

ON THE OCCASION OF PHYLLIS A. ROTH'S DEPARTURE FROM THE DEANSHIP

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT JAMIENNE S. STUDLEY

May 2, 2000

I can promise that this will be a pun-free, smoke-free zone.

In September, Phyllis and I announced her plan to complete her tenure as Dean of the Faculty, to surrender the delights and lay down the burdens of office. I promised then that there would be a more appropriate occasion to celebrate Phyllis's contributions to Skidmore. Eight lively months later, here we are.

At that time I said, "Phyllis has been my teacher." In college I took a seminar entitled "The History of Higher Education in America." This year, I have had the remarkable privilege of a yearlong tutorial with Phyllis on the subject of Skidmore College and contemporary academic and faculty issues, not to mention extra credit experiences in information technology, ethics, swimming pool thermostatic control, and close textual analysis of the Faculty Handbook. Let me hasten to say that this tutorial was a writing intensive experience, in the sense that all of my writing was subject to Phyllis's intense editing, she of the bold correcting stroke and unerring syntactical scalpel.

There are three phrases without which I cannot imagine honoring Phyllis. The first phrase is *interdisciplinary*. Here, as you know, is a woman at home in the Victorian novel, Nabokov and Frankenstein, rhetoric, and statistics. She is skilled in the ways of digital photography and electron microscopy, fundraising, space allocation, and those modern day additions to the classical quadrivium, multi-tasking, split second e-mail turnaround, and car pool management. She draws on the knowledge of her colleagues and her own prodigious stockpile of experience and wisdom to craft solutions to the insoluble, plans for the unpredictable, strategies for the unimaginable, and budgets for the insatiable.

The second phrase, *standards and expectations*, is inextricably linked in my mind with Phyllis. She has been a consistent advocate of high standards and expectations for our students, challenging them to shift from comfort to intellectual high gear. When faculty meet her standards, she is generous, insightful, and eloquent, as in the prized introductions and thank you's for lectureships and retirements over which she toils.

Phyllis sets ambitious standards for her own work, and rigorous expectations for the quality of analysis and level of responsibility that we will bring to the College's business and discourse. She sets and models intensely high standards for fairness, justice, and honor. When we meet Phyllis's institutional standards and expectations, we are truly at our very best.

And finally, *fore-sister*. That's Phyllis's word. She uses it to describe and then pay tribute to the trailblazing women of Skidmore. The tradition begins with the early faculty who taught, lived in the dorms, shared the college's modest circumstances and, by their unstinting service, laid the foundation for the college of today. Next in her sisterhood are the women of a later generation who shattered stereotypes, pushed open the doors, and then braced them open for others by their courage and mentoring and moral support.

Phyllis herself is clearly one of those fore-sisters. She has opened doors for women teachers, scholars, staff, and students. She has shared the insights and the secrets, she has mentored and encouraged and dared and counseled. And she has interrogated, as only Phyllis can, the institutional patterns, policies and practices that affect the advancement of women - and made sure that they changed as fast as humanly possible. We - women at Skidmore, and men who care about equity and a vibrant institution - owe her an immeasurable debt of gratitude.

In her autobiography, True North, Jill Ker Conway reflected on her time as provost of the University of Toronto. Do you think that before she took on administrative leadership roles Phyllis ever said, as did Conway: "I hadn't known I liked running things, or that I was a forceful personality"?

But it was this paragraph that struck me, and that I hope, perhaps even suspect, reflects something of what Phyllis is feeling at the close of this decade:

"I'd been pushed beyond the boundaries of my orderly but narrow professional life, made to think about a range of subjects I'd ignored, or of which I'd previously been oblivious, energized by working with people I admired and respected, reaffirmed and instructed in my feminist ideals, creatively engaged in a broader set of concerns than my life had encompassed in my earlier incarnation."

Phyllis Roth: Teacher. Scholar. Dean.

Advocate. Leader. President.

Interrogator. Truth-teller. Counselor. Conscience.

She is "the sage on the stage AND the guide on the side."

Friend. Above all, friend.