

President Thomas C. Galligan Jr
Commencement Address May 9, 2015

Be Mystical

As I was walking round Grosvenor Square
Not a chill to the winter but a nip to the air
From the other direction she was calling my eye
It could be an illusion but I might as well try, might as well try

She had rings on her fingers and bells on her shoes
And I knew without asking she was into the blues
She wore scarlet begonias, tucked into her curls
I knew right away she was not like other girls, other girls

In the thick of the evening when the dealing got rough
She was too pat to open and too cool to bluff
As I picked up my matches and was closing the door
I had one of those flashes I'd been there before, been there before

Well, I ain't always right but I've never been wrong
Seldom turns out the way it does in a song
Once in a while you get shown the light
In the strangest of places if you look at it right

Well, there ain't nothing wrong with the way she moves
Scarlet begonias or a touch of the blues
And there's nothing wrong with the look that's in her eyes
I had to learn the hard way to let her pass by, let her pass by

The wind in the willow's playing, 'Tea for two'
The sky was yellow and the sun was blue
Strangers stopping, strangers just to shake their hand
Everybody is playing in the heart of gold band, heart of gold band

Songwriters: GARCIA, JERRY / HUNTER, ROBERT

Well, here we are. Today is a big day as we gather to celebrate the Class of 2015!
Congratulations!

You know, as I look out, I can't help but think of all those who have come before you. These are the 177th commencement exercises for this institution that started so long ago just down the road. You know that, right? One of the things I have taught here is history, so I can't help it – that white building on the Town Common is where we began back in 1837, as an academy.

And here we are today. It's your turn. Every year, as I think about the message I want to share with the graduating class, I try to say something meaningful and appropriate to the occasion. Last year I relied upon legal philosopher Roger Dworkin and Plato to form the message of "think for yourself." It is good advice, and I repeat it now—think for yourself!

This year though, I rely upon a different source from history for my inspiration: The Grateful Dead. The Grateful Dead formed in 1965 and died with lead guitarist and vocalist Jerry Garcia in 1995. Garcia is, of course, Ben and Jerry's inspiration for the ice cream flavor Cherry Garcia.

Even though the band is gone, the Dead are still popular today. The band, as Wikipedia says, was "known for its unique and eclectic style, which fused elements of rock, folk, bluegrass, blues, reggae, country, improvisational jazz, psychedelia, and space rock, and for live performances of long musical improvisation."

A word on Wikipedia, now that you are graduating: I use it all the time, and I know you do, too. And because Wikipedia is a shared initiative of the masses, it seems a particularly appropriate source to cite for the Dead, because a Grateful Dead concert was truly a shared event.

Today's inspiration comes from a Grateful Dead song written by the late Jerry Garcia and lyricist Robert Hunter. "Scarlet Begonias" was the fifth track on the 1974 album "From the Mars Hotel." It became hugely popular among Deadheads, and others have covered it—perhaps most notably Jimmy Buffet. It is so popular there is an annotated version prepared by a research associate in the music department at the University of California at Santa Cruz. I promise I will not go through all the annotations, but a few points about the song strike me.

Let us start with the title—"Scarlet Begonias." In the language of flowers, a begonia signifies a fanciful mind on either the sender's or recipient's part. The Dead liked plants, including flowers—particularly roses. If you don't remember their album "American Beauty," think of the movie of the same title and you'll get the idea.

But Begonias—I think it may have something to do with William Blake—yes, the Romantic poet. Blake was a sort of 18th and 19th century hippie, and the Grateful Dead were hippy hippies. Blake is associated with mysticism—the sense that all things are one. The idea, as the Hindu Veddas, say is that "Thou art that!" We are all one.

One of Blake's poems that I read in school was "Ah Sunflower." It inspired Alan Ginsburg's "Sunflower Sutra" and it inspired other Beats, and the Beats certainly influenced the hippies, including the Grateful Dead. So, to me, the Dead are associated with the mystics and mystical states, even if self-induced.

The closest I have come to mystical experiences were those times when I felt that time was standing still. They were the rare times when I was totally in the moment—those times when I was doing what I was doing, and being who I was being.

So, my first point from the song is to "be mystical" whenever possible. Be mystical through your lives and be mystical right now, which to me means *be in this moment*. This is a huge day for you. I know you are excited; your hearts may be pounding; you are looking around

for your parents, your grandparents, Aunt Maria and Uncle Dinesh. But take a deep breath and be here. *Be here now*. Relish the experience of graduating from Colby-Sawyer. You will never have this day again.

And, as you leave us, “be mystical.” Make your plans, but don’t forget to live in the moment. Stop time every once in a while. You can do it, though it won’t stop for too long—it will catch up with you; it will run and it will take you with it—all the way to the end of it all, wherever that might be. But in the meantime, do your best to stop it and enjoy it and savor the moment and the experience. Before you know it, you will be back here for your fifth, tenth and even fiftieth reunions. Come back to this campus, one of your many homes in the world, with a life full of experiences to tell us about. So—be mystical.

What else? Well, the song is about a person walking in London by Grosvenor Square—which from 1785 until 2008 was the site of the U.S. Embassy to Great Britain—in what the lyrics indicate might be the fall or early spring: there is “not a chill to the winter but a nip in the air.” And then, “from the other direction,” comes a woman with rings on her fingers and bells on her shoes and with scarlet begonias tucked into her curls. When I first heard the song, I thought, *Ah, it’s going to be a psychedelic love song*. And it is, for a while, but like most things, there is more there than it might seem at first. Because before we find out how the love turns out, Jerry sings: “I ain’t always right, but I’ve never been wrong.” Well.

My friends and I used to love that line. We would belt it out, over and over. We may not have always been right, but we certainly would not admit we were ever wrong! There is a youthful arrogance in those words that resonated, though even at 19 I knew I *had* been wrong. But as I think about the line today, I see deeper meaning.

Of course I am not always right. Some will tell you it is a rare day indeed when I am, but I do my best. Everything I have done in my life has not worked out as envisioned. Every decision I have made has not been perfect. Every path I have taken has not been free of pot holes. I daresay that the same will be true for each of you.

I also know this is a time in your life when you are challenged *not* to be wrong. People are asking you what you are going to do. Some of you know; some of you don’t; some of you know but are not sure. Some of you know, are sure, but will still change your minds. There is pressure because there is uncertainty and you have bills to pay. And, you want to get on with the great things you are going to do even if you do not know what they are. At the same time, your families want your decisions to work out. They want you to be happy. But you know, and they know, that things are not always wonderful, and if they were, life would actually be too easy and growth would stop.

No, you have made mistakes, and you will make more. There will be joy, but there will also be pain. At the same time, if we all make the best decisions we can at the time and are true to ourselves in whatever we do, then even if the road is hard, while it may not have been right, it wasn’t wrong. It was the best, most right, most honest thing to do at the time.

So it is high praise, then, to know that while you will not always be right, if you are who you are and you think for yourself and you do the best you can, and you learn from those mistakes, you are never wrong.

Now, let me read you the entire line from which I have only quoted the first part because there is more truth to be told: “Well, I ain’t always right but I’ve never been wrong, seldom turns out the way it does in a song. Once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right.”

Life seldom does turn out the way it does in a typical song with a typical happy ending. Life is usually neither as predictable nor as simple as it is in that kind of song. And in the end, our protagonist in “Scarlet Begonias” has to let the girl pass by. They do not end up happily ever after. But, while it seldom turns out the way it does in a song, I suggest that you should keep your head up; keep your mind open; keep your heart open; and keep looking at things in fresh new ways. Because if you do, then, even though it may not turn out the way it does in the song, when you least expect it you might learn something wonderful because, after all, “Once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right.”

But to look at “it” right, and I think the “it” here means life, you have to look through your own prism. You have to look with your eyes. Don’t be trapped by the way people have always looked at it. Don’t, for example, let your view be defined by the way your family looks at it. Don’t let your view be defined by the way your friends look at it. At Colby-Sawyer, we have worked hard to give you the tools to help you create your own unique perspective. We have given you a great liberal arts education that has exposed you to the knowledge of the ages as well as the knowledge of today. We have helped hone and sharpen your perspective, but it is still yours; it is all *yours*. So look at life your way, because *that* is the right way to do it. And when you do look at it your way, it can be pretty wonderful. It can, to circle back to the beginning, like circles usually do, be pretty mystical.

Finally, at the end of the song, even though it did not work out for the singer and the girl with the Scarlet Begonias in her hair, life was fantastic: “the sky was yellow and the sun was blue” and “strangers were stopping strangers just to shake their hand.” So the song had a happy ending after all, even though it didn’t turn out as hoped. To paraphrase another song, you don’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you get what you need.

So, to recap from me and the Dead:

Be mystical.

Be true to yourself and you will never be wrong—even if you ain’t always right.

Look at life your way. Trust your education and your vision, but always keep learning, too.

Finally, expect the unexpected, because it seldom turns out the way it does in a song. And, always be ready for that unexpected wonderful experience or inspiration. They are out there for you, so go on and let them happen—make them happen. We are all proud of you and excited for you, the Class of 2015. Congratulations!