

SKIDMORE COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

May 16, 2015

Sallie W. (Penny) Chisholm

I feel incredibly privileged to be here today, and I especially want to thank Phil and Marie Glotzbach for reaching out to me over the past few years and bringing me back into the Skidmore fold. It has been 46 years since I graduated from Skidmore. Needless to say, *that* Skidmore was a very different college from *this* Skidmore, *your* Skidmore. For one thing, there were no men at *my* Skidmore. A huge difference! And we had rules that you would not believe. In my freshman year we could not leave town on weekends without permission, we had curfews every night, and we were even required to wear skirts to dinner. Looking back, I am amazed that we put up with it. But it didn't last long. The late '60s was a time of rebellion and social change—it was the era of Vietnam war protests, civil rights marches, and the birth of modern feminism. By our senior year everything in our world had changed. We were liberated.

Those were such turbulent times that a documentary has just been released about my class at Skidmore, *Women of '69, Unboxed*. It chronicles the dramatic transformation of our world between our freshman and senior years. Watching it recently, seeing my classmates being interviewed, the one thing that stood out was that nobody could have predicted the paths that we would take, based on our hopes and dreams, or lack thereof, when we graduated—myself included. If anyone had told me then that I would end up on this stage today, I would have declared him or her crazy! Throughout my college years I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I had come to college to find a husband, and that didn't seem to be panning out. Luckily my advisor had said to me once, “You could get a PhD if you wanted to, you know”—something that had never occurred to me. Looking back, that simple sentence changed my life. I didn't know where I was headed, but at least I could see a path. Skidmore opened my eyes to the possible, and gave me the “hands on” science education that carried me through graduate school and beyond. I thank you!

But enough about my journey. This is your day, and I suspect I should be trying to share with you some pearls of wisdom, or inspire you to go forth and make the world a better place. Try as I might, I could only come up with clichés. So instead I've decided to share with you a parable I once read, from a commencement address by David Foster Wallace, that left a deep impression on me. It goes something like this:

Two young fish are swimming along one day and come across an old fish. He nods and says, “Morning, kids. How's the water?” The young fish swim on until they are out of earshot. Then one turns to the other with a puzzled look, and says, “What the hell is water?”

The point is that it is often the most important realities of our world that we have trouble seeing. We are so self-absorbed, so distracted, so lacking in awareness in our day-to-day lives that we miss the most important dimensions of being human—of being alive. Since I first read this passage a few years ago, few days have gone by that I don't wonder: What am I not seeing? What is happening now, right now, that I will some day look back on and think, How could I not have seen that?

I try to pause, breathe, look around, and concentrate. Sometimes, if I am lucky, I can catch a glimmer of “the water.” And *that* makes all the difference.

I'll leave you with that to ponder, and wish you the best of luck in your next chapter. You can be sure that it will unfold in ways you cannot imagine!