

Commencement Remarks

17 May 2014

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Thank you, President Glotzbach, Skidmore students, faculty, family and friends.

It has been a true joy and privilege to be with you at the bookends of your time at Skidmore. Time flies and, coming from a paleontologist who thinks of life on the order of hundreds of millions of years, that says a lot.

While it is humbling to be with you and to be honored in this way, I have to say that the initiation to my life's work was a study in complete and utter ineptitude.

I grew up wanting to lead grand expeditions to discover fossils, so entered graduate school to study paleontology. During my first year in the program, I received a huge opportunity—I was one of the invitees to a field expedition headed to the deserts of northern Arizona, a land of mesas, buttes, and barren red rock. Exploring those rocks was our goal—we were sent there to find 200 million-year-old fossils. Typically, fossils just erode out of the rock, so you spend days walking and scanning the surface for the fossil bones and teeth that emerge.

Not knowing a thing about finding fossils myself, I shadowed one of the seasoned veterans on the team, a man named Chuck who had spent the better part of forty years on expeditions of one kind or another. Chuck was generous with his time and for days we walked the vast plains together looking at the rocks on the surface. For several weeks, Chuck talked and picked up fossils at our feet while I found absolutely nothing. Chuck returned to camp with bag after bag of fossil bones while all I found were blisters and sunburn. Where Chuck saw bones, I saw dirt and rock.

With the growing frustration of each passing day, I remember asking Chuck how he finds bones, what they look like, and what kinds of cues he uses to recognize them. He described his methods, but for the life of me I could not understand him. And, to add insult to injury, he was picking up bones, sometimes with my own boot print.

Then, one day I saw it—a brilliant piece of bone that sparkled in the desert light. It was a tooth and the way it glittered was different from every other rock I had seen to that point. As I looked around, I saw more teeth and more bone. Suddenly, it was as if I was wearing a new pair of glasses; the entire desert floor opened up in front of me to reveal fossil bones everywhere. This was the first time I had seen bones on the surface but the joke was on me: I'd been looking at things like these for weeks. What was mere rock to my eyes just days before, was now fossil bone.

What changed? The thing that changed was my ability to see. I learned to find fossils by seeing the familiar world around me in a whole new way.

And that is what much of education is about: learning to see the world to discover the treasures that lie hidden all around, whether they be artifacts, ideas, aesthetics, or friendships.

I hope that your time at Skidmore has opened up new ways of seeing for you. I hope it has cultivated your ability to see what is important to you, given you the tools to understand the hidden meaning of what you see, and before you get too comfortable, to reveal to you how much you must continually jostle and challenge your established ways of seeing.

Congratulations to you and all those who made it possible for you to stand here today: your family, your friends and, of course, all those fish.