

Bennington College Commencement Address

President Coleman, trustees, members of the faculty, parents, friends, graduates of the class of 2005, thank you for having me, this is an extraordinary occasion and I'm grateful to be with you.

The standard advice for one giving a public address is to begin with a joke. So I'm going to begin with a joke: a guy walks into a college.

But let me backtrack. This is characteristic, by the way, of all the best jokes, like the one I'm going to tell you about the guy and the college – the teller will need to periodically backtrack and explain, to fill in, as I'm going to do now. And, if this joke is like most of the jokes I tell, you'd better savor the digressions for their own sake. They may be better than the punchline, which is so often a letdown. So, to better prepare you for the disappointment of the punchline, to make it likelier that you'll forgive me when that moment comes, let's agree now to try to make something out of the digressions. If you will. Please. Thank you.

So, to backtrack, the college – this college is a liberal arts school in New England, one with something of a reputation for being innovative in its approach to teaching. The guy, he's a high school senior, a possible painter or writer, sporadically attentive to his studies, brash, foolish, and perfectly typical of the persons attracted to the college in question.

So, senior year of high school ends, the guy applies, gets in, packs his bags, goes to the college. He's assigned a dorm room, roommate, signs up for some classes. Passes a few, gets, uh, extensions on a few others. Delves into the whole college experience, for a little while. Then decides he's got something more important to do, and goes into an office in the barn and explains he's going to take some time off. Not dropping out, no – just a leave of absence. So they give him the leave. Guy moves to California, writes a couple of books, ten years go by. His friends from college have long since graduated. Still, anytime anyone asks him where he went to college he tells them the name of the school and says, "I'm a sophomore, on leave." At first it's an excuse, and then it becomes a joke. "I'm a sophomore on leave."

Nearly ten more years go by. Guy returns from California to the east coast. More books. Some of these books, in the typical manner of a writer leaving youth behind and approaching middle age, become reflective, even nostalgic. The joke – "I'm a sophomore on leave" – begins to take on elements of yearning for connection to the school the guy left behind, of going back in his mind and doing things slightly differently, of wishing, in fact, that he could go back and do things a little differently. But never mind, time flows in one direction. So, one day the guy comes home, and finds his wife has jotted down a telephone message. The message says "Liz Coleman from Bennington would like you to call her back at the following number." The guy – the sophomore on leave – has an instinctive feeling, left over from long ago, that he's in some kind of trouble. But unlike his twenty-year-earlier self, who probably wouldn't have returned such a call, who would be more likely to immediately depart for California at the arrival of this kind of phone message – who, in fact, departed twenty years earlier for California without paying a ticket, a citation from the New York State

Highway patrol for driving without a license, awarded him just outside of Hoosick Falls – unlike that earlier self, the guys calls Liz Coleman back. And she says, drum roll please: “The class of 2005 has asked you to be its commencement speaker.”

Okay, it’s not really that great of a joke. It does have this distinction, though, from most jokes you’ll hear: the punchline is standing before you, in the flesh. That would have meant quite a lot to me, back when I was a student here. I’d have gotten a certain amount of mileage from the fact that the commencement speaker was a sophomore on leave. It would have seemed so perfectly Bennington to me, in some way I couldn’t have expressed except by that adjective: so Bennington. Having been attracted to this place for its willful unconventionality, and because of my hope for its tolerance of my own willful unconventionality, I was prone to punishing it for being itself – punishing it, that is to say, by the constant application of my fiercest irony, which is to say punishing it not at all. But I did use that irony to insulate myself, my vulnerable and yearning and hopeful self, from the fear of failure and rejection that it couldn’t tolerate or even fully consider. The reasons I left this school early are too complex to describe now, at least not without stealing far too much time from those I mean to congratulate and honor, but the simple way to describe it is that I declared a false choice to myself – in the privacy of my dorm room – in the basement of Noyes House: I’d begun a novel and then decided that somehow I had to go away from this place to become a writer. As it happened, I would spend much of the following years attempting to reconstruct for myself informally a version of the community I’d denied myself by leaving college, but at the time I left I had no idea how much I’d miss it, and besides, I didn’t admit to my friends or my father or myself that I was leaving for good – I was simply a sophomore, going on leave to write a book, leaving behind a place that had aroused and challenged and intimidated me, a decision that I kept quarantined in a thick coating of irony.

Now, as I search for words adequate to this occasion I can’t locate that irony at all. Your graduation today seems to me an ineffably beautiful thing, you all seem as scrubbed clean of irony as newborn babies, and before you decide you don’t like the sound of that let me say that I feel like a newborn baby today, too. These ceremonies stir us at such depths because they are among those rare moments in life that can only happen once, like birth or death, like leaving your native soil for a first encounter with a foreign country. Like marriage, which happens only once at least among certain species of birds if not always among humans, but is nonetheless like birth and death, and like graduation, in being among those moments in which our irony falls away, moments like a hinge in time, a hinge to a door which is also the cover of a book, moments like that when the swing we are riding reaches the top of its arc and we are neither rising nor falling but instead are still, and we take a breath of the open air and glance around the entire landscape our lives, seemingly laid bare for us there, at the top of the swing’s arc, as if our lives are already complete and we are only recalling them. By bringing me here to congratulate and honor you as best I can, by calling me here to speak to you in the middle of my sophomore year, you’ve also provided me with one of those moments, you’ve stripped me somewhat bare of my defenses, and I thank you for it.

And I am supposed to provide you with un-ironic advice. Honestly, an uncomfortable assignment, but beautifully risky, a kind of high-wire act for everyone involved – because this is a kind of birthday for us both I am going to have to risk giving you advice and you’re going to have to risk listening to it.

You're going to have to sit still for a few of my certainties, even though the attempt may seem rather un-Bennington – somehow, paradoxically, dropping out seems more Bennington than giving a commencement address, doesn't it? As though I were closer at the start of this twenty-year journey than I am now, at the end of it. And certainties are the thing I'm least certain of – I've got fewer of those than I did when I arrived here from high school. If you'd asked me to give this speech as a freshman, rather than as a sophomore on leave, I'd have had no problem. I would have simply informed you that all the wisdom of the world was contained in the lyrics of the band Devo, but only the first three albums. Any subsequent Devo album lyrics may be considered strictly optional. This, however, will no longer do. While in 1985 I would have sincerely advised you to listen to Devo, to do so today is only another joke, another deflection, more irony, not advice at all. And advice, it seems to me, like most jokes, is supposed to be all about the punchline but instead is usually better in the digressions, for if you judge advice by the punchlines it all turns out to be exactly the same, except when it contradicts itself completely. Advice, like a joke, comes alive, if it does, in the telling.

The first advice that mattered to me was the phrase, "All paths lead nowhere, choose one with heart," which as a child I heard repeated often by my parents' friend Dan Icolari, who was a man who frightened me slightly. Dan Icolari had what is sometimes called a 'built-in bullshit detector'; he had an impatience with fools that extended, in his case, even to little children. I associate Dan Icolari with the experience of being sent upstairs to bed so that the adults could begin to really talk, to gossip and complain, and therefore I associate him with a frustration of my insatiable curiosity for sitting at the edge of the grownups' table and eavesdropping. "All paths lead nowhere, choose one with heart," would seem to have a kind of Buddhist placidity and calm to it, and it may in fact have been a paraphrase of some guru of the east, but in Dan Icolari's mouth it had a Brooklyn toughness, an impatience that suggested you were a moron if you didn't already know that all paths lead nowhere and that anyone with any sense at all could recognize a path with heart, and that if you couldn't recognize one with heart you were beyond help anyway. "All paths lead nowhere, choose one with heart" was a great consolation to me, as I contemplated it privately, not least because in Dan Icolari's mouth it presented itself as an only slightly politer way of saying, to someone who was dithering aloud over some choice they were unable to make, shut up already. You could even say it to yourself that way, as I have been doing for decades now.

Another piece of advice that has lodged in my head, so dense and aphoristic and familiar that it can be easy to forget that it is advice: "All roads lead to Rome". When I was younger I took this literally, as a description of an ancient world that had been outgrown – I figured all roads no longer led to Rome, and I was free to go where I chose instead. I was much more interested in paths that lead nowhere, and in choosing one with heart. In my urge to be unconventional I figured Rome was the last place I'd go, an attitude which, paradoxically, led me both to the choice of Bennington College and to dropping out of Bennington College. Yet here I am, on graduation day, which is a kind of Rome, and one to which my road has seemingly inevitably led. And here you are, on graduation day, the Rome at the end of the road you quite possibly felt led elsewhere, or nowhere. If you're anything like me, you hardly expected to be here. Perhaps, then, Rome is birth, and death, and marriage, and graduation day, the destination we hardly need to bother trying for, the inevitable city on the horizon of the path to nowhere. Rome, like birth and death and marriage, and graduation day, is a kind of punchline,

obvious, inevitable, you see it coming a mile away, but the point is the means by which you got there, and the pleasure you took on the digressions along the way, and the tone of voice of the telling of the tale and the attitude struck and the pleasure taken by the listener to the tale. If all roads lead to Rome then the point is the one you chose, the path to nowhere, chosen with heart.

More advice, even more familiar, familiar to the point of being inane: choose your battles. Or, with that slight spin given it by the Brooklynese, by a speaker such as Dan Icolari, “You choose your battles.” The implication being: “YOU, dummy. I’ve watched you do it.” I don’t know when I first heard this piece of advice, nor when it first proved itself lucid and useful to me, but I know that I repeat it to myself almost once a day – it is a kind of get-out-of-jail-free-card of the mind: choose your battles. Of course, if all roads lead to Rome, and they do, then most of your battles have chosen you before you had the chance to consider otherwise. You’re up to your neck in battles chosen before you understood you were choosing: battles ethical, aesthetic, sexual, political, battles at the shifting frontier where your self meets the world, battles with the mundane stuff of existence which seems to make its own demands, in the manner of a family, and which may seem at times to conspire against you. Today is commencement day, yet we’d better acknowledge that most everything else besides this particular day commenced before we came along, that a world of battles has been underway that we were merely born to. Yet you still get to choose the battles you’ll call your own, the battles you’ll embrace and be defined by, the way you were defined by coming to this place to live and work and play, the way it was a battle you’d chosen before you knew it, a road to Rome when you’d never said to yourself clearly that you wanted to get to Rome. In other words, you’ve already chosen: now choose. You’re well in the thick of anything I could possibly advise you to ready yourselves for. The friends and lovers around you today have presented you with the problems of living you will spend the rest of your lives solving and not solving. The questions they’ve posed by their being alive beside you are the questions you’ll reply to by the way you choose to be alive beside the ones you choose to be alive beside, whether those happen to be the very ones beside you today or not. The work you’ve undertaken is a version of any kind of work you’d ever encounter in the world, and the world you enter will be partly made by the work you make in it. To borrow, for the moment, the words of Edmund Wilson, written in a letter to a despondent friend, “We have to take life – society and human relations – more or less as we find them. The only thing we can really make is our work. And deliberate work of the mind, imagination and hand, done, as Nietzsche said, ‘nonwithstanding’, in the long run remakes the world.”

As for battles though, mostly I’d advise not choosing them. The world has battles enough. If you can identify it as a battle, leave it alone. Like unanswered e-mail or unreturned phone messages a gratifying number of these will resolve themselves if we only hold ourselves a patient distance from them. But above all, avoid choosing battles that don’t exist. By this I mean, avoid false choices. False choices are offered to us everywhere, the voice of authority is addicted to them like garbage calories, like crack, and like garbage calories or crack they degrade the mind and body that opens to them. False choices like the choice between self and community – which was the false choice I felt I had to make when I left college, and which you’ve been clever enough to avoid. While most any problem you meet worth solving will need solving at least twice, and the problem of yourself, of being a self, will, if my example is any measure, need solving at least twice a day, there are many seeming

contradictions that must not be taken as problems to be solved, but as paradoxes to be embraced. For instance, am I advising you to choose with heart, or to avoid needless choosing? Both, whenever possible. You're sometimes told to "vote with your feet", but as you'll observe now, you're already standing somewhere when this advice reaches your ears. Be where you are and go somewhere else (with heart of course): I'm endorsing both. Both are unavoidable anyway. And, most strange of all, you'll find yourself defined, frequently, as much by what you've attempted to turn away from, by what you've tried to leave behind, as by the things you've chosen deliberately to embrace. I, for one, can locate in myself the version of my college that existed when I was still in high school, dreaming of where I might apply, fitting myself to my imagined destination, the version that I dwelled in here for my too-brief visit, and the version I left behind to my friends and eventually to all of you. When I walk this campus, letting it flood me with memories, I dwell in all three selves simultaneously. In the words of William Faulkner, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past."

The one thing I can't tell you to do is to do as I have done and drop out of Bennington. You lost your last chance to do that a few days ago, at least, and even then you have to admit it would have looked pretty lame. The fact that you are here listening to me means that you will have to accept that that was one path you did – or didn't – take, one battle you did – or didn't – choose. You can still follow in my footsteps, though, and leave this place. In fact, they will insist upon it. Take the diploma as a big fat hint. If you read the fine print on the thing you'll find it says "put an egg in your shoe and beat it, make like a tree and leave". So go ahead and follow in my footsteps and put this place behind you – or try, anyway. Abandon Rome, if you think you can. You'll be back, again and again you'll be back, because this is the Rome inside you, a place where you came to make yourselves and one another ready to leave it, and in doing so made it a place you'll never finish leaving.

Now let me try to tell you a better joke. A guy walks into a coffee shop. This guy is on the small side, a bit short, a bit slight – rather harmless looking, you'd say. Nevertheless, he has an intense look about him, he's scowling, and he walks very intently to the counter of the coffee shop and presents himself to the proprietor. "Can I help you?" says the proprietor. The little guy says: "Give me a cappuccino, and I'm not paying, because I'm not afraid of anybody." The proprietor looks around him, wondering if this is some kind of joke, perhaps there's a hidden camera somewhere? But no, just the little guy, scowling up at him. So, the proprietor isn't really all that impressed, but he doesn't want any trouble, he's got a clientele he doesn't want to disturb, so he makes a cappuccino and gives it to the little guy. The little guy takes it and sits at a corner table and drinks the cappuccino, scowling back over at the counter, and when he's done he slams down the cup and, sure enough, he leaves without paying. The proprietor figures, 'whatever'. He forgets about it. Only the next day the little guy is back. Rushes straight up to the counter and slams his fist and says again: "Give me a cappuccino, and I'm not paying, because I'm not afraid of anybody." And again the proprietor wonders: is this for real? But again he doesn't want any trouble. He tells himself, 'you choose your battles'. So he gives over the cappuccino. And again the little guy drains the cup and glares and stalks out without paying. Well, this is all well and good, but the proprietor has had about enough. So the next day he has a little surprise prepared, in case it happens again. He hires a bouncer, a rather tall and rather hefty fellow, an imposing figure. And, sure enough, it does happen again. So, when the little guy walks up to the counter and says "Give me a cappuccino, and I'm not paying, because I'm not afraid of anybody," the

bouncer leans in. He's about two feet taller than the little guy. And he looks down and says, "What's that you say? You're not afraid of anybody?" And the little guy looks up and says, "That's right." And the bouncer says, "That's funny, because I'm not afraid of anybody either." And the little guy looks up at the proprietor and says: "Make that two cappuccinos!"

What I like about that joke, I suppose, is its radically unfinished quality. Its beauty is in the unspoken continuation of the story, and the mystery of possibility it encompasses. Who knows, in the afterwards to that joke the big guy and the little guy may even find themselves, like Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains at the end of Casablanca, at the beginning of a beautiful relationship. My blessing to you all, my hope for all of us from this day, is that we will always demand two cappuccinos. To paraphrase Yogi Berra, when you come to a fork in the road – and you will, and you have, and you stand at one today – take it. With heart.

Thank you.

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