

*“The Feel of that Ol’ Rougarou” – Delivered by winner of the Jack Jensen Award for Excellence in Teaching Michael Jauchen, Assistant Professor of Humanities at Colby-Sawyer College for Commencement on May 9, 2015.*

## **The Feel of that Ol’ Rougarou by Michael Jauchen**

Well, hi. I want to start off by saying thank you to the trustees, President Galligan, Dean Taylor and especially to you, class of 2015, for having me speak today. It’s a real honor. I think you should also start things off by giving yourselves a big round of applause because you’re graduating, and that’s a huge, huge deal.

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I want to talk about stories a little bit. Those of you who’ve taken classes with me know that stories are pretty much my job here at Colby-Sawyer. I teach people how to read and write them. When I’m not doing that, I’m writing stories myself or getting way too involved in stories on TV. I may have spent more time thinking about stories than doing anything else in my life.

This is an obsession that goes way back. One of the most important moments of my childhood involves a story. It happened in the fifth grade when my teacher, Mrs. Davis, read aloud the ending of a book called *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Maybe some of you know this book. It’s about a boy and his two hunting dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann. It’s a simple little story, but it was the first book I ever really loved, and that means it was the first book that really scarred me. You see, at the end of this novel, Old Dan and Little Ann are killed defending their owner from a mountain lion. And when Mrs. Davis read that ending to us, and as I sat there imagining this little boy having to bury his two best friends, I got so caught up in that story that in the middle of that circle of fifth graders, without even knowing it, I started to cry.

And I mean I was *really* crying: huge tears, audible sniffing, honking trails of snot.

Now as you can probably guess, openly weeping during the fifth-grade reading hour isn’t the most effective way to become the “cool kid” in elementary school. But now I can look at that experience as a moment of real discovery. When I cried over the death of those two hunting dogs, it was one of the first times I sensed the profound ways that stories can reach out into the real world.

Since then I've only become more and more convinced of how *central* stories are to us as human beings. As I look at you, Class of 2015, I see stories and narratives seeping into your lives all over the place. You historians have spent the last four years cobbling together stories out of the past. You nurses will soon spend your workdays trying to come up with ways to resolve the stories you hear of patients' illnesses and chronic pain. Those of you in marketing will try to write the perfect story to convince me that I really *need* that Iced Mocha Cookie Dough Latte.

Even today, one of the main metaphors we use to describe what you're going through right now comes from the world of storytelling. You're all getting ready to begin a new *chapter*, we say. It's like all 312 of you are sitting here perched inside 312 different books, every last one of them paused at a key moment in the plot development.

This moment in your life story between chapters is so special because it's a threshold moment. In about 20 minutes, you're going to walk up here and start off as someone on this side of the stage and by the time you reach that side, once you cross this threshold, you're going to be someone fundamentally different. It's kind of amazing what one little handshake from President Galligan can do.

And what I love most about threshold days like today, what I've always loved, is the energy in the air. With all these bodies under this tent, there's a palpable charge of potential. You can feel it. It's a hum you can almost hear.

And man, it is a crazy mix of a whole bunch of different stuff.

Of course this energy today is chock full of excitement, happiness, and hope. My guess is you're giddy about what's next. But maybe some of you are also feeling a sense of loss that these college years are finally coming to an end. Maybe you're a little sad because you're thinking about the important people in your life who couldn't be here to celebrate with you. There's some of that feeling in the air, too.

And if we're being completely honest, maybe in the air today we can even feel trace amounts of anxiety, apprehension, and worry. Maybe you're sitting there thinking, What exactly am I going to do now? Wouldn't it be easier if I could just stay here for another four years?

I love this energy at the threshold, right before you cross. It's so mysterious, ramshackle, electric, and fun.

There's a great word for this energy. I want to give this word to you today. Consider it my graduation present. It's a word I brought all the way from the swamps of Southern Louisiana, which is where I lived before I moved up here. Strange as it might sound, there's a distinct

feeling in the air down there that's close to the energy I can feel on a day like today. When you drive around the sugarcane fields or cypress swamps, the atmosphere is charged with something. You stare out at the still water of the swamp and you can just sense things are moving out there, even though you can't see them. Southern Louisiana just has that kind of feel.

A really good friend of mine, Jeff, once told me about a Cajun French word for this feeling of things being on edge like this. He said it was called the "rougarou."

Maybe you've heard this word before. More commonly, the rougarou is the name of a mythical swamp werewolf who prowls the bayous around New Orleans. It's said the rougarou eats naughty children and that he hunts down bad Catholics who break Lent. But Jeff told me once that the rougarou is also used by some Cajuns to describe that ineffable energy in the swamp, the potential in the air you just *feel*. And when it's used like this, rougarou is a word that roughly means "the thing that is about to happen."

Right now, as you're perched at this threshold moment in your life story, the feeling in the air, this fraught, emotional gumbo of happiness and worry and doubt and elation and fear is the rougarou.

I love this word. It's fun to say. It's got mystery. And because it's connected to the swamp werewolf it also feels a little scary, a little bit dangerous. The rougarou. The thing that is about to happen. What a perfect word for this feeling.

Now, I'll admit there are a lot of things that are about to happen today that aren't mysterious at all. We know that each of your names will be called and that you'll cross this stage. All of you will have your Tom Galligan handshake moment. Your Mama T hug moment. We know that later on this afternoon you're going to go up to all the friends, family members, staff members and professors who helped you get through the last four years and you're going to say "thank you." We know all that's going to happen.

But that's not really what the rougarou is. The rougarou is really about that deeper feeling, the thing that is about to happen to you that's much more ethereal, more distant. At its heart it's about this deep unpredictability that hums beneath all our lives from day to day. It's all those things that are about to happen that you can feel are out there in the future, but that you just can't picture exactly.

Well, even though you don't know what they're going to be, as you sit here I can tell you from experience that a lot of those things are going to be really wonderful. There are some fantastic rougarous lurking out there for all of you: love, fulfilling work, traveling to a faraway country and feeling totally lost and loving it. Maybe it'll be a moment in forty years where you get

together with your best friends from Colby-Sawyer—all of you a little more rickety—and you look around and you realize just how necessary those people, just these random people you met one time in your freshman residence hall, have been to your life. One thing I can tell you is that life is going to surprise you with moments of almost breathless clarity and happiness. That rougarou is out there, and it's something to be really excited about.

But – and I hate to be a downer on such an awesome day – I can also tell you that out there, and maybe you can feel this right now too, out there in the thing that is about to happen, are other, less happy, rougarous. Darker things we don't like to think about, but that we know might be lurking in the future: that day you're passed over for a promotion or the day you lose a job, a moment of humbling disappointment, loneliness, that feeling of falling out of love, loss, sadness, perhaps even catastrophe. Just a few weeks after Jeff told me about the rougarou, Hurricane Katrina roared through New Orleans, leaving his home in the Ninth Ward submerged in water. Even as I was writing this speech, news hit of the earthquake in Nepal. How many Nepali families, even six weeks ago, could have imagined the pain and devastation they're facing now?

Personal hurts, suffering, heartbreak, large-scale catastrophe; the rougarou is made up of these things, too. They happen. And I wish I had some snappy piece of advice to give on how to handle these moments when they arrive, but I don't. The best you can do, I think, is never be afraid to ask for help from the people you love, and never hesitate to help when people in pain need it from you.

I mentioned that today was a threshold day, where this feeling—this rougarou—sits heavily on the air. But I really think it's just amplified on a day like today. This on-edge feeling never goes away completely. Unpredictability is just kind of life's default setting.

In a little over two months, my wife is going to give birth to a little girl, our first child. I think about how her life story is just about to start, how she'll be another human being perched on this perpetual edge we call life. If I try real hard, I can imagine 22 years from now watching her cross a stage to get a diploma and a handshake from someone a lot like Tom Galligan. Sometimes I'll close my eyes and imagine things like that and smile. I would guess that 22 years ago, some of your parents might have been imagining the very same thing about you.

But I also know that in about two months, my life's entire axis is going to shift, and try as I might, I really have no clue what's about to happen. I'm a little terrified. What is she going to be like? How can someone like me, a guy who can't even shave on a consistent basis, be tasked with something like this? 15 years ago when I crossed the threshold at my own graduation, an event like this was the farthest thing from my mind. But the thing is, it was always out there, waiting for me. When I put my hands on my wife's belly and feel that baby kick, I can't help but think about her as my little rougarou.

Ask anybody here today who's older than you: no matter where you are in your life story, the rougarou lurks. You'll prepare and prepare, and life will still find a way to surprise you.

Of course, the final rougarou that lurks out there is the same for all of us. The underlying reality of all this—these moments of elation, these moments of worry, these ecstatic days of celebration underneath giant tents—is that they won't last forever. It's the final thing that happened to those two little dogs in *Where the Red Fern Grows*. The thing I wept about in the fifth grade was real, and someday each of us will reach a final threshold that marks the end of our life story, that moment when our last chapter gives way to its final conclusion.

Don't be too sad about this, especially on a day like today. It really isn't something sad. But it's never a bad idea to remind yourself that it's precisely life's finiteness that gives the world its astounding beauty, that makes a day like today the truly special thing that it is.

You're a little bit closer to that threshold now. In the story of your lives all 312 of you will share this very same moment. But soon enough you'll exit this tent and scatter like birdshot to different parts of the country, different corners of the globe, different lives. The rougarou is out there. Amazing, life-altering, things are waiting for you. You don't know what they are, but right now you can take a second to bask in the feeling of it. And it's so *fun*, so *life-affirming*, to bask in it. It's an incredible reminder of just how mysterious and amazing it is to be alive. And if you close your eyes, in this last quiet moment, if we're all very still, you can just *feel* something waiting for you.

Now go find out what it is.

Congratulations, good luck to all of you, and I hope you have a wonderful, wonderful summer. Thank you!