

Chatham College Commencement Remarks and acceptance of the Honorary PhD for Public Service

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Thank you for this honor! I would like to thank Chatham's President, Dr. Esther Barrazone, Chatham's Trustees, the Alumnae and especially the students.

First I want to wish the Class of 03 Congratulations! Congratulations to you and your family—this is a very special day and one for celebration.

As a scientist, asked to provide remarks at my College's commencement exercises, I decided to carry out a "controlled" experiment to measure the impact that commencement speakers have on the graduating seniors. I asked everyone—my colleagues at work, my friends, and people walking down the street—"Who was your college commencement speaker?" If it was the President of the United States, or perhaps Mr. Rogers, someone might have remembered, but no one I asked was that lucky. The answers were: "I don't know." "Did we have a speaker?" Or some remembered that it went really long, or told me that their speaker was great since the speech was short.

Based upon my research, I might as well sit down right now because you are not likely to remember me or the message that I am about to deliver.

I then asked myself, why? Today, your commencement, isn't ABOUT tomorrow. It is about today. This day marks a major milestone in your lives and that of your family and friends. **YOU ARE GRADUATING.** I know at Chatham the Major Milestone came when **YOU COMPLETED YOUR TUTORIAL!** Graduation and Tutorial—Congratulations!

Right now, each of you can not wait until this ceremony concludes so you can celebrate with family and friends, but also turn to your friends to say "goodbye." Goodbye is a "good word" and for you all, it is goodbye for now.

Therefore, I decided to throw out my "polished" commencement address with the "memorable" quotes from Bartlett's Book of Quotations—the ones that you would NEVER remember—and instead speak from my heart, one Chatham graduate to another.

I was reflecting about what we have in common; me from the early 1970's and you today. I graduated at a time when the Viet Nam War was ending but we were still in the "cold war," uncertain as to the stability of the world. That is also true today. Our economy was also unstable—we were not confident about finding the "right" job. This is also true today. And in the 1970's, there were Chatham alums knocking on our door at graduation, finding shared dorm rooms, wanting just for a moment to look in, just for a moment to be able to "enter that room again" and try to recapture the experience. Yesterday, my college friend, Susan Garland George, and I drove through campus. Please note that we were very kind to the graduates living in REA Hall. Given the early hour of the morning, we just looked at the windows and reminisced, instead of knocking on your doors and waking you up!

However, as Sue pointed out to me and as she recently told a Philosophy class she attended during the fall semester, there are three major differences between the 70's and today. In the 70's, students smoked in class. In the 70's, there was no air conditioning—I repeat—no air conditioning in the class rooms. And, in the 70's, we didn't wear bras. Yes, we have made real progress!

YOU ARE GRADUATING FROM CHATHAM. You are the Class of '03. Evolving from an incredible beautiful environment were you and your friends spent the last four years talking, reflecting, and preparing for this day. You are now ready for the successful transition into a “new” world.

I will tell you that a liberal arts education is an incredible introduction. Combining that with the women's college experience really provides that extra confidence. It is that **CAN DO SPIRIT** that, **YES**, you can do anything and meet the continued challenge of new opportunities.

At a women's college the best student is a woman, the student most called upon to answer a question is a woman, the first to finish the exam is a woman. Today, the students graduating are women, the ones opting for further training in graduate and professional schools are women, and the new generation entering the workforce is women. Women may be a silent majority elsewhere, but at a women's college the person asking the question in class, and in life, is a woman.

Continually asking questions is critical throughout your life.

Indeed, I was recently asked by a group of seniors at a major research university what did I take away from college that “made the difference” in my career? Well, beyond knowing about the Steelers and the Pirates, the opera, surviving a CMU and PITT mixer (do you still do that?), and having the opportunity to read novels at night as a science major because I was lucky enough to also take English courses from Professor Cummings (OK, I did take it for pass/fail but it started a tradition of reading novels at night), after careful reflection, I answered that question by saying: “I believe that I have been successful because of my commitment to always to continue to seek new knowledge and have the **COURAGE** to **NEVER** be afraid to admit that I do not know everything. I believe that this is contrary to many males I've met who seem to believe that they know everything! But **NO ONE** does.”

Indeed, I strongly believe that one of the best attributes that a person develops is having the confidence to ask questions, and at a women's college, as I said before, women learn to be the ones to ask the questions. Throughout your career, I believe that it is essential to know what you don't know and be comfortable seeking that new knowledge. As Rachel Carson stated; “Every mystery solved brings us to the threshold of a greater one.” And you need to have courage to solve those next mysteries.

I can speak truthfully about not knowing, because I didn't know what I wanted to be when I went to Chatham. I can also speak truthfully when I say that, 29 years later, I still don't know what I want to be next. What will be my next position?

I do know that if it was not for Chatham College, and, as I will explain, the easy access to ice cream, I would not be a scientist today.

Inscribed on my high school entrance doors were the words; “What you are to be—you are now becoming.” I KNEW I wasn’t going to become a scientist because in high school, I actually hated science. I entered Chatham believing that I would either be an economics major or a history major. I also found at Chatham that I didn’t appreciate the quality of dorm food, and substituted ice cream for everything. (Some things haven’t changed!)

So what happened? Subsisting mostly on ice cream means weight gain. Weight gain made for an unhappy mother. Mother STRONGLY suggested that from now on I take a physical education course along with my academic studies. The only course to fit into my schedule and still allow badminton and tennis was general biology. Science, mother, and ice cream had to be weighed in the balance. My advice? Always listen to your MOTHER!

So, I took general biology and the class was incredible. The professor really excited me about biology, and I could not wait for each class and laboratory session to learn more. Dr. Keen Kompher was hired my sophomore year, and I was in the first course Dr. Thomas Hershberger taught at Chatham my junior year. Those two professors encouraged me and trained me to continue the quest for understanding how the brain and endocrine system works. I took many courses from them and they were always inspiring.

Last night, a member of the graduating class of ‘03 received an award and, in accepting, she acknowledged her professor. Following her example, I want to acknowledge Tom for his influence in my career. I can say that I still consider him to be a friend and someone I can turn to as a life-long mentor! At Chatham—you make lasting relationships.

At the end of my Junior Year, I knew that that I was going to get my PH.D in neuroscience, become a professor, and do research and teaching at a major research institution. I achieved that, but that was not what I was ultimately becoming. New opportunities would knock on my door.

Because of my training and experience at Chatham, in an atmosphere that encouraged me and gave to me and my classmates the courage and confidence (OK, I did hyperventilate a few times) to accept new challenges, new responsibilities and new opportunities, I am not what I thought I was going to be back then. I have evolved. That is my message to you today.

Seize those opportunities. You have mastered the TUTORIAL, you can master anything! What you are planning to be today will be different in the future, I guarantee you. But the last four years in rooms that are “covered” by the IVY OF CHATHAM, that experience and training, has prepared you for anything.

Women’s colleges are always quoting statistics about the success of women who graduate from a women’s college. I like to put in perspective. Think about the total number of women graduating each year from college and universities, and compare that with the few women graduating from a women’s college. Then in 10- 15 years look around at YOUR Colleagues. Many more than one might expect of MY colleagues are women’s college alums! My guess is that you will find the same.

And, PLEASE DON’T FORGET YOUR COLLEGE WHEN YOU LEAVE. Chatham gave you an opportunity. It is important to continue that tradition for the next generation.

As a graduate today, you have become part of a larger community—not just the CLASS of ‘03 but the CLASS of CHATHAM! You never know when you will run into one of your Chatham sisters! Last night, Dr. Carol Mason received the CornerStone Award. We are both

“neuroscientists” by training and I knew her as a colleague that publishes in the Journal of Comparative Neurology, but you know how I found out that she was my “sister”? In a BATHROOM at a “power” Restaurant in DC! You just never know!

Another truth that I can contest to is that some friends you made here will always be close in your life, regardless of time apart. I hadn’t seen Sue Garland George in over two years and I just spent the last four days with her and her wonderful family. It was almost as if we were still sitting in that dorm room, talking about life, and wondering what roads we would walk down.

One of my former bosses is Senator Conrad Burns of Montana. (Yes, I worked in a Senator’s Office even though I was a science major, NOT a poly-sci.) I spent two years as a fellow on the HILL in a position that I never even dreamed nor considered that I would be doing 20 years after graduation! That position opened the door to my serving as NASA Chief Scientist, and then to my new position. Who ever knows? But getting back to Senator Burns, he often says; “there is no worst death than being talked to death.” So, I want to assure you that I’m getting close to the end!

My being your speaker today may not impact your lives. You may join the vast majority that has no recollection of their commencement speaker. But I, at least, am glad you invited me here today. It allowed me to recall and appreciate those late evenings in our dorm rooms discussing life, the world’s future, and which bar to go to on Friday night—and listening, always listening, to Bob Dylan (I guarantee that the Dorm mother who lived below me will verify THAT story!).

Bob sang;

With half-damp eyes I stared to the room
Where my friends and I spent many an afternoon
Where we together weathered many a storm
Laughin' and singing 'till the early hours of the morn'.

This time has brought back memories of a life shared among friends, and allowed me to reflect on the importance of the four years that I spent earning a liberal arts education.

And returning to Rachel Carson, she said; “If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. For the sense of smell, almost more than any other, has the power to recall memories and it is a pity that you use it so little.”

Today you are listening to a Science Advisor to the President, a nice title but perhaps ultimately not very memorable. In 30 years, one of you may be the commencement speaker at Chatham College but your audience WILL remember you—because you have become the PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

The times they are a changin’. Welcome CLASS of 2003 and THANKYOU CHATHAM.