

Grace Mary Burton

Remarks

Skidmore College's 101st Commencement

May 19, 2012

President Glotzbach, members of the Board of Trustees, colleagues on the faculty, friends, family, honored guests. . . Class of 2012.

I would like to begin my remarks this morning by saying how deeply touched I am that you would choose me to be one of the people standing between you and your degree. Touched and a bit troubled. I cannot for the life of me figure out why you would want to hear from someone so—well—old? And I mean old. I was born in those halcyon days of the distant past in the years B.C—before computers. I remember when the VCR was a new technology, when cameras had film and books were made of—dare I say it—paper. I grew up in the days before digital TV, before cable TV, before color TV. That's right; when I was a child we watched Saturday morning cartoons in black and white. And we were happy!

But not only am I old. Lots of people are old. And if you believe the TV commercials, lots of old people are young at heart. They drive fast cars, climb tall mountains and watch the sunset from the security of his and hers bathtubs that overlook the cool waters of a drowsy lake. But I am not one of those people. I am old. And I am boring. Unlike the distinguished speakers with whom I have the great privilege of sharing this podium, I have done nothing with my life, nothing but read. And in the last few years, I have been reading about nothing. But the news gets worse, not for me but for you, for despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite all your cords and your tassels, despite all of you your prizes and your honors, it turns out that you, too, have spent the last four years doing nothing.

Now, some of the folks sitting behind you—and especially the ones who have written a check or two along the way—don't seem too happy to hear that. I can well imagine that some of the folks sitting behind me are none too happy either. But as different as you and I are—and we are different (after all, when someone says the word Blackboard, you log on to a computer and I pull out a piece of chalk) we now have one fundamental thing in common: we—all of us—have a liberal arts education. So let's do what we do best. Let's interrogate the proposition. Have we all spent our time doing nothing and if so, why is that work so important?

So where is all this nothing? For some, nothing is but a word-- nothing, *nada*, *niente*. But nothing can also be found lurking in the nothingness of existential philosophy and the emptiness of Buddhist thought, in the empty space of the Black Box Theater and energy of the black hole. From the null hypotheses of scientific investigation to the negative space of the art studio; from the opportunity costs of economics to the sunk costs of business to what a certain political scientist of my acquaintance has called the great sinkhole that is the United States Congress, nothing has touched us all.

And nothing is a powerful force. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't mind having another zero at the end of my salary. (Any chance of that happening, Mr. President? No? I guess there is zero chance.) Nothing is powerful, but in many ways it is an afterthought. You have only to look at the first number on your cell phones -- yes, those ubiquitous smart phones of yours -- what an afterthought nothing is. If on the mathematical number line, 0 comes before 1; in the world of lived experience 0 comes much later. Have you ever seen a small child proudly demonstrate his ability to count? Have you ever heard him

begin with 0? No, neither have I. 0, you see, is not an intuitive concept. The mathematics of the ancient Egyptians had no need of 0. They concerned themselves with the practical applications of geometry: geo-metry, literally “the measurement of the Earth,” as the great Nile River receded back into its banks after its yearly flooding. And although the Greeks abstracted and extended these ideas, they had no room for 0 either. Nor did the Romans. Roman numerals are a counting system--I, II, III--that cannot be systematized. To add, subtract, multiply and divide—to perform operations—requires the existence of nothing. Now, my colleagues in the Classics Department will object that thinkers like Democritus and Epicurus in Greece and Lucretius in Rome did posit the existence of the void, but the sad truth is that these ideas lost out in the struggle for preeminence to plenists like Aristotle, for whom the world was filled with aether, with subtle matter, with substance, with SOMETHING.

I would submit that you graduates have had more in common with this ancient understanding than you may want to admit, for your lives have really been something. Yours have been measured lives. It began the day you were born, the announcement of your arrival accompanied by the tale of the tape: William Joseph Hoffman, 11 lbs, 3 oz. 21 inches long. Your pediatrician measured you against the developmental milestones of sitting and standing, walking and talking, and your parents measured you against the Pooh and Friends Peel and Stick growth chart on the back of a bedroom door. And then you went to school, where your march upward through the grades mirrored the march of those old Roman numerals, starting with 1 and ending here today with 16, or in my case, since I am old and I have never left school, starting with I and ending today in XLVIII. Your life has been perfectly filled, not with the ancient aether, but with double majors and triple minors, with sports and music and clubs and not a little partying.

Your life has been perfectly filled--until now. Now you face an uncertain future, for all futures are uncertain. Now you will have to make choices, choices that will begin to distinguish your life from those of your peers, choices that will send your life in one direction as opposed to another, choices that will entail loss. And it is this loss—this immeasurable nothing—that will ultimately give your life shape and dimension. You art and art history majors already know what I am talking about: I’m talking about the vanishing point. After 0 comes into Europe by way of the Muslims, who picked up the idea from the Indians and incorporated it into what we now know as Arabic numerals, it begins to infiltrate Western thought in surprising ways. The vanishing point, a kind of visual nothing that allows an artist to depict three-dimensional space on a 2-dimensional canvass, represents a radical shift in thought. If in medieval art the size of a figure reflects its importance, with larger figures more important than smaller ones, with the appearance of the vanishing point in Renaissance painting, the size of a figure becomes a function of its position with respect to the other figures in the field. Saints and sinners, kings and courtesans were now on equal footing. This is a relational understanding of the world that reveals itself in mathematical terms in the Cartesian Coordinate System, where the x and y axes intersect at what a mathematician would call an origin, but what I would call the nothing that sits at the heart of modern thought. And if at first it is the presence of this nothing that allows one thing—one something-- to relate to another—supply and demand of economics, pressure and volume in physics—it is only when something enters into a direct relationship with nothing that the power of the concept can truly be felt. It is being in the light of nothingness that serves as the foundation of existential philosophy. It is both the 1 and the 0 of binary computer code that makes those smart phones of yours so smart. It is joy in the face of loss that brings meaning to human life.

You have spent your years here studying nothing, its presence, its power, and, its possibilities. If it is nothing that allows us to relate one thing to another, it is also nothing that allows us to find deeper connections and discover more profound truths. You have only to look at the posters that dot the walls of Tisch and Dana to know that this is true. But what you have learned here is no mere theoretical exercise,

for it will be your ability to integrate the invisible, immeasurable, but not unknowable nothings into your life that will come to define who you are. Others will undoubtedly measure your life against the outward benchmarks of success from the degrees you earn to the titles you hold to the salary you command. But it will be the commitments you make together with the losses those commitments entail that will allow you to know yourself. For make no mistake: to commit is to forego other roads, other possibilities, other lives. To commit is to embrace [acknowledge] the nothings that lie lurking among the choices we make.

You have worked hard; you have achieved much. You are accomplished but not complete. Now you must find the courage to embrace the nothing you have heard so much about here. Silence and space, and—yes—even disappointment and loss. These are the nothings that will that will in time force you conceive of life in a different way; they are the nothings that will put your life on a different path. They are the nothings that will allow you to achieve . . . wisdom.

Oh, and one more thing. . . As you leave us to go out in the world to start your own careers, think of us once in a while. And give money. Someone has to keep us old fogies in chalk!!