

BENNINGTON COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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by Ellen McCulloch-Lovell '69

Note: *Ellen McCulloch-Lovell is Chief of Staff for U.S. Senator Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vermont, in Washington, D.C. After graduating from Bennington College in 1969, she worked for the Vermont Council on the Arts for thirteen years, serving as its director for eight of those years.*

I have this special vantage point from which to see the world, called the United States Senate. All the world's problems seem to troop through daily: the Iran-contra scandal, arms control agreements, acid rain, and the budget deficit.

One of the exciting things about my job is that I get to think about the world a lot. But I usually don't make speeches about what I see! I review the speeches, not give them. If I'm effective, then I'm invisible. Tonight, I get to say what's on my mind — it's been a work in progress, as world events have changed daily.

For we are all living in an incredible time. Through the hot medium of satellite TV, we've watched the Chinese student democracy movement grow, symbolized by a statue — the Goddess of Democracy — on Tiananmen Square where I stood a year ago. And we watched in horror as tanks rumbled, crushing unarmed students on bicycles. The world is in wrenching change at the very moment we celebrate your transition.

Twenty years ago I sat where you are — and listened to Denise Levertov read a long poem. It was a Bennington ritual, without banners or benedictions, but as I listened to that poem I dimly knew this was a ceremony of change. Truthfully I did not know whether my life was just beginning or had just ended. I wondered what I would do next and held equally in my heart dread and joy. I had left friends and family before, but now I was alone, now I had to be my own parent, my own home. There was of course the sense of immanence: to know the real, to exercise mastery in something, find a place to live, to plant a garden.

Twenty years ago I wanted two things more than anything else: I wanted to be competent at something — anything — making pots or understanding Plato. And I wanted to know myself, and what I believed. My father said:

"I'm not going to spend \$6,000 a year so you can make pots!" So I stuck with philosophy. But it didn't tell me what the years would prove: that "the Self is not something ready made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action," as John Dewey said. There is no state at which one says: now I am ready, now I know what to do. My father next asked me what I was going to **do** with philosophy. I replied flippantly that the question was not what I would **do** but what I would **become**. We were both on the right track. I still am becoming in the course of doing.

My report from twenty years out is: that the Self is a work-in-progress, in an age where all our fates are interconnected, where we can no longer separate people's actions from the future of the planet. Of course, as you have, I darted into autonomy and back to protection. I worked one NRT for the American Friends Service Committee protesting a Nike missile site, then returned to Bennington to sort out my experiences, back to the place where you could paint with Pat Adams and write with Bernard Malamud.

I remember first arriving on campus — the dancers leapt across the green; the potters were covered with clay, the musicians looked about abstractly as if counting something invisible; the social scientists read thick books in Commons with titles like *Being and Nothingness*. I also remember the loneliness. I learned I could live through the loneliness and find out what I was thinking about, separate from all the other voices; what I cared about, apart from what moved others. And here I began to see art as an act of courage, a way to order the chaos, to turn the real stuff of life — movement, sound, clay — into ideas that can be felt. I graduated believing art could change lives.

This College is a virtual greenhouse for cultivating the Self, so much so that it became the focus of a study by Theodore Newcomb, who surveyed the 50th reunion classmates here tonight. In the mid-thirties students spoke of the creativity, unconventionality, and tolerance of Bennington. Twenty-five years later in the follow-up study, they told how it influenced them long after they left. By then, some sixty percent of them were involved in some political activity. True to form, my recent alumni survey asks a modest question: "In what ways do you see yourself bettering life on the planet?" As the question implies, we become selves by extending into "fellowship in the human community." It seems that at the same time we discover "the ground of our being," we yearn to transcend it.

Who it is that chooses and what is chosen are answered together in life. One will not become a painter, then parent, then a voter. The worker, the friend, the parent, the citizen — all are intertwined, simultaneous selves. Part of your rite of passage tonight is becoming the citizen-self. In many ways you are born a citizen by virtue of growing up in this country, born into the secular religion called democracy, based on some fantastic ideas still new to the human race — that all men and women are created equal and are treated as equals by their elected government.

You have already exercised the citizen self by living in a community. You've had to compromise your desires, or even ostracize someone destructive, to achieve social peace. You lobbied student government for funds to take a bus to the pro-choice rally in Washington, and considered the rightness of using everyone's student fees to express the will of the majority over the opinion of the small minority. You grew up in the American political culture, and whether you actively choose it or not, if your government doesn't bump into you, you will bump into your government your whole life. Where you go to school, how good that school is, how much taxes you pay, whether your taxes are spent on missiles or education, all depend on your government, depend on that messy and discredited process called politics.

In 1969, we who heard the poem, already had watched a President blown from matter into spirit; we saw that complex ritual of democracy, the party convention, spill into the streets of Chicago where voters were clubbed by the Mayor's police; we saw the preacher who had a dream of racial equality die on a motel balcony; the nightly news still intoned the body count from Vietnam and women still died getting illegal abortions. We were going to make our way in an unjust society.

No, I am not going to contrast the activist sixties with the greed of the eighties. I didn't march on Washington. Most of my friends got deferments, not body bags. My husband and I retreated to northern Vermont to sixty acres of overgrown pasture and a woodlot, and a house we built ourselves. We grew our asparagus roots, but we also worked off the land: Christopher to teach school and I to work at the new state arts council.

There I learned to persuade governors and state legislators for money to put poets into classrooms and brass quintets on town greens. I argued that giving the people artistic experience was a right, like learning to read. What began with Plato and pots had arrived at politics.

In 1980 politics bumped into me and it made me mad. My radio alarm went off the morning after the election to tell me that Ronald Reagan was elected President and Vermont's senator Patrick Leahy was hanging on by a few thousand votes. I was shocked — for the first time I felt totally out of the mainstream. I had thought of working for Leahy, someone I associated with good government and arms control, but thought he was a shoo-in. So I voted, nothing more. By then I was Director of the state arts council with a budget large enough to award hundreds of grants each year to artists and arts councils.

I watched the new political order move in. In the first State of the Union address, the second item of the federal budget to be cut was the National Endowment for the Arts. Believe me, that galvanized the arts community. We organized and used its powers of expression to persuade the Congress at hearings; we compared our whole arts budget to the cost of just one foot of a nuclear submarine.

As part of the new arts lobbying campaign, Bernard Malamud journeyed from Bennington, to Washington D.C. When I asked him why, in his 60s, a famous writer whose work reached millions, he went to sit in Congressmen's offices and to wait outside the hearing rooms to have a word with them, he said: "Because the work is no longer enough."

The arts budget was nibbled, not cut. But I could see a larger system was controlling my work; what I cared about was assaulted by political actions I did not understand, but which I wanted to change. My work was no longer enough.

A few years later, Patrick Leahy asked me to go to Washington as his chief of staff. I would be a very unconventional choice for a senator to make. I loved the arts and found I cared more about kids going hungry in America and the threat of nuclear war. A Senator was offering me the chance to do something about it. While he decided whether to take the risk, I went home and dug my potatoes. It was October. The leaves had fallen and the sky gone leaden. The cold dirt hurt under my fingernails. (I lifted my eyes to Hunger Mountain to see a brief orange sunset burn out over the Worcester Range.) I knew that to put my conviction into action I would be leaving my garden, my mountain and even, for a while, my family.

And here I am asking you to answer your own call to the citizen self. I know you have a lot to do tonight and tomorrow; say good-bye to this place and these friends, find a job, find an apartment, find your true work.

You may be saying to yourself; if I'm a kind, generous friend, won't that make a difference? If I act compellingly in a play that helps people embrace their humanity, won't they then act more humanely? If I write a check to the Wilderness Society, aren't I helping to save Mother Earth?

Yes, yes, and yet "the work is no longer enough." Understand that the search for personal love and satisfying work are connected to but not the same as social responsibility. When you push love beyond the people you can see and touch, it dissolves barriers and becomes something larger. Love for humanity is love of justice.

Yet the world seems full of injustice. One quarter of a million Sudanese starved to death last year because the factions fighting in their civil war would not allow international food aid to be delivered. In the Amazonia of Brazil, 54 acres a minute of primeval rain forest, the home of half the world's species, are cut and burned daily; due largely to the inexorable pressure of poor Brazilians, who are trying to survive in a country where 4% of the people own 80% of the land. In Washington, D.C., men with assault rifles battle it out nightly to carve up the drug territory. Today, in America, one-fifth of our children live in poverty — and the society you now enter will support them in hospitals, in prisons, and in the social welfare system. There are too many images, too much demanding our caring. And I think that when we no longer feel, our ability to act is stunted. Faced with such overwhelming problems, we ask; what can one person do?

How can I as a citizen find out about, much less care about an abstraction like Third World Debt. But let's explore that dense issue together a moment — to show how it has a very human face and affects our lives. As John Muir, the 19th century American conservationist wrote; "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

In the early 1970's, driven by population growth and the need to expand their economies, many of the poorest countries from Tanzania to Brazil sought loans from the big banks. But when that debt became due, they couldn't pay. World prices had plunged for their raw materials — their main source of cash. Many countries negotiated what's known as an "economic adjustment" in exchange for new terms. And that means the government cuts its spending by no longer subsidizing food and fuel, devaluing currency so that it buys less, and by making deep cuts in government programs. The trouble is that when the cuts get made, those who influence the political system protect their

interests. The national airlines and the military do not get cut as much as rural health services and public education.

The rich get the loans but the poor get the debt. And the poor have the least fat to absorb the blow of recession. That's why Argentines rioted, looting their grocery stores last week. Three-quarters of the income of the very poor is spent on food, and what remains on housing and clothes, bus fares and medicine. Losing an income or buying power means going without the basic necessities. And most of those going without are children, children without nutrition to grow, vaccines to protect them or education to uplift them. The human faces of third world debt are the half-million children who died in 1988 as a consequence of economic decline. The human voice is the Tanzanian President asking; "Must we starve our children to pay our debts?"

Today one-third of Latin America's people live in dire poverty. Such poverty is the seedbed of hopelessness, revolution and war. Countries trying to get cash for their exports exploit their natural resources. The pressure for growth in South America, Southeast Asia and Africa means that 40% of the tropical rain forests are gone from the earth.

The rain forests are far away, but they are linked to our lives, because their massive destruction contributes to the greatest environmental and political challenge of our day — global warming. The fossil fuels combusted in cars and factories in the industrialized north are destroying the ozone layer and warming up the earth's atmosphere. Burning the tropical forests dumps another one billion tons of carbon dioxide into the air each year, making a serious situation into a dire one. At this rate, the world's temperature could rise 2 to 8 degrees over the next 60 years. This means not only unbearably hot summers like last year's; it means climate change that wipes out crops that feed the world.

Our world is one where the sheer number of people and the availability of information through technology links us together directly. If the pervasive image of my childhood was the mushroom cloud billowing over the Nevada testing ground, surely the symbol of your age is NASA's photo of our island earth, cloud swaddled, floating in space. When John Donne wrote nearly four centuries ago that "No man is an island, entire to its self..." he predicted the practical reality of today; anything by itself is hitched to everything else.

When the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl melted down, the radiation was measured in Sweden. When the company buried its toxic wastes the people in

Love Canal got cancer. When the rain forests burn, we not only lose the magnificence of creation, we lose the very atmosphere that sustains life.

Can governments solve these problems? Americans are deeply cynical about their government's ability to do so. Just two weeks ago the Washington Post and ABC news reported a poll in which 75% of Americans thought that politicians care more about the special interests than people like them. Three-quarters also thought that a politician will lie if he or she thinks the truth will hurt them politically. Voters are lethargic. In the Presidential election just over half the eligible voter went to the polls. Only 36% of voters between 18 and 22 years old who could vote, did vote.

However, Congress is probably less corrupt today than it was when no less a man than Daniel Webster collected fat fees from a bank while serving as Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. Government is more accessible than in the days before the sunshine laws and the Freedom of Information Act, less beholding to the special interests than before the campaign finance reform laws that were enacted after the Watergate scandal in 1974, when CREEP passed out money in brown paper bags.

If you are from Vermont you are less cynical. Here a person and a carload of friends can take over a town caucus and get elected to the party convention. Here you bump into the town planning commissioner in the grocery store and can discuss whether or not the new shopping center will be built on prime farmland. Here a few years ago there was a Speaker of the Vermont House, who loved the game of politics yet each morning he and his friend, the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, asked each other; "What are we going to do for the People today?"

Still, I realize that government itself often teaches us to be cynical. Long, negative, and expensive campaigns make us suspicious of the messages manufactured for the 30-second spots. Politicians who themselves are responsible for making the democracy work, run against "those people" in Washington. When a President says that people on the street are homeless by choice, and when we step over them at night and hear their ravings and pleading, we know it's not true and we end up disbelieving our leaders.

The 101st Congress has been in session five months and what do people think we've done? We've maneuvered over the pay raise, fought over confirming John Tower as Secretary of Defense, conducted an ethics

investigation of Speaker Jim Wright and failed to raise the minimum wage. What do people perceive? Greed, power and sleaze.

But we cannot care about everything, and our own problems, our luxurious problems of too much freedom or too little love, are real to us. Lacking caring, or perhaps sensing that we need to protect our feelings for what is closer to home, we lack real engagement. What does one person do?

You will find your own answer to what one person can do. You do not have to spend all your efforts to get fed, like the Sudanese. You have time to be conscious. Acknowledge what moves you. Find out about it. Develop a point of view. And choose an action that springs from your values. Be a mentor to a deprived child. Find out about the candidate and go fill a phone bank. Drive voters to the polls on election day. Write a letter. People say to me — oh, that doesn't make a difference. Letters do. In the senate office one of the first questions we ask of an issue is; what are we hearing from Vermonters?

Here's a more dramatic example. Amnesty International was founded on an idea called "one of the larger lunacies of our time; the idea that ordinary people could set free or save from torture or death, men and women they had never met, in countries not their own, by writing polite letters to the government involved. It works."

Or you may ask the question another way; what can one person, linked with another person, linked with another person do? And that, friends, is the process called politics, that process we so mistrust is reshaping the world.

Item: A new Soviet leader is declaring an end to the Cold War, building four months of political pressure before President Bush proposed major cuts in weapons and troops in Europe.

Item: In Poland, two generations voted for the first time in 40 years, and had a choice between the Communist party and true opposition candidates for positions in the new Senate.

Item: For seven weeks tens of thousands of Chinese students and workers held Tiananmen Square, essentially demanding our Bill of Rights; freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, the freedom to participate in their own government. Soldiers twice defied orders to clear the Square by force; they cried and said, "The People's Army will not fire upon the people." And we cried when they finally did. A Chinese student leader said, "As an intellectual, politics is my responsibility."

Are the Chinese students reading Jefferson when we have forgotten him, "A little rebellion now and then is a good thing, as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical," he said, though I am sure Jefferson wanted ballots not bullets. "The people are not always well-informed, but it is better that they have misconceptions that make them restless than that they be lethargic - for lethargy in the people means death for republics." When the Chinese die for rights we take for granted, we can respond by reaffirming those rights at home.

You are a citizen by virtue of leading a life in this country; and because of that you have a voice in the affairs of that country. Is your voice raised? Did you vote last year? Did you consent to be governed? If you didn't, then those who voted made the decision for you.

Government can be wrong, it can be corrupt. Yet in a democracy, politics is self-correcting. In 1973 when you were probably in first grade, a President told a nation, "I am not a crook," only to resign before he was impeached. When Nixon flew away in his helicopter, the country stayed behind, intact. America has faced problems as intractable as today's and submitted them to concerted action.

If world poverty and environmental pollution seem insoluble, take the long view for a moment and look back at our struggle for civil rights. In 1787 when the Constitution was written, black Americans each counted as three-fifths of a person. They didn't get the right to vote until 1870. It took until 1920 to pass the 19th Amendment to give women the vote. The Armed Forces were integrated in WWII, but it took until 1954, in *Brown vs the Board of Education* decision, for the Supreme Court to declare school segregation unconstitutional.

Other struggles will emerge as the system continues to correct itself, a work in progress. Some times demand great leaders to articulate human yearning and coalesce its will. Some eras — and I believe this is one — progress because the people already glimpse the future cycle and are moving there ahead of the politicians. But even leaders do not make movements happen without the people who bear witness to: what one person can do.

Rosa Parks knew what to do. On Thursday, December 1, 1955, she left her job as a seamstress and took a seat in the front section of a Montgomery, Alabama bus for the 15-minute ride home. Soon the bus filled and one white passenger was left standing. The driver ordered the sections cleared so he could sit. Three people moved; Rosa Parks did not. She was tired and she quietly

refused. The driver called the police. When they arrested her, she called E.D. Nixon, a local labor leader who paid her bail. Nixon called local religious leaders, including the 29 year old new pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church — Dr. Martin Luther King. Five thousand people attended a mass meeting four days later and organized a bus boycott that lasted over a year. On December 21st, 1956 the Supreme Court declared segregation on city busses unconstitutional.

Rosa Parks was modest about her choice. She said, “I was a worker — nothing more.” She wasn’t naive or unconscious; she was an ordinary person. She was a member of the NAACP when she refused to give up her seat, but she wasn’t planted there.

She was a woman who maintained her dignity as a human being; she became a symbol of racial equality by acting as an equal. She is a reminder of the ordinary people who, after Rosa Parks decided she was too tired to give up her seat, decided they were not too tired to walk to and from their jobs for a year... A black minister asked an old woman during the boycott whether she was tired, to which she replied, “My soul has been tired for a long time. Now my feet are tired and my soul is resting.”

Thinking tonight about the heroes who inspired me to move from Spruce Mountain to Capitol Hill I realized they were all dead. When I thought of what hope I could offer you that your choice-making is needed and will make a difference, I kept thinking about Rosa Parks, because, acting out of her self-worth, she claimed the rights she was entitled to as a citizen. Because her actions prompted thousands of others to say; what can we people together do?

Faced with so many choices in a world full of emergencies, people respond differently. Some feel more secure by turning away. Some believe that cultivating the Self **will** change the world. We’ve all seen the bumper sticker that says; “Visualize World Peace:” all those shiny souls meditating together to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Others will become what we sarcastically call “Cause People” — with no personal identity outside the political outrage of the moment. Somewhere between meditation and militancy, the citizens of the next millennium will find their way. And the way likely will not be lead by heroes in any mythic sense. The heroes will have 1,000 faces — and they will be yours and yours and hers. We seem to be redefining who a leader is. We want our leaders not only to DO good, we want them to BE good. We want them to symbolize our

own search for integrity — as we seek to integrate Self with service to others — to join belief with action.

To act, to serve, your motives do not have to be pure. You can do the right thing and at the same time like being powerful, or being recognized or getting a paycheck. Human ambition and moral action are not mutually exclusive. It's alright to have idealistic visions and realistic actions. Woody Allen said that "80% of life is just showing up." Sometimes that's all you can do — just show up.

Why be a citizen of the world? Why show up? Because through choice of action you will form a self that is either a spectator, a victim or a participant. Because "for those to whom much is given, much is required." Even facing the possibility that we may NOT make much of a difference, we act anyway... because it is a requirement of our humanity, because "all real living is meeting," because it is the only thing between us and evil, because it is the only thing between life and death.

To me and perhaps to you the world seems no less and no more chaotic, threatening and bloody than it did twenty years ago. I know you are as hopeful as I was. And whether you face the decisions you will make with dread or hope, you inevitably will make them, intuitively or consciously, imperfectly, with brave thrusts and healing retreats. So I want to say from 20 years out, simply, that there is compassion and kindness. Forgiveness and reconciliation are real. Love exists.

Two years ago the graduation speaker told the Bennington class to "follow your passion." I ask you to find your compassion. From compassion grows conviction, from conviction arises action. Your work alone is not enough. Your feet will be tired but your soul will be at rest.