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BENNINGTON COLLEGE

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Convocation Address

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By Rebecca B. Stickney '43

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*September 6, 1995*

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# Laboring in the Vineyard

Well, well, well...!

It never occurred to me over the years I have labored in Bennington's vineyard that I would be standing in front of this community, a captive audience assembled, prepared to hear whatever I had to say for however long I wished to say it. What an opportunity! One of a lifetime, surely.

When Liz called me on a recent evening to say that the senior staff (a group, I hasten to tell you, I do not belong to in spite of the fact that I am senior in every respect to everyone on the committee) was issuing an invitation to me to address all of you at this event. I told her I would far rather be *in* than in *front of* an audience. She laughed and asked me to think it over. I did. So here I am, and there you are.

In the last few days as I walked with dog Chestnut early in the morning I thought of dozens of things to talk with you about. You will rejoice to know that I have gradually reduced that number to about two. I want to tell you something about the College when I was here as an undergraduate and then give you my view of the College in the present, what I foresee in the future and your crucial role in determining what that future will be. Why do I want to tell you this old stuff? Because I want you to know that what once was can, in today's terms, be so for *you*. Let's go back then to 1939—yes, 1939.

The College was in its seventh year. There were about three hundred of us undergraduates and, of course, we were all women. We thought of ourselves as "different" from most college women and we had reason to think that. We had a great deal to



Becca (in white) on the farm in 1943, digging the root cellar.

say about our own educations; we were not asked to put our motivations on ice while we satisfied a bunch of requirements those in charge thought would be good for us and turn us into well-rounded adults. How boring! Don't get the idea that academically the sky was the limit. There were guidelines, expectations and, of great importance, counselors. There *was* uncommon freedom for Bennington students, necessary, it was felt, if we were to grow up, but there also were counselors. One met with one's counselor every week. Work was discussed, always academic plans, and if play was excessive, that, too. Most counselors asked questions. My freshman year counselor's favorites were "What makes you think that?" "Where's your evidence?" "What do you want to learn?" "What do you think you need to do to learn it?" We were *required* to be in charge. We were *expected* to take prime responsibility for our educations, and for our social lives. We had no system of class cuts, no specific number of weekends away, or nights out. We could have men in our own rooms (between the hours of ten a.m. and six p.m. please!). We were the first college women to wear jeans, the first to go around with Flat Fifties in our hip jeans' pockets (a Flat Fifty, which cost thirty-five cents, was a small tin box of fifty Chesterfields, Camels, or Luckies) and certainly the first to be able to study, as regular courses, dance, painting, drama, music, photography. We were second (Antioch was first) to go to work in the outside world every year. For all these reasons, and many more, most of the outside world thought of us and our wonderful new college as godless (there was no chapel, nor did we want one, nor were we required to attend it) uncivilized (because there were no parietals—I wonder how many students here even know the meaning of the word?) and "arty" (because we could *study* the arts). This was very heady stuff to us. We were excited, hard-working, proud of ourselves and enormously proud of our College. We loved to say we went to Bennington. That always caused a reaction like, "Why don't you go to a *real* college?," and then we were up on our soap boxes. We knew that Bennington was, indeed, a serious academic institution with an extraordinary faculty of

professionals teaching students to produce serious, imaginative, *original* work. We knew, too, that students' increasing "self-dependence" was the crucial measurement of satisfactory progress and determined whether we were invited to return year by year.

Here's a bit of personal stuff now to prove my point: I was a trial major in science (I'll explain "trial major" in a minute). As a freshman I was required to do a project. I chose to build a radio, a big one, eight vacuum tubes, short wave—the works. I worked on it most of second term, figuring out the circuits, soldering like the pro I was becoming. One night I made the final solder, turned on the switch and, *mirabile dictu*, there was sound! The volume worked. I could get short wave! I was excited more than I had ever been. I called my father and he, pleased as punch, said, "Well, that *is* why you built it, isn't it?" Then in my sophomore year I had become interested in the search for synthesizing Vitamin C. No one yet had been able to put it together chemically. The famous scientist Albert Szent Gyorgyi was hot on the trail. An associate of his was a friend of Bob Woodworth's, one of my great teachers. I decided, why not? I knew that the bacterium *bacillus brevis*, acting on sorbitol, a corn syrup by-product, would, on paper anyway, produce Vitamin C. *Bacillus brevis* could be found in cow's saliva. We had good sources of that in the area and I went out to the pastures, got it, isolated the bacterium I was after as I had been taught to do in bacteriology, and set up my equipment in my own little lab. One night, late, I was there to take a reading and the oxidation of my end product was spectacular. I called Mr. Woody who hustled over to check on my results. I also called home to tell the parents of the great find and my mother, my wonderful Radcliffe graduate mother, said, "That's wonderful, dear, wonderful. But I *wish* you would take some history." Well, it turned out not to have been Vitamin C but it was the first step of many towards it. Imagine, though, having the chance to take a real whack at producing that vitamin? Think how much I learned. Dr. Szent Gyorgyi beat me to it, but I had encouragement to try, and it was thrilling.

We had a trial major system in those days. That meant that when you made your very first program you delegated half of it to the discipline you most cared about. The remaining half was to be spent in two other disciplines. If, for instance, you came to study dance, you could spend half your time in the dance studios but the other half, divided into quarters, had to be in, let's say, social science and literature. (After all, you had to have something to dance *about*.) But soon the faculty decided the trial major encouraged too much specialization too early, and the so-called basic courses were established as the general guideline for the freshman year. This meant four quarters in four different disciplines, but there were choices enough so you could still study what you were interested in. Sophomore year we were all required to submit a plan of study for the last two years where majoring was expected—as, of course, is true today.

When I came to Bennington there was a *community* Constitution, a committee structure of students, faculty, and administrators to see to the management of our daily lives. "Civilized behavior" (and I put that in quotes) was expected and transgressors—usually students (but occasionally faculty, never administrators) were handled by the appropriate committee. Rules and regulations as established by the community were spelled out and when changes were required, changes were made—by the community. Robert Devore Leigh, Bennington's first president and a man of daring and wisdom, felt strongly that every generation of students should have a chance to revise the constitution. We were frequently at work—all of us—in updating and keeping our Constitution responsive to our needs.

Just a word now about the physical campus: very different from what it is today. There was no Crossett Library, no Dickinson, no VAPA. There was Commons, of course, twelve student houses and the Barn, which housed the library in the east wing and the science labs in the west wing. There was another entrance drive altogether, through the little cemetery just below the student houses straight up to the Flagpole. Jennings and that north end of campus were

not acquired by the College until Mrs. Jennings died in about 1941. At that time the present lovely drive was also acquired.

I *do* want to emphasize that we had an evangelical sense of mission in those days. We felt ourselves to be in the trenches and we were bent on making our College work, and proving ourselves to the world out there.

In December 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and by the time we students came back from our winter jobs, lots of changes were taking place. The country was at war. Many faculty were joining the armed forces or being drafted. Many students were leaving to be married before their men went off to war. Some students joined up. Our individual ration books for meat, sugar, butter, eggs and the like were handed over to the Dining Halls. Dorothy Thompson, New York *Herald Tribune* columnist, foreign correspondent, and dynamo—it was said of her that next to Eleanor Roosevelt she had "the most power and prestige of any woman" in America and, by the way, she ultimately became a Vermonter; she married Sinclair Lewis and they had a farm in Woodstock—Dorothy Thompson came to this College and at an evening meeting she told us that we should put our college careers on hold and join the Women's Land Army which would raise masses of food crops for the war effort. She was a powerhouse speaker and had us in an uproar. I think I recall correctly that there was such a commotion classes had to be called off the next day while things got sorted out. I called my father and said, "Daddy, I'm leaving college and going out to work in the Women's Land Army." His response was "Well, no, I don't think so." Most of us decided to stay in college and it was soon thereafter that we ourselves decided to farm. We certainly did farm! Bob Woodworth, botanist and biologist of our science faculty, was put in charge. Most of our acreage was put under cultivation. We raised chickens, beef, and pork for our own tables. We also raised vegetables and potatoes, and what we didn't eat or freeze or put into the root cellar, we gave to folks in North Bennington. It was a College commu-

nity project. Everyone was involved. It was volunteer labor, of course, and as can happen with volunteers, a few undertake most of the work. But when the notice went out that classes would be canceled for a Farm Day, everyone showed up to do what needed to be done—like plucking and freezing hundreds of chickens, or digging a ton of potatoes.

Perhaps, now, you have some idea of what Bennington was like in its early days and into its early middle age. Things changed in the educational world as we went along, of course. Other institutions began including the arts as legitimate disciplines for study, students elsewhere were given something to say about their programs, and parietal rules were largely modified or abandoned altogether. We were no longer so “different” up here on our hilltop. We *had* proved that students were better students if they were studying what they were interested in, that they could learn to make increasingly responsible decisions about themselves and their lives while in college, if given the chance to do so. By the seventies Bennington had grown up in the public eye, and everyone else had caught up. While Bennington students found their academic lives challenging and involving, we clearly were no longer pioneers. I suppose one could say that some hardening of the arteries was beginning to show.

May Sarton, poet, novelist, chronicler, (recently deceased) said at a poetry reading, “This is the best time of my life. I love being old.” When asked what was so great about that, she responded “Because I am more myself than I have ever been.” She was seventy at the time and I think she was right. At least I am that age and I know whereof she speaks. I have fewer doubts about what I think and fewer inhibitions about *saying* what I think. So now I am going to tell you, in general terms, what I think has been happening at Bennington over the last twenty years, where we are today, and, as I said earlier, the very important roles we all, but especially you students, have to play in determining our College’s future.

From 1970 until 1987—a matter of seventeen years—we had three presidents and two acting presi-

dents. For some of these people Bennington was a brief stop on the way to somewhere else. But whatever, it was not exactly a time for developing faculty or administrative leadership, nor for regular periods of self study (a tradition the College was proud of), when all constituencies, including alumni, would be involved in examining and evaluating the College—whether it was academically challenging and teaching students the techniques they would need to have control over their lives once in the larger world; whether, as times changed, the College responded appropriately; whether finances were sound; and whether, when all else was said, it was the best it could possibly be.

By 1986 we were once again looking for a president. After six months of meetings, the search committee (made up of trustees, faculty, students, and staff) was ready with its short list of four candidates, all of whom came to the campus to see and be seen. The campus was polled and the committee, based on that poll, recommended to the Board that Elizabeth Coleman be offered the presidency of Bennington College. To our great delight she accepted. Liz took office in January 1987. That was eight years ago. This College has been no stepping stone for Liz.

Let me read to you a quote from an article I read recently in the Spring 1995 issue of *Liberal Education* written by Arthur Chickering, professor of educational leadership at George Mason University. He writes, “Research evidence dating back to Ted Newcomb’s studies of Bennington College in 1938 documents time and again how critically important clear institutional objectives and a clear sense of institutional purposes are for student learning and development. Unfortunately, Ernest Boyer in the late 1980s found a pervasive absence of clear and consistent objectives among our nation’s institutions. He says, ‘During our study we found divisions on campus, conflicting priorities, and competing interests that diminish the intellectual and social quality of the undergraduate experiences and restrict the capacity of the college effectively to serve its students.’”

Dr. Boyer could have been talking specifically about Bennington. He describes very well what was happening here. The Board of Trustees and the president were deeply concerned about the quality of the educational opportunities for our students and the quality, as well, for the everyday life of our students. Neither was good enough. Changes were in order. But who likes change?

Most of us know the rest of the story. The Symposium process was established. Faculty, students, administrators, and alumni were all solicited for commentary on the various reports and documents sent to them from the Board proposing changes in structure and curriculum. Hundreds of responses came in from former students, faculty, and staff. Meetings set up on campus for discussion of proposed changes were unevenly attended. For certain there were some faculty and students who felt that traditionally trustees did not meddle in matters of this kind and that nothing would come of their initiatives. Wrong. The trustees were deadly serious. They knew that the College was in a decline. Its reputation as an academic institution of distinction was in question. Admission figures were not promising. Financial soundness was at risk. Prospects for the College were poor. Without intervention, the best the Board could see was compromise of the very reasons Bennington was established in the first place. The Board did act. The Symposium Report of the Bennington College Board of Trustees was issued in June 1994.

Now I'm going to pull out all the stops. I wish I were a Dorothy Thompson talking to you students because were I, by the time I finished you would all be out of your seats!

You have a new institution here. The press has had a heyday with us. Some of our alumni are doing their best to discredit the Board, the president and perhaps even those of you who have decided to stay here, or those of you who have decided to come as new students. The reason you're here is that you know the possibilities for you are tremendous. You have an extraordinary, first-class faculty of profession-

als here to teach and counsel you. You have cooperative, concerned administrators whose only mission is to make it as easy as possible for you to get to your teachers. You have extraordinary dining hall and maintenance staffs who know that students must be well fed and housed if they are to be good students. You even have a Constitution for community governance in process. (Everyone should be involved in that and those upper classmen assuming leadership for it would welcome your interest.) The fact is, this College is set up now—again, as it was in my undergraduate years—to act as if it only had one student at any given moment. If you work as you never have before, if you make tremendous demands on yourselves and on your teachers (who will love it), each of you will have an unparalleled undergraduate experience, *one that will change your lives.*

Bennington has become a household word in the educational world and all eyes are upon us. Many hope we will succeed. Some doubt we can. Others hope we won't. You, too, like those of us here in the early days, are now in the trenches. You are our Pioneers, the Next Generation. Use yourselves and this place hard, seriously, and responsibly. Be good to each other. You have to make it all happen, both for yourselves individually and for the College as a whole. If you do this, the College will be around for a long time and, as was the case for many years, every high school student will want to be here. Mind me now! You can do it!