

Hello....it's me. I was wondering if after all these years, you'd like to graduate? My children begged me not to being my speech this way, but I'll be darned if I am going to squander my big Adele moment on the stage in front of all of you! But I did restrain myself from singing, so spared you that.

The only thing worse than beginning a graduation speech with a really bad joke is to begin a graduation speech by quoting the dictionary definition of a relevant word. Well, as Wesley tells Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*, get used to disappointment. In my defense, let me emphasize that I did not merely venture on to **Dictionary.Com** to look up the definition of "graduation" –no, no, for you only the best. I am, after all, a professor. So, foreswearing the siren song of the simple internet search, I consulted a paper, truly, a paper, version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*—albeit the shorter version. But really, could I consult any edition other than the shorter version? Ok, ok, that is it. No more corny jokes, I promise.

So what does the *OED, Shorter Version*, tell us about graduation? Well, beyond the obvious one which you are all so helpfully illustrating for us right now by, well, graduating, my paper purveyor of all that is sage and musty and endangered in our Technicolor technological age also offers us many additional understandings of both the verb "to graduate" and the noun "graduation", some of which, fortuitously and felicitously (that is a word, checked it myself in the Oxford English Dictionary, Shorter Version), prove to be unexpectedly apt, at least for me, and I hope for you, at provoking some thoughts that seem appropriate for this day and event.

Many of the meanings of “to graduate, verb” and “graduation, noun” are related to the idea of movement, and progress:

**To graduate, vb.** **4:** “Progress to a more advanced or more extreme activity or position; **5:** Change gradually step by step; **7:** to improve the grade or quality of something, to transmute something to a higher grade...

**Graduation, n.** **2:** Each or all of the marks on a vessel, instrument, etcetera, which indicate degrees of a quantity. **3b:** “Progression or elevation by degrees, a step in the process, the process of tempering or refining a substance.”

I have to admit that, after a bit of reflection, I found these more deeply buried definitions to be collectively a rather dispiriting description of our contemporary educational process as it is usually understood and portrayed. You, our graduates, have marched more intimately than anyone else here to the relentless drumbeats of “progress,” “improvement,” “higher grades,” “higher qualities”, and so on. If our popular media and campus counseling centers are to be believed, the mostly very-well intentioned combination of parental love and concern, pervasive social anxiety and peer pressure that has accompanied you along every step of your journey up to and at Skidmore, up to this very day, has indeed served to “temper and refine” many of you, to “transmute” many of you, “to alter and change you in your natures”—and not always for the better. The ever-present exhortations for you to “progress to a more advanced position” in our ultracompetitive world—from the right preschool,

to the right primary and high school, to the right college, and then the right major, and the right internship, and now, the right answer to the question "So what are you going to do now? --have resulted for too many of you in unprecedented levels of, depending on which study you consult, grave threats both to your own well-being -- depression, anxiety, addictions of various types and to our common well being,-- solipsism, narcissism, and a lack of empathy and fellow-feeling.

We, your faculty have also, again, with the best of intentions, pushed you to "change gradually step by step" – to read more, and more closely; to write more, and more confidently and grammatically; to think more, and to think more artistically, quantitatively, scientifically. We have labored to "improve the grade and quality" of the substance that is you by demanding that you be on time, that you put the phone away, that you meet your deadlines, that you read yet another book, write yet another paper, think critically and creatively yet some more, do even more perfectly or expertly a laboratory or theatrical or musical technique. We have done this because we hope, and believe, that the gradual, step by step, change these **disciplined actions** effect upon the substance that is you, is ultimately for your benefit, that it will indeed help you "Progress to a more advanced activity or position." In this respect, we too have been complicit in this long process of filling up the graduated cylinder of your life, of helping you mark off relentlessly the scores and divisions that mark the graded climb of formal, institutionalized education, that began so long ago and which ends today, with your well-earned achievement, with your graduation. We too did this with the best of intentions, fully believing then and still believing now, that the guidance and discipline we could bring to the process of

"transmutation of the substance that is you" **would** ultimately help you "to achieve and progress to the next level." And this more instrumental aspect of education is of course very important – the skills, and competencies, and disciplines that you have mastered here are indeed necessary and vital for the next stage of your life. Indeed as much as the parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and siblings who are gathered here today love and support you, I also imagine that one of their most fervent hopes for you is that you will someday, maybe not tomorrow, but someday not too far away, find work that is both meaningful, and remunerative enough to allow you to move out.

And yet, we need to remember today the **other** meaning of today's celebration, that related to its formal title as printed on your lovely programs, and that is of course, commencement. If one thing that we mark today is your achievement of the final, the highest marker on the graduated cylinder that contains the substance that is you, we also mark, and this is the heart of what I want to convey to you today, we also mark today **the commencement**, the beginning, the start, FINALLY, of the period of your life where YOU, YOURSELF, get to decide what comes next. No longer will your parents, your teachers, your coaches, your school counselors, your stage directors, your choreographers, or even YOUR PROFESSORS be defining for you the nature of the markers, the graduations, on the cylinder of your life that holds the substance that is you. From this moment on, YOU get to decide what the gradations, the qualities, the marks of progression, the signs of advancement are that will define your life, not anyone else. Now is your chance to

start over, to commence, to begin to shape and form and fill a container, a life, for the substance that is you, according to criteria of your own making.

What might those criteria be? I have suggested here, and most fervently hope, that those skills and habits of mind and body that you have acquired thus far, including during your four years at Skidmore, will help you in this shaping and forming and filling of your life, to pursue this task efficiently, excellently, and yes, successfully. And these expected, demanded and, yes, necessary criteria of excellence, achievement and success should and will be an important part of the process of your life-building that commences today. But there are also other considerations, other criteria, other understandings of value beyond advancement and progress and achievement that I hope with all my heart will inform your process of life-building that commences today after you leave Skidmore. Criteria like happiness, friendship, love and wellbeing. Values like compassion, humility, morality, and the common good. Most important of all, states of being like curiosity, reverence, gratitude and wonder. I can guarantee you that each of your faculty who are gathered here today, like myself, has a deep and sincere wish that each of you will take with you from Skidmore not just the **ability** to achieve what you want in life, but the **wisdom and the discernment and habits of mind and heart** to think deeply, slowly, and meaningfully about what you want in life and why you want it. We your faculty are lucky enough to have found a path in life that allows us to combine the best aspects of both aspects of life --**the instrumental**—the need to work and find one's way in a material sense—**and the soulful**—the need to be continually surprised, challenged, awed, and humbled by the complexity, the pathos,

the beauty, and the mystery of life. We want nothing less for you, and can't wait to see how it turns out for each and every one of you. **CONGRATULATIONS !**