I wasn't always certain you'd make it through this place, but you did. And along the way you ended up being the Liberty League Men's Soccer Defensive Player of the Year and an All-American, only the second men's soccer All-American in Skidmore history. Well done, Bare! There are many ways to put one's stamp on a community, and we all bring different things to the party.....Oh, and I can't tell you what Bare is doing after graduation because, of course, he never responded to the email I sent him asking that question.

Nicole, Kai, and Bare are just three examples, as all of you, well at least most of you, have pushed yourselves and taken advantage of the manifold and wonderful opportunities here at Skidmore to develop into more highly educated and engaged citizens of the world. Thanks for letting me come along for the ride.

O.k., now for the advice part of the speech, there has to be an advice part, right?

Over the past 4 years your actions have impacted this place and its people. As you leave here and engage in various civic and professional activities, start families (yes, most of you will), travel the world, etc., I would submit that your future actions and behaviors will cast much broader silhouettes and have even greater impacts on many more people and this wonderful earth.

So what will determine your actions in this world? Well, your beliefs, of course. And how do we come to believe what we believe? Through "Education" in the broadest sense. But more specifically, our beliefs result from interactions with our Parents, Guardians, Peers, Teachers, the Natural World, Books, Articles, Pieces of Art, Music, TV, "The News", our iPhones. And here's where it gets scary for me, as it's so easy to fall into the trap of basing our beliefs on unsubstantiated snippets and headlines that come across our iPhones or on "news stories" that come from self-proclaimed news channels which actually are peddling biased opinions at their best, and known falsehoods at their worst.

What to do? Read books. And lots of them. And books whose authors base their conclusions on thoroughly reasoned and interrogated ideas, on science and real facts, on a deep artistic and aesthetic awareness. Books that help us develop our own moral compasses to deal with the difficult decisions we all inevitably encounter in our lives.

Since my college days, I've quite literally carried around what I consider to be 10 or so "great books" to help inform my day-to-day activities, and to reference when facing challenges. Some of these books have changed over the years; some of them are society's classics and some of them are Mark's classics; some are philosophical, some are artistic, some are science-based. They range from Thoreau's classic *Walden* to Naomi Klein's contemporary *This Changes Everything*. MIT Professor Alan Lightman, who spoke on campus several years ago, also mentioned that he takes about 20 books with him wherever he goes. (He's smarter than me, so he can handle 20 versus my 10.) He called his books his "friends, whose smell and feel provide companionship." I encourage you, too, to find your set of friends to carry around, whether that be physically or electronically. Scribble in their margins, dog ear their pages, share them with your friends, discuss and debate their ideas.

In closing, I'm going to quickly share one of my friends with you that I've been carrying around since my college days, and which I've found myself reaching for quite a bit recently – it's Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975. In it, there's a fantastic poem, **For the Children**, which ends like this:

To climb these coming crests
 One word to you, to
 You and your children:
 Stay together
 Learn the flowers
 Go light

I'll REPEAT that last part.....Stay together, Learn the flowers, Go light

Stay together – We all are part of many communities and social networks, indeed our lives quite literally depend on them. We could not have survived without others feeding us, clothing us, teaching us, etc. And that dependence on others continues throughout our lives. There's no such thing as a self-made woman or a self-made man. Yes, you've all worked hard to get to this graduation day, but, as I think you realize, you've had a tremendous amount of help and support along the way. So go out and help others. And in order to help others, you need to understand and empathize with "the other." As Pope Francis recently stated in a TED Talk called *Why the only future worth building includes everyone*. Quote. "Let us help each other, all together, to remember that the other is not a statistic or a number. The other has a face...is always a real presence, a person to take care of." And remember, you could easily be "the other." It was simply chance that one Wes Moore was born to a certain set of parents on a certain street in Baltimore, while the other Wes Moore was born to a different set of parents

on a different street in Baltimore. Stay together, be grateful, be empathetic, and go out of your way to help others.

Learn the flowers – Many of our day-to-day lives have gotten so far removed from the natural world that we've almost forgotten that we're part of the intricate web of life of all species. We've also forgotten, or at least take for granted, that this wonderful mother ship provides us with clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, healthy food to nourish our bodies – the list goes on and on. Earth is our only life support system, yet we treat it as a commodity, we trash it, we abuse it for short-term economic gains and returns on investment. So I implore all of you to get out in nature and learn the flowers, as we only appreciate and protect what we know and love. Oprah has called 2017 her year of adventure, and recently was quoted in *Outside Magazine* saying, "My favorite thing on earth is a tree." She goes on to say that getting out in nature "requires no particular skill, only two feet and a sturdy pair of shoes. You set the pace. You choose the trail. You lock into a certain rhythm and that rhythm becomes your clarion song." Well said, Oprah. So go hit the trail, and learn, enjoy, appreciate, AND PROTECT, the flowers...and the trees.

Go light – In my 50+ years on this wonderful earth, I've never heard anyone say, "I wish my life was more complicated." But I've literally heard thousands of people say, "my life's too crazy," "I need to slow down," "I have way too much stuff." When in doubt, I think it's best to adopt parsimony and use the KISS principle – Keep It Simple Stupid. Yes, there are circumstances in this world that demand complexity, but based on my experiences, in most instances it's usually prudent and more personally satisfying to go light and keep it simple. Plus, going light and keeping it simple is much better for the flowers and trees.

So, Graduates, Stay together --- Learn the flowers --- Go light

My sincere and heartfelt thanks to you, the class of 2017, for choosing me to give this address – it's truly been an honor and a pleasure. Good luck and stay in touch.