



SKIDMORE COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

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“Community, Connection, and Friendship”

Good morning. On this wonderful day, let me add my own heartfelt greetings to parents, family members, trustees, members of the faculty, and honored guests in attendance at this celebratory event, Skidmore College’s 104th Commencement. Above all, to the members of the Skidmore College Class of 2015, both undergraduates and those receiving master’s degrees today, heartfelt congratulations!

In addition to the American flag are 33 other national flags arrayed on either side of the stage, representing the homelands of those graduating seniors who have traveled far to learn with us and who, in turn, have enriched the Skidmore community with their presence and their perspectives.

We clothe important life transitions in symbolism: The bagpipers who led the majority of you into the Opening Convocation in September of your freshman year today reappeared to herald your final moments as Skidmore students; and then, at the end of this ceremony, they will lead you out into your new lives as Skidmore alumni. Four years ago, at that Opening Convocation, those of you who were new first-year students wore green class T-shirts with “2015” in orange numerals. Those shirts signaled both the bonds you would soon establish with your classmates and your goal of completing a course of studies that would bring you to this day. Now, four years later, your academic robe and accompanying flourishes serve as outward signs of your hard-won accomplishments. I hope that each of you is proud of what your cap, gown, and honor cords say about what you have done during your time at Skidmore. And by the way, your gowns are made of recycled materials, as one more symbol highlighting our commitment to environmental sustainability.

The array of ornate regalia in evidence here today connects each of us to the rich and abiding history of higher learning. This form of dress harkens back to the medieval university and reflects a continuity of tradition extending across nine centuries. It also reminds us that yours is just one of many generations of young people who have come to the academy seeking preparation for productive and meaningful lives and, I hope, some measure of wisdom. Those of us on stage wear our own academic robes to signify that we too have made similar journeys. This is *your* moment of transition, triumph, and, no doubt, some trepidation, but you can take a measure of encouragement in the fact that we and countless others have traveled this path ahead of you.

For the past two years, we have focused special attention on a fundamental question about the College: What kind of community do we want to be? We have consistently answered that we are determined to be a community of respect, inclusion, and excellence. And we deeply believe that the excellence we want to see in the lives of our graduates is most likely to be fostered in a respectful, caring, and supportive campus community. We know that we sometimes fall painfully short of achieving that ideal.

Sometimes I worry that we talk too frequently about *community* and the connections I hope we all feel to the College and to one another. These ideas are too important to be devalued by overuse; we need to keep them fresh and crisp in our consciousness. So let me shift for a moment and speak of another and related form of connection, but one we don’t talk about quite so often: *friendship*. A college community is a place where we forge what are often our first adult friendships—ones that, quite literally, will last

across our entire lifetime and that grow more meaningful with each passing year. Marie and I frequently meet alumni from decades past who have maintained their Skidmore friendships for 40, 50, 60 years, or more. And I cannot tell you how many times we have heard about Skidmore friends who were there to give care and compassion at the end of a life.

The importance of friendship within human affairs is hardly a new insight. The deep bond that joined the warriors Achilles and Patroclus is a major motif in Homer's *Iliad*, and writing four centuries later, the Greek philosopher Aristotle thought friendship to be so important that he remarked, "Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."¹ But as the pace of contemporary life speeds up and technology increasingly tempts us to replace face-to-face interactions with virtual connections, it can be easy to feel friendships—and even the understanding of what *friendship* means—slipping away. Indeed, in the Facebook universe, "to friend" has become a verb that refers to a trivial activity that is light-years removed from what it takes, and what it means, to become a *genuine* friend to someone. So in this world of clicks and swipe-rights, it is worth reminding ourselves of what it truly means to be a friend in the highest sense of that term.

One of the best expressions of this deeper meaning that I have encountered comes from an unlikely source, Robert Tyre Jones. Better known as Bobby Jones, he was one of the greatest golfers of all time and became a national sports hero in the 1930s, at a time when the country desperately needed signs of hope in the midst of a crushing depression. Later in his life, on an occasion when he was receiving what he regarded as a signature honor, Bobby Jones spoke the following words to those in attendance:

When I say that I am your friend, I have pledged to you the ultimate in loyalty and devotion. In some respects friendship may even transcend love, for in true friendship there is no place for jealousy. When I say that you are my friends ... I am at once affirming my high regard and affection for you and declaring my complete faith in you and trust in the sincerity of your expressions.²

Pause for a moment and think about your own very closest Skidmore friends, many of whom, no doubt, are here with you today. I hope you could say to that small number of persons that you too have "pledged to [them] the ultimate in loyalty and devotion." And I hope you would affirm that the connections joining us one to another in our deepest friendships represent one of the highest expressions of human interaction.

We could say that the ensemble of one's friendships constitutes a kind of micro-community. At a time when the world can so easily break one's heart on matters that are truly important or even those that are trifling in the larger scheme of things, we can always turn to the members of that micro-community for affirmation, for support, for a reminder that community matters and that there are other people who absolutely will stand with you. They always will have your back. See to it that, as a true friend, you stand with your friends and always have their back as well.

As a human institution made up of imperfect beings, Skidmore College may never arrive at that omega point that would perfectly realize all the values we cherish and espouse. But I do believe that we are a community where genuine friendships occur and the values associated with authentic connections are respected. In part because of these relationships, we are better than some of what we have seen this past year would indicate, and we can and must continue striving to be better tomorrow than we are today.

¹Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," W. D. Ross, trans., in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard Mckeon, ed. (New York: Random House, 1941).

²Quoted in *The Grand Slam: Bobby Jones, America, and the Story of Golf*, Mark Frost (New York: Hachette Books, 2004).

That's why, at the Opening Convocation referenced above, I challenged the members of the new entering class to discover your own way to leave the Skidmore community better than you found it. As we gather here today, many of you should feel pride in the different ways you accepted that challenge. And your college is definitely better for what you have done during your time here.

The strength of a community is often revealed in how it responds when it seems most deeply challenged. I want to assure the members of the Class of 2015 that those of us who will remain here after you have departed will rise above the challenges of this past year. We will continue the struggle to make Skidmore the kind of place in which all of us understand that even though we cannot all be friends in the highest sense of this concept, we nevertheless can stand with one another; we all can have one another's back. Within our community, we should be able to question one another's position on any issue, to disagree vigorously on occasion if necessary, but we also should remember that, at the end of the day, we are all on the same team.

Those of you receiving degrees today have become one community within the larger community of communities that upon your graduation will comprise more than 37,000 current Skidmore alumni. I hope your special identity as members of your graduating class is important to you. Do not underestimate the value of the friendships you have made along the way; they are one of the key forces holding your community together. Continue to care about one another and strengthen your relationships. Continue to care about the College and feel pride in the progress we will continue to make. Stay connected to one another; continue to build both your own community and the extended Skidmore community at large.

Stay connected to the College, and help us stay connected to you. Let us continue to support you through Skidmore's professional networks and our Career Development Center—which is available to you for the rest of your life—and, above all, through all the relationships you have forged throughout your time here with professors, coaches, members of the staff and administration, and others. Cherish and build upon all these connections, for Skidmore is now an indelible part of your personal identity—of who you are today and who you will become tomorrow.

To each of today's proud recipients of Skidmore College degrees, I wish for you the full blessings of good fortune and good friendships.