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Faculty Commencement Speech
Skidmore College
May 2011

Good morning,

I would like to first say how humbled I am by this honor. For the last four years I have had the privilege of sharing a classroom and innumerable conversations with many of you, and I am delighted today to be part of your celebration.

And, now, I must also make a confession: I feel a bit of a fraud up here. No one taught me how to teach, nor did graduate school prepare me to put together lectures or ask you interesting questions in order to elicit even more interesting answers. So, I'll admit now that I am not only nervous to be standing *here* today, I'm still nervous every time I walk into one of the classes we share. In that moment when I sit at the table, or head to the podium at the front of the class, my palms sweat, my heart beats faster, and I am filled with self-doubt. I wonder whether I will remember my plan for the day, or whether you know more than I do about a subject (or are checking Wikipedia during my lecture to make sure I'm not making something up). And I worry that you might challenge me by announcing that my exam questions are flawed. I have a case in point: Recently one of you stopped by my office after class to tell me (jokingly, I think) that you were sure I didn't have even a whisper of a lesson plan, and that it's clear I go into class and just wing it. For one. Heart-stopping. Moment. I remember thinking, uh oh, busted.

But, I am saved, it seems, by three factors. The first is that you keep coming back, and so I too keep coming back. The second is that I believe fundamentally and

passionately in the endeavor of learning about the past in order to better understand the present and anticipate as best we can the future. Whether we study perceptions of medieval women, Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Europe, or Science and Nature in the Renaissance, cultivating an historical consciousness is the way that a culture sees not just beyond itself, but even beyond the limits of its own expectations. The study of history allows us, even *demands* of us, that we expand our awareness; it compels us to accept our own insignificance as we explore the world through the eyes and accounts of others.[1] Whether it is the history of science, or the rise and fall of empires, history gives our lives relevance. It should, as Father Pedro Alonso O'Crouley wrote in 1774 about the discovery of the new world, "fill all the vague diffusion of the imaginary spaces of man." An historical consciousness is essential, historian John Gaddis reminds us, because it "suspends us between sensibilities that are at odds with one another, and it's precisely within that suspension that [our] own identity – whether as a person or an historian – tends to reside." Self-doubt, Gaddis assures us, "must always precede self-confidence."[2]

The third factor is that, as my graduate advisor at Berkeley never failed to remind me, the study of history is not a combat sport, it is a collaborative effort: the teaching of it, the learning of it, and perhaps most of all, the making of it. Amerigo Vespucci, for example, may have taken credit for being a great navigator when he noted "I truly showed them that, without any knowledge of sea charts, I was still more expert in the

[1] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[2] *Ibid.,* 8.

science of navigation than all the pilots in the world."[3] But even Vespucci acknowledged that he had to leave to others the sailing of the ship that brought him to the shores of this world so many thousands of miles from his European home. Galileo understood perhaps better than most how indebted he was to those who came before him, in particular to earlier astronomers, men who literally risked their lives when they proposed that ours is not a finite, geocentric universe. "There is certainly something very noble and humane," Galileo wrote to his patron, Cosimo de' Medici, "in the intention of those who have endeavored to protect from envy the noble achievements of distinguished men, and to rescue their names… from oblivion and decay."[4]

Because the development of an historical consciousness is collaborative, the pursuit of history brings us together and helps us to shape our own worlds, our own cultures. As those of you who wrote a Social Contract in my Enlightenment course noted, the collective spirit involved in the enterprise of studying history is what makes the experience so memorable. With a healthy dose of tongue-in-cheek hyperbole, you wrote in your preamble "We aspire to freedom in the most profound sense of the word, and it is this desire for self and communal realization that brings us together and offers us the possibility of immortality." The society that you created fall semester resembles what *New York Times* journalist David Brooks has recently called an emergent system. That is, according to Brooks, "when a group of people establishes a pattern of interaction." And

[3] Amerigo Vespucci, *Mondus Novus*, trans. G. Northrup (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1916), in Peter C. Mancall, ed., *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 215.
[4] Galileo, *The Sidereal Messenger*, Introduction.

once their culture exists, it influences how the individuals within it participate.[5] Brooks' sentiment echoes anthropologist Clifford Geertz', who argued that as humans we have the ability to both create and then modify our cultures, and once we do, they define us. And when we study them, compare them; ***learn*** from them, according to Geertz, we should remember that we are not engaging in "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[6]

Having an appreciation for history, developing an historical consciousness, profoundly influences how we understand the human experience as it has changed across time and space. It is this knowledge that keeps me coming back to the classroom, sweaty palms, flawed questions, and self-doubt not withstanding. I take heart every semester in knowing that while on the first day of class we are a room full of strangers searching for meaning, and often at odds over how to get there, by the end of the semester, precisely because we come together to learn about the world through the accounts of others, we will have formed a better idea of who we are in a broader historical context.

Knowing that it is possible, even necessary, to be transformed by the study of the past, I have just one recommendation for you: Make your historical consciousness the heart line of your future. Whether it is the consciousness you developed in your courses here at Skidmore, or a more intimate collective memory of family, friends, and life experiences, find ways to incorporate it into who you are becoming as you leave here today. And, I warn you it won't be easy. Claire Solomon, who graduated last year, wrote

[5] David Brooks, "Tools for Thinking," in *The New York Times,* March 28, 2011.
[6] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

to me recently to ask me to tell you that the transition away from this place was more jarring than she ever anticipated, She notes, it is “in part because the self that we cultivated in college now has to exist outside of Skidmore.” “I think” she continues, “If we don't acknowledge the change, then we are missing something big.”

Skidmore may not have required you to develop an historical consciousness, but as David Brooks, Clifford Geertz, and Claire Solomon remind us, life will.

Thus, I will end with this thought: as John Gaddis has so eloquently noted, we “know the future only by the past we project into it. History, in this sense, is all we have.”[7]

Thank you for the opportunity to have the last word, and good luck.

[7] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.