

Commencement Speech  
Eileen Scully  
June 4, 2005

Welcome families and friends of our graduates. Congratulations to you all, the Class of 2005. It is my privilege and pleasure to address you on this very special day. But, hmmm, as to an actual speech—well, I need an extension. No, really, just two days—Monday, noon, I'll have it in your boxes. And it's going to be amazing!!.....

So, it is indeed my privilege and pleasure to address you on this very special day.

Over the last several weeks I asked many of you what you might find inspirational, useful, and memorable, in a graduation speech, what you would likely hear as trite or clichéd. So, you told me:

Reassure us that we are well prepared and that we got a good education, just as good as from a 'regular' college.

Don't tell us that the future is here, that it's ours, and that we must change the world you guys didn't fix even though your graduation speaker told you to.

Don't tell us that history thing, about those who don't understand the past are fated to repeat it.

Don't lie to us.

Make us laugh.

Tell us something dumb you did when you were our age

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Well, I can't discuss the really dumb things I did when I was younger, for...reasons of national security.... But I think this one will serve.

Twenty-plus years ago, my own graduation day arrived. I had, fortunately, passed out of my Janis Joplin phase, when I sat in my darkened dorm room drinking Southern Comfort, listening over and over again to my eight-track cassette tape of "Me and Bobby McGee." Still, I had absolutely no plans for the life that was supposed to begin the day after graduation, and so woke up that day-after in my childhood bedroom, in my parents' house, wondering what—if anything—had actually

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changed except that black tassel hanging from the bedside lamp. I had only a vague, but compelling, sense that I wanted to live a big life, to be out there where things were happening.

At that time, young people were being advised to “think China” for training and careers, as the US had just reopened formal relations with Communist China at that time, in the late 1970s. So, China it would be, I decided.

In those days, we didn’t have the internet...Not sure what exactly Al Gore was doing back then, but anyway, no web pages, email...just newspapers. One day a few months after college graduation, I took fate in hand, and put an advertisement in the national and international editions of the Christian Science Monitor: “Young woman, wants to go to Mainland China, will do anything.” Eileen P. Scully, BA, 92 Pinebrook Rd, New Rochelle NY, 10026.

What’s really funny, and touching, about this for me is that I can see myself sitting there working on the ad, thinking quite carefully about this phrase: ‘will do anything.’ I was no fool. I weighed all the possibilities—typing, research, taking care of kids, cleaning houses, starting a branch business in China, being a stringer for a newspaper, teaching English.’ Yes, indeed, I would do ‘anything.’ As you would expect, I learned over the next several weeks that there were a whole lot of “anythings” out there, and none of them were for me.

Letters arrived from every corner, every dark corner, of the world, and America. My parents stood back at first, letting me handle things, until the letters started arriving from Ft Leavenworth Prison, addressed to “My China Baby,” and “Lady in Red.” I heard my parents “discussing” the situation behind closed doors:

“..fancy college...teach her?”, my dad.

“...adult now...” , my mom.

“...one ounce...common sense..” my dad.

So began an intensive tutorial. Everyday they would give me the New York Post and New York Daily News, with all the stories circled about really bad things that happened to people, and then at dinner we would hash out the moral of each terrible tale. Some months later, with their financial support, good wishes, and great fears, I went off to Hong Kong to study Chinese.

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So, that story is one of my gifts for you today. Not just the gift of shared laughter, but the gift of perspective. As you move through your 20s, you will inevitably make mistakes. In those moments ahead when you find yourself saying “How could I

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have been so dumb?” Stop, and remember this moment, me, here, in this hat, and consider: “hmm, was it as dumb as what Scully did that time?” If it was, then get help immediately. Call family, friends, Call one of us (faculty). If it wasn’t, then distill the lessons of your experience, and forgive yourself, as fully and readily as you would forgive a loved one. If something like this doesn’t happen to you by the time you are thirty, look around to make sure that you aren’t perhaps too wordly wise, too certain about what life offers and how people are.

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It does seem to me, then, that you are far better prepared than I was, with your Field Work Term experiences at the very least. More than that, I believe you are as prepared as anyone can be in this day and age coming out of college, and better prepared in certain crucial respects because you chose Bennington in the first place, and continued to choose Bennington during the periodic angst that led you to other college websites and transfer applications. It seems to me that you, as Bennington graduates, already understand in a profound intellectual and experiential way what most other colleges don’t teach students: that our lives are our own to take responsibility for and give shape to. The Plan process means that Bennington students do in college what most young people do in their 20s, some not until their 30s, and some so late that it’s known as a “mid-life crisis.” That is, you each have come to understand yourself as an individual—with particular ways of thinking, particular talents and dispositions, some attitudes and habits that repeatedly get in your way, certain core ethical values that will help you navigate the complexities and vicissitudes out there. That isn’t to say you are ‘finished,’ only that you are ready.

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Your class most especially has experienced the outer reaches of emotion that are eventually captured in any really lived life: despair, joy, tragedy, love, outrage, comfort, grief, pride, and exhilaration! What is the essence of exhilaration? I think it is being exactly where you are, loving doing what you are doing and those who are in it with you, while feeling truly your ‘self’. For me, this exhilaration comes from doing history, and then teaching what I do. I did not particularly love history in college, it was just more interesting to me than the other “majors” offered, and I couldn’t sing, draw, dance, or do math and science except pass/fail. I remember exactly the moment things changed, when history became not just interesting, something I was good at, but a way of thinking, a framework for the kinds of questions I have about the human experience.

I had moved on from Hong Kong to Taiwan. I was living under my Chinese name: Pleasant Forest, to family and friends, really close friends, ‘Happy Woods.’ I was in my rented room at the YMCA in Taipei, studying my Chinese characters. I

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was studying the character for 'melancholy.' This character, 'chou2" combines the character for "autumn" and the character for "heart." 愁

As I looked at the character, I remembered an 1880 poem I had studied in college, Gerald Manley Hopkins "Spring and Fall to a Young Child," which has the opening lines,

Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

I raised my head, and I swear it was as if I looked across 4000 years into a pair of eyes, the eyes of the person who created that character.

I felt my head nod, "Yes, that's right, that's what melancholy means. That autumnal sadness, when blazing colors fade and fall, and we feel the earth's perpetual rotation pushing us across the span of a life.

It took me another decade to decode that experience, and translate it into life as an historian. Although I had a wonderful advisor and mentor, graduate school did not nurture this impulse in me, instead 'postmodernizing' me, so that 'melancholy' became a 'patriarchial, hegemonic, construct.' It has only been here, teaching you all, working alongside of my colleagues, that I have recovered that long ago experience of human connection, where eyes meet across time and space, and there is that nod of "yes, it is like that."

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It is thus from a sense of gratitude to you, to Bennington, that I give you my second gift. Some days after being invited to speak at your graduation, I idly wondered if *anyone* in the whole world would know exactly the right thing to say to you—such a complicated class, such a tumultuous four years. Before I knew of a place called Bennington College, when I had not seen that students might write a five-page, double-spaced paper with a paintbrush, a kiln, a camera, a violin, when I thought my own the most interesting questions, my idle imaginings obediently slipped off to find other minds on other days. Something in the air here, though, in what we do to each other, lets such wonderings take hold, and now I run to keep up.

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And so, from my first thought—is there anyone in the world—tumbled forth a second: I could find out, I could find out. We HAVE the technology. For your leave-taking, then, here are voices from around the world and across America, some giving advice, others sharing hard-won insights, and still others sending simple good wishes in this sweet-sad, ephemeral moment of your lives.

Over the last three weeks, I emailed friends and strangers, here, there, everywhere, subscribed to dozens of online forums, and blog-frogged from Mexico to Beijing. I joined AARP a few years early so I could talk to old, older, people. My appeal was simple:

Middle-aged professor, wants advice for graduating seniors, anything will do. Eileen P. Scully, BA, MA. PHD One College Drive.....

Well, no, actually:

*I am a history professor at a small New England college. I am writing all over the world and the US to gather thoughts, insights, and advice for our graduating seniors. Their first day of class was 9-11, and they recently lost a classmate, so they know something about life, grief, and community. Each year, they have been out in the world for one of our three terms, doing jobs, internships and volunteer work in the US and internationally, so they know something about what is out there. They are both excited and anxious as they leave us. Are there things you wish you had known at their age? Do you have advice? Might you pass along your good wishes to them?*

Hundreds of people responded from places far and near: Iceland, Japan, England, Romania, Pakistan, Kenya, Mexico, China, Canada, Afghanistan, Iraq, and all across the US. When the booklet passed page 50, the Communications Office and Alumni Office stepped in to help. They have put the booklet on a CD for each of you, and volunteers will give them out as you leave. They look like this:

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I'm going to take a few more minutes here, as I did indeed find someone in the world who—I believe—knows exactly the right thing to say to you, the Bennington College Class of 2005. I found him quite by random. Reading his letter to you, and working on this project, crystallized for me the insight I had struggled with as we came together in community first, on

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9-11, and then again in recent months: Clichés are clichés except when they're not, except when they are the sound one person makes reaching out to another across our separate selves.

Here, then, are excerpts from his two-page letter to you, written on May 8<sup>th</sup> from Baghdad.

“Dear Graduates,

I am a middle aged man from Iraq. I have been asked by Professor Eileen Scully to say a few words to you on your graduation. I am honored and delighted to do that.

I still remember my own apprehensions on graduation and my thoughts about leaving familiar surroundings and venturing out into the ‘wilderness’ we call practical life. I hope you can find it in yourself to look at it as an adventure, for that is what it is.

Go out into the world, but always remember home. Home is where you think you belong. Cherish the friendships that you have formed at this age, they are one of the most precious things in life.

I am told that your first day of college was 9/11. Remember that 9/11 was an act of hatred - pure blind hatred.....

(He goes on to say)...The greatest tools to combat hatred are knowledge and understanding. You have just passed the major hurdle of the first. Use it to seek the second.

....I had to go through that struggle myself. Your country is seen by many as causing enormous damage and suffering in mine. I had to fight within myself not to hate everybody in America. It was not difficult. I keep thinking of all those millions of decent people there. I assure you that when I reached out, I found plenty.

Civilization now has a new opportunity. Armed with a brand new ‘connectivity’, ‘the other side’ and the enemy are no longer distant monsters to be feared and destroyed... but only a few clicks away where you can see how they feel and live and love and hate.

You are the torch bearers of the present civilization. Through your youth, energy and vision, you can influence where your country and the world goes next.

This is such an awesome responsibility... but also a wonderful privilege. You are fortunate to be young at this time. You can take part in this wonderful human adventure.

I wish you success. But more than that, I wish you happiness, for success without happiness is not worth much.”

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Let me close, then, with a few final words, these from Andrew, who will be starting at Bennington in September as a 1<sup>st</sup> year:

“Dear Class of 2005:

Is life after college like life abroad? Is it full of mystery, wonder, hardship, poverty, adventure? I hope you are able to find out, soon, and happily.

I have spent extended periods of time abroad, and had incredible experiences. But I believe I will have as many or more amazing experiences at Bennington. Even though the campus is quite small, you should all consider yourselves extremely well traveled.

Having taken this past year away from high school and college, I’ve been given my first true taste of a life absent from academics.

Even though this freedom may be very welcome to you, don’t forget to continue the things you loved to do in an academic setting.

Keep reading! Keep writing! Keep analyzing! Keep creating!

Now you, the class of ’05, have completed your education at Bennington, and you probably feel the same excitement and worry about leaving the college as we, the class of ’09, have about coming into it.

You may think this completion is the end of the world, like you’re about to leap off that picturesque hill and fly smack into those green mountains.

But be rest assured, a lot of us believe it is your beginning.”

And so it is. Goodbye and best wishes.

*Author’s postscript: The central elements of the story I tell early on in the speech—the newspaper advertisement, its wording, the nature of the response—are true. I have exercised creative license on other details, for reasons of privacy and propriety.*