



Connection and Continuity

Commencement Remarks

20 May 2016

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President

Good morning. On this beautiful spring day, let me add my own heartfelt greetings to parents, family members, Trustees, members of the faculty, and honored guests in attendance at this celebratory event: Skidmore College's 105th Commencement. Above all, to the members of the Skidmore College Class of 2016 – to those receiving Master's degrees, bachelor's of arts and bachelor's of science degrees today, heartfelt congratulations!

You have just heard from Ms. Linda Toohey. Today is a graduation day of sorts, for her as well. Linda has served for fifteen years as a Trustee of Skidmore College and for the last four years as an accomplished and transformative Chair of the Board. Today, Linda is stepping down from that leadership role and retiring from the Board of Trustees. I ask that we give her a sincere round of applause to thank her for her outstanding service to the College.

We invest important life transitions in symbolism: In addition to the American flag, there are 32 other national flags arrayed on either side of the stage, representing the homelands of those graduating seniors who have traveled far to learn with us and who, in turn, have enriched the Skidmore community with their presence and their perspectives.

The bagpipers who led most of you into the Opening Convocation in September of your freshman year reappeared today to herald your final moments as Skidmore students. Then, at the end of this ceremony, they will lead you out into your new lives as Skidmore alumni. Four years ago, at that Opening Convocation, those of you seniors who were new first-year students wore green class t-shirts with '2016' in purple numerals. Those shirts signaled both the bonds you would soon establish with your classmates and your goal of completing a course of studies that would bring you to this day. Now, four years later, your academic robe and accompanying flourishes serve as outward signs of your hard-won accomplishments. I hope that each of you is proud of what your cap, gown, and honor cords say about what you have done during your time at Skidmore. And by the way, your gowns are made of recycled materials, as one more symbol highlighting our commitment to environmental sustainability.

The array of ornate regalia in evidence here today connects each of us to the rich and abiding history of higher learning. This form of dress hearkens back to the medieval university and reflects a continuity of tradition extending across nine centuries. It also reminds us that yours is just one of many generations of young people who have come to the academy seeking preparation for productive and meaningful lives and, I trust, some measure of wisdom. Those of us on stage wear our own

academic robes to signify that we too have made similar journeys. This is *your* moment of transition, triumph, and no doubt, some trepidation, but you can take a measure of encouragement in the fact that we and countless others have traveled this path ahead of you.

Your own personal journeys will be shaped, in part, by larger social forces that act upon all of us. In fact, your generation already has been forging new relations to society and to one another in a time when traditional social structures are themselves in considerable flux. Yours is the most diverse generation in American history, and the range of perspectives represented across your cohort reflects what the Pew Research Center describes as “a myriad of views on many of the important issues of [your] time.”¹ You have come of age in a world marked by social media, and you are highly connected in the virtual realm. At the same time, your generation is much less attached than previous ones to political structures – e.g., traditional political parties – or organized religion. And yet, the Pew data also show that your generation remains optimistic about the future. I sincerely hope that each of you shares that sense of optimism.

I also hope you will place a value on social connection that is rooted, in part, in your college experience. In this past year, we have shared the profound experience of coming together as a community of respect, trust, and care. This was especially true on the two sad occasions when we gathered to commemorate the loss of Michael Hedges and Will Golden – who tragically were taken from us. As seniors, few of you personally knew these members of the first-year class. Even so, you too gathered with your fellow students and other members of the community to stand in sorrow and solidarity; you too felt a sense of loss born out of your membership in this special institution. And at the same time you felt the support of your fellow students who were united in facing these challenges together.

Now, as you prepare to leave this close-knit campus community and move forward in your own lives, let me leave you with just two more thoughts about the world of work you are about to enter – whether through a job or by pursuing advanced studies in graduate or professional school.

First, even in these challenging economic times, don’t settle for work that just enables you to survive but seek out work that speaks to you in a deeply personal way – ideally, something that engages your creative spirit, something you find so fulfilling that you will be amazed that someone is actually paying you to do it. We human beings intrinsically seek to create meaning across all the many dimensions of our lives. My hope is that you find meaning in your work-life and that you are able to regard what you do as important. It doesn’t have to be if-I-do-this-right-I’ll-win-a-Nobel-Peace-Prize important, but your work should be something about which you honestly can say (to yourself), “What I am doing is valuable. It makes a difference.” And the good news is that *you* get to decide what is important – to determine just what kind of difference you want to make in the world.

Second, in a recent broadcast of the National Public Radio program “Studio

¹Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,”
<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

360,” host Kurt Anderson interviewed the acclaimed theatre, film and television actor Frank Langella.² At one point in the interview, Mr. Langella recounted a bit of advice he received as a young actor, just 24 years old, from a director who said to him, “Try to, in your career as an American actor, associate your name with the word ‘quality,’ and you will survive.” I hope that you will approach your own work with a similar determination. And if you combine that determination with your creative spirit, you will do much more than survive – you will thrive, and you will lead. Certainly, if you regard your work as meaningful and important you will want to do it well. And I trust that you’ve already learned that performing at a high level, no matter what you are doing, is *intrinsically* satisfying.

There is another more *extrinsic* aspect of all this to keep in mind as well. Even though you will have left our campus to seek your own path through the professional world, your Skidmore degree connects you to a larger community of perceived value that includes all Skidmore graduates past, present, and future. In short, the Skidmore brand is now inextricably part of the brand called ‘you’. Your degree gains this *extrinsic* value, in part, because of what other Skidmore alumni have done and how well they have done it, for the world now will associate you with them.

Conversely, the important work *you* do well helps to create value for your fellow alumni. Our new *Strategic Plan* includes the expectation “that when potential employers or admissions deans of graduate and professional schools see ‘Skidmore College’ on a resume, they will think, ‘This is someone who will elevate our organization.’” If you strive, through your own work, to associate *your* name with the word ‘quality’, you will fulfill this expectation. Similarly, as we work together to continue to improve the educational opportunities we offer to successive generations of students at the College – and as Skidmore’s reputation continues to improve as a consequence – your degree becomes more valuable as well. In short, we all remain connected through the extended Skidmore community in a web of both intrinsic and extrinsic value.

There is much to celebrate today about what you have done to reach this point in your life, and there is much to anticipate about what you will do tomorrow. The paths you choose will be uniquely yours. And at the same time, you will always be connected, in so many ways, first of all to everyone in the Class of 2016 but also to everyone in all those classes that have come before you, as well as those yet to come.

Be mindful of those connections, embrace them, and nurture them.

Congratulations, and may the force be with you.

²“Studio 360,” <https://www.wnyc.org/radio/#/ondemand/604169>.