



ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

ANNAPOLIS · SANTA FE

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, SANTA FE

MAY 23, 2009

President Peters, Dean Mora, Mr. Venkatesh, tutors and staff of St. Johns College, parents, friends and family of our graduates, and most especially, on this memorable day in your life, the students of the graduating class of 2009.

If you ask an alumnus of the college, what they would consider to be the most significant honor that they could receive from the college who provided them such a remarkable education, many would likely say: returning some day to give the commencement address to a graduating class with whom by the very nature of our shared legacy, we are one. If you then asked the same alumnus what would be their biggest fear, it would be to be asked to give the commencement address to a graduating class of the college. And so I would like to thank President Peters for simultaneously granting me this honor and exposing my worst fear.

So it is with both great pride, and considerable humility that I stand here before you, whom the college honors today, to share in this moment in your life and in the life of this unique college.

My own experience with the college began a long time ago, in an equally tumultuous time in our country's history, having been given by a friend in high school, what we often refer to as the 101st great book, namely the college catalogue. It was, as I am sure it was for many of you, a reading resulting in an epiphany of sorts, and without ever visiting the school, I applied and was accepted. In the late summer of 1966, I drove with Joe Sachs, who was to become a tutor in Annapolis, from Texas through the deep south to the college, unsure of the adventure awaiting me as I entered the first tutorial and seminar rooms to find Plato, Euclid, and Homer there awaiting me and my classmates .

Four years later, in the late spring of 1970 we sat, in the shadow of the Liberty tree to receive our diplomas and begin, again, a different journey, imprinted by the college, who although would be away , it would never be far from wherever life and our imaginations took us, nearly 4 decades ago. Although we left its physical proximity, the essence of college traveled well with us into the adventures and challenges that we confronted in our own lives and in our world.

In preparing for this day, I wondered what I could or should speak to you about. Should I go through the reading list and find meaningful passages, should I focus on the challenges facing our country and the world, and how it is has changed since my class sat like you amongst your family and friends? Rather, I would like to share with you the ways in which the college has had a presence in my own life and work, long after my knowledge of Greek, of Maxwell, of Plato, of Aquinas, and Newton has long since waned.

My journey after graduation took me from Annapolis to California, pausing in Santa Fe for a last look at the program's home, before beginning the study of biology and medicine and the subsequent pursuit of a career in oncology and the care of people suffering with cancer, and to conduct the experimental research that would give people hope, a longer life, on their own terms rather than that dictated by disease. And more often as the years have gone by, my colleagues and I were able to actually cure the disease and return a person to their own life. When asked about my choice, and the unusual college background that could lead me to such work, I often answered that I chose the most philosophical of the medical specialties as it forces one to confront, daily, the important questions in our life and its meaning, about how we live our life, and our relationship to each other, our family, and community, our country, our world. In essence, the work has allowed me to continue to think about the same questions that you have been considering for the last 4 years.

I believe that this was possible, because we were taught the pleasure and virtue of learning how to learn, fearlessly, and to be undaunted in our pursuit of knowledge in its many forms. After 4 years in this college, there is nothing that is unapproachable or unlearnable for you and although some knowledge or skills may be utilitarian, each of you understands the feeling that comes with any new understanding, that makes a person different as a consequence, from one moment in the dark, to one more enlightened. We all share the awareness of that feeling when we learn or have an insight that may have been elusive or difficult and the pleasure it conveys, and how it in an instant, we are transformed. When we meet with prospective students in Los Angeles, and I am asked, mostly by both students and their parents, what a student can do after this kind of education, you all now know the answer to that question: anything! If it is knowable, then it can be learned.

You have also learned to listen, carefully, respectfully, and in this noisy, often shrill world, where speaking and listening are often no more than the 140 characters of a Twitter message, or an attack add during a political campaign, this may be the most important gift to you from the college. It is a habit that will serve you well in your work, in play and, in love. For me, sometimes that listening is often at a bedside, with a hand extended, and a hand grasped.

You have learned to pursue truth, an often painful process, which has an inherent integrity, which is never ending and as Socrates taught us, is not always welcome. But it is the pursuit of truth that will enrich your life's work, deepen your friendships, and your love of another human being.

So some may ask what you have achieved, what is the meaning of your degree, without specialty, without major without job training. And to those who would ask, I would say that we have helped our young to become life long students, capable of anything, who understand listening to be a virtue, who will pursue truth in their work and in their life. Not a bad education.

A few years ago, as we were preparing for the new capital campaign, I was interviewed by a company who was working with us to articulate the message of the campaign, who wanted to know what I thought was so important about the college that would make people want to support it. I told her that the college was national treasure. After a long and silent pause, she then asked how a college, so small, so young, with comparatively few alumni compared to the University of Michigan or Harvard, could merit such an audacious description. Yes, I told her, we are small, but different, and our students are not the only ones who derive a benefit from an education at St. John's College. The habits and character of a St. John's graduate affect the workplace in whatever vocation they pursue. It is remarkable that a college where we all had the same education, results in such diversity of vocation, as we are teachers, lawyers, judges, clergy, scientists, physicians, writers, craftsmen, nurses, business men and women of a certain integrity, servicemen and

women and members of elected government. Your education affects your relationship to a spouse or life partner, how you raise, listen and respect your children, how you value and nurture your friendships, take care of your families, your community, your country. Yes, indeed, the college and its graduates are a national treasure and many will benefit and be affected by the habits of learning, listening and the pursuit of truth of its graduates. In my own work, it is sometimes said, that we are guided by “pikuech nefesh”, the idea that to save a person’s life, it is considered as if one has saved an entire world. To me that has always meant the life saved is much more than a single life restored, as that person is someone’s spouse, someone’s brother or sister, someone’s parent, or child, a member of a community, of a church synagogue or mosque, or a friend, and as all are affected by loss, all are restored by their return. So I believe that the impact of your education here is not solitary or transient, but will affect all with whom you will engage, throughout your life.

So indeed, I believe that you are part of that national treasure that is St. John’s College.

So your journey began in the fall of 2005 on the shores of Troy, when men and Gods fought, and in the case of Odysseus, making his long trip home to Ithaca. Your adventure here concluded two nights ago during a long, thoughtful day in London after the Great War, in June of 1923, preparing for an evening party with Mrs. Dalloway. While you were in London, freshman were returning to Troy wondering whether Philoctetes would give up his bow, a gift from Heracles, so that a war could be won and soldiers could, as all soldiers desire, to go home. Sophomores spent an evening on an Island, awaiting justice for an Italian prince, now sorcerer, facilitated by a tempest storm, and then applauding Prospero, so that he could too go home. Juniors returned to the antebellum south of our country, poling down the Mississippi before freedom came for Jim, and Huckleberry Finn could also, if he ever wanted, go home too.

So I do hope that you will remember this day, as we celebrate your graduation, the courage that each of you has demonstrated in coming here, as this is very daunting place, as it exposes your fears, and rather than running away, you have remained, and with the help of the college, you have overcome them. We celebrate the courage of your parents to trust you and the college to guide and protect you and bring you to this day. Yes, you are “Johnnies”, and so are your parents. And of course, there is the courage of our faculty, resistant to the educational fads of the day, and like you, are not here by accident or casually, who, like you, face their own challenges in learning and teaching in all parts of our community of learning. And like all of you, I remain grateful, and respectful of their role in preserving this oasis of learning.

So you should all remember the day you arrived, the days in between and today, as to forget robs you of the pleasures of lessons learned. To paraphrase Eli Wiesel, memory is passion no less powerful or pervasive than love. When we remember, we are able to inhabit more than one world, prevent the past from fading and in its own way, illuminates the days to come. When you recall what happens in your life, it will revive those fragments of your existence, rescue lost beings, and cast a bright and warm light on the faces, and the events of your life.

I remember my own classmates with great warmth, some of whom have become life long friends, some of whom by virtue of time and distance have remained in my memory, as the Dylan song says, forever young, the same age you are today, while we have grown older. I remember my tutors, the upper classman who helped us, playing sports year round for the Guardians in Annapolis, and my student job as the bell ringer in the spring of my senior year, every Monday and Thursday evening, ringing the bell whose melody was a clarion call to all of us to gather, when for a few hours, everyone in the college was doing the same thing, reading books together. Books which because of the passage of time in your own life, will always be new, as they are not bound by temporality, and will speak with a fresh voice to you at different times in your life. As everyone knows here, a book worth reading is a book worth reading again.

For me, I also learned about a different kind of great book. It is the great book that is in the life of every person, regardless of station of life. So often we make shallow and inaccurate presumptions about people, like the cliché of telling a book by its cover, which robs you of the deeper experience that defines us as humans in our relationship to each other. For me every patient is a great book with a story to tell and much to teach me, and I am sometimes ashamed when my presumptions are exposed and I then see the remarkable person within, between the covers of the book of the story of their own lives.

When I first came to the college, making my way across the south, in the late sultry summer of 1966, it was a different country, and it was an uneasy journey as 3 young civil rights workers no older than you, had been murdered two years before by Klansman in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The world in which I grew up was one of separation and discrimination and many of us, and our families, many of whom were refugees and survivors of the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, worked in the civil rights movement to help finish what Lincoln had begun. Four decades later, many of us returned to Washington DC to stand and bear witness to the inauguration of President Obama, a man who, when I came to the college, as he said in his inaugural, could not have sat at the same lunch counter to break bread with us, nor quenched his thirst at the same water fountain. So you graduate now from the college at a thrilling and challenging time in the history of our country and our world, and we welcome your commitment to pursuit of the good.

In my office, amongst the books, and journals, and papers, are pictures of family and of friends, of Jackie Robinson stealing home base in the world series against the Yankees in the early 1950s, a picture of a Jewish scholar writing the torah scroll which I had in my dorm room at St. Johns, photos of grateful patients, some of whom have been cured by the discoveries of our work. More importantly, are the pictures of those people for whom we were not successful as, they are a daily reminder of our responsibility to those in need of our help, for whom our extended hand, when grasped, remains firm regardless of where we go together. And although, over the years, I have obtained other degrees and honors, there remains only one diploma hanging on the wall in my office. It is the one I received on June 7, 1970 from the Collegii Sancti Johannis who will today award you that same diploma.

I hope you are as proud today as we were then, and that our lives will cross again some day.

Thank you for allowing me to share this special day with you. I will remember it always.

Stephen J. Forman, A70