

Convocation 2009
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Thank you, Dean Green. President Parker, let me add one more chorus of welcome – believe me, this is truly a place where anything can happen!

I am an operatic soprano. I am used to *performing* in front of large audiences. I am not, however, used to speaking in front of so prestigious a gathering to people whom I admire, respect and value so very much. So – if you will excuse a middle-aged diva – I would like to raise my comfort level a bit – much better!

I am incredibly overwhelmed to have received this enormous honor. Ladies, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Since the first time I turned the key in my office door, I have considered it an honor to walk with this esteemed faculty at convocations and graduations – to consider them my colleagues. You see, I never take for granted – not for one minute – how incredibly lucky I am to call Sweet Briar College the place where I work. Speaking of work – there are people in this world who get up at 4:30 every morning and make biscuits at McDonald's. They have jobs – they go to work. I am living my dream.

This room contains more knowledge – more academic success – than you will ever – at any other time in your life have at your disposal. Ladies, you have a wonderful opportunity to learn from the brilliant minds before you. You also have an opportunity to learn from the simple acts of courage that are exhibited in this community on a daily basis. I encourage you to embrace the spirit of community that exists here – and endeavor to become a part of the human bond that makes us more than students, faculty and staff – the bond that makes us an integral part of each other's sorrows and triumphs.

But before I wax philosophical and tell you what I have really come to say – I would like to take this opportunity to first clear up a bit of old business.

Last year at this time, Dr. Tim Loboschewski used an analogy to bring home a point he was making about reality and how it will, inevitably, find us all no matter how hard we try to avoid it. The analogy he used involved a kitten – a tiny kitten – trapped hopelessly in a pizza box with a poisonous radioactive isotope. This image has haunted me for one solid year.

I had almost recovered when I was treated (and I do mean treated) to Dr. John Morrissey's speech at Baccalaureate – and I quote, “Us biologists don't understand why some dead animals, such as a dried starfish or seashell on a bookshelf, are considered to be decorative ideas when others are not. If I nailed a puppy to the wall, you'd think I was a freak. Biologists think that all dead species are decorative. ... ”

Both of these amazing professors teach in Guion – I have no idea what goes on over there – I don't want to know – I went in there once looking for a snack machine and got lost – the place scares me to death – dead kittens, dead puppies – musicians may be crazy – but

we do not kill helpless small animals either to prove a point or as a means to decorate! So for all of you science majors who have no interest in playing musical instruments or learning how to sing – if it gets too horrible over there – walk across the parking lot – I have coffee and tissues! I take it as another sign of God’s enormous sense of humor that I have to look at the Science Building every single day!

By the way, Dr. Morrissey, I took to heart those 37 steps to success that you mentioned – I’m on number 35 and I’m feeling really successful. When I get to 37 I plan to start all over again at the beginning – practice makes perfect! May I also add that I think the selection of “Dr. Tatiana’s Sex Advice to All Creation” as the campus-wide reading for this year was brilliant. If I had had this book when I was struggling with biology in college – things might have turned out differently. I am still feverishly trying to figure out how to apply the text in my voice lessons – I haven’t figured it out yet – but I will!

Now that the old business is settled – ladies welcome to the beginning of a new year. It is to you that I dedicate the rest of my speech – it is to you that I dedicate whatever skill I might have as an educator, a nurturer, a teacher.

In order to communicate what I hope to leave you with today, I would like to begin by telling one of the many colorful stories of my undergraduate years. As fate would have it – this story takes us back to biology 101 and a lesson that I learned the hard way.

During my freshman year I had three quarters of biology (I also had three quarters of math, but we’ll save those stories for another day). This particular quarter we were graded on two out of three exams. We could easily opt to only take two – which is, of course, what I did. Upon taking my second exam and receiving a failing grade I decided it was time to go see my professor. I knocked carefully on his office door – “come in” was his response – “what can I help you with?” Mind you he did not look at me the entire time I was sheepishly making my way into his office, nor did he really acknowledge my presence.

I introduced myself and told him that I was in his freshman biology class. He then asked me what I was having trouble with. Instead of saying “everything,” I decided to pick a topic that might make it seem as though I was at least *in* class, so I responded, “Well, sir, I’m having trouble with the Electron Transport Chain.” Still not looking at me he said – “Well, why don’t you go to the board and show me what you know” – it was the longest 20 feet of my life. When I got to the black board, I knew I was doomed. I turned and completely red-faced said “Doctor so and so, I don’t know enough to ask you an intelligent question” to which he replied “sit down!”

He then turned, and for the first time, looked me straight in the face and said:

“Out of a class of five hundred students, I have ten percent who are failing. Of those ten percent, ten will completely humiliate themselves and come talk to me simply because they care about their grade ... and I will pass every single one of them. Now, get out of here.”

Once I had recovered from being completely sick to my stomach I remember feeling relieved. I got a “D” in his course and was glad of it! As time passed, however, I began to look upon that experience from a different viewpoint. I didn’t do my job. Here was a human being – a person with a heart and lungs and an arguably superior scientific brain – who truly could have taught me something – if I had asked earlier – if I had taken responsibility for the task that had been set before me and tried to understand the information that was being offered. Don’t get me wrong – I studied and read and went to class – but I did not value what was right in front of my eyes. I did not value the fact that someone – who was much wiser than I was – had for very good reasons decided that taking biology would be good for me – it would make me grow.

I decided that I was incapable of learning the subject matter even before I got started. I was a musician, I was a singer – my brain was just not wired “that way.” And, it was not out of arrogance that I decided all of this, it was out of fear – fear of being called “stupid,” fear of making a mistake that would lead to embarrassment – fear of failure.

Therefore, I did not require him to teach me. I did not show up at his office door at every opportunity and ask him to explain again and again what everyone else seemed to have been able to understand during class. I did not learn anything in the entire 12-week time period. What a complete waste of his skill and my brain power. My grade was determined by sheer luck and his generosity – it was a dangerous gamble. Don’t base your education on either luck or generosity – trust me – hard work and perseverance are a much better measuring stick.

Invite us to teach you, expect to be taught and help us to discover how you learn. Learning is not a passive sport – it requires your participation.

You are here for one purpose and, basically, for one purpose only ... to learn ... to grow. In every aspect of your life – in every capacity that you can – grow – grasp every bit of knowledge you can, process it and make it a part of who you are becoming. As you begin to mature and stretch your minds – you will become opinionated. This is an excellent outcome! As you become opinionated, you will begin to understand that most of the folks around you are also opinionated – the beliefs and value systems which you knew to be truth as you grew up will no longer be just those of your parents – they will begin to become yours...or not. You will begin to decide for yourselves what you believe and don’t believe and then – somewhere in the magic of education – if you truly apply yourselves to what is being taught – you will have achieved what I believe is one of the primary lessons a liberal arts education is charged with teaching – tolerance.

Exposure to the things on this campus that are “different” will begin to help shape your individual perspective on everything around you. Sooner or later as you allow yourselves to expand, you will become aware of the fact that other people believe just as strongly in the opinions they have formed and you will learn that being tolerant of each other is not only a matter of individual survival – it is imperative if a community is to survive and grow.

Somewhere in that mix make it a goal of yours to understand that you must learn how to allow those around you to believe differently than you do – and in so doing, you must also learn how to live with those people as they are learning how to live with you. THEN you will be able to understand the concept of service and living outside of yourself and in community. There will always be people whose journeys have been more difficult than yours and there will always be people whose simple acts of courage will humble you beyond your wildest dreams.

In time, you will learn to hold dear those things which feed and nurture you and let go those things which do not – gracefully. You will truly come to understand that in essence life is about choices – what you choose to keep and what you choose to selflessly give away. Success will become something that is measured by how you feel at the end of the day – knowing that you have been kind when kindness was not required – been helpful when you were not asked – been loving and giving when you did not have the time to be either.

The last story I would like to share with you occurred in 2006 a few short months before my mother died of Alzheimer’s disease. During the last months of her life, on Sunday afternoons, I would often go by and play hymns on the horribly out of tune piano that was in the common room of the care facility where she lived. I used my sense of humor often as the residents would wander around – sometimes singing – sometimes talking while I sang – truly in their “own little worlds.”

This one particular day, however, was a lady’s birthday. This was a woman who spoke in nonsensical sounds and had no clue as to what her name was – she wandered all the time and was often caught trying to get on the elevator in order to escape to another floor. But this day she was dressed in her nicest dress and wore a crown on her head.

She stood beside me and sang “Jesus Loves Me” – perfectly. Every word. She smiled a smile I have never forgotten and there was a connection between us – even for a very brief moment – that was poignant and life changing.

You see – I gave her 30 minutes of my time – she gave me a lifetime of confirmation that what I was doing was good and had value. Somewhere in her lifetime singing was a part of who she was – I have no idea of the history of this woman’s journey – only that in the last few months of her life – she sang – beautifully. Suddenly everything that I was trying to do with my life made more sense – she gave me a wonderful gift.

I believe with all of my heart that when the brain shuts down – when the circle of life is almost complete and we have to be cared for as if we were infants once again – the soul still sings – loudly and confidently we remember the melodies we have embraced and taken inside ourselves and perhaps, if we are very lucky, we will be given the opportunity to sing them – to give them to anyone who will listen. The music continues – it is a never-ending constant that envelopes all who choose to listen.

Albert Schweitzer said, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

Use this time in your lives to find out who you are. Make choices that will enable you to live lives of purpose and, in so doing, make it your goal to figure out how you can use what you have learned – and what you love – to give something back to each other and to serve the world around you.

Because, perhaps, my dears, in the final analysis, what you do in your lifetime will not be nearly as important as what you *give*.