

President Tom Galligan
Commencement Address May 10, 2014

Make Up Your Own Mind

Congratulations to the Colby-Sawyer class of 2014!

This is your day. It is a day to celebrate; it is a day for all of us to congratulate you on your accomplishments. And it is a day for you to bask in your glory. At the same time, I daresay, and I recommend, that it is a day to reflect. One of our learning outcomes at Colby-Sawyer is that at the time of their graduation, our students will have enriched and deepened their self-knowledge. I take that to mean, in part, that at graduation our graduates will know themselves better based on their educational experiences while in college. To know one's self required some reflection. After all, as Socrates said: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

My wife, Susan, says a person should never ask another person to do something they would not be willing to do themselves. Taking her advice as I always do, today, as I look at you and prepare to ask you if you know yourselves better today than you did when you arrived here, I have asked myself the same question. Do I know myself better? My colleague Ann Page Stecker says that at Colby-Sawyer "the question is privileged." It is a great way to say that at Colby-Sawyer, we encourage, we urge, and we demand that you, we, all of us constantly question everything. That is a part of being liberally educated.

So, I ask: Do I know myself better today than I did four years ago?

That day four years ago in September 2010 when most of us first met we sat together under a similar tent and I welcomed you to Colby-Sawyer. I also told you a story about a recent trip Susan and I had taken to Venice and how we had visited the Peggy Guggenheim Collection of what we used to so quaintly call modern art—abstract art. The Peggy Guggenheim collection includes work by Duchamps, Picasso, Ernst, Pollack and Dali, among others. I told you how those artists had broken new ground, challenged and shattered accepted norms, and defined new schools of art and thought. I also told you how I had rented a headset and that the voice in my ear that day was my guide to the art, just as the masters had been the guides of the so-called modern artists. I told you that our faculty and staff would be your guides as you learned and prepared to break your own new ground.

And we have done just that; we have been your guides as you have been one another's guides, and I hope we have learned together. But do you know yourselves better today than you did when you arrived? Do I know myself better today than I did that day four years ago?

As I began to think about this, another question kept coming up—a related question. Why? I could not decide if I knew myself better without answering that nagging, core question: Why? Why do I do what I do? Why do I work in higher education?

The answer seemed easy at first. I love to teach. I love to see my students learn. I love to see them succeed. I love intellectual inquiry. Okay, okay, but those are easy answers. In addition, I do what I do because there is a part of me that feels whole in the classroom. And a part of me feels whole as I prepare to shake your hand and give you your diploma today. Yes, yes, but those are emotional answers. Can I explain it? As a lawyer, as a teacher, I must be able to explain it. Okay, so I do what I do, in part, because I am lucky enough to be surrounded by a talented and able group of faculty and staff who together are successfully struggling through the most challenging time for higher education. Sure, sure, that is a communication reason. But what else? Is there anything else?

Yes, as I pushed myself, I think there is something more. Last year the legal philosopher, Ronald Dworkin, passed away. One of his last books, published in 2012, is called *Justice for Hedgehogs*. I read it earlier this semester. The title comes from a line attributed to the Greek poet Archilochus, made more famous by Isaiah Berlin. The line is: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” In *Justice for Hedgehogs* Dworkin defends one big thing what he calls an old philosophical thesis—the unity of value. To him the unity of value is the one big thing that he, as a philosopher, knows. He argues that ethical and moral values depend upon one another, and he proposes what he calls a “creed...a way to live.” It is then, in part, a book about ethics—one’s responsibility to one’s self. And it is a book about morals—one’s responsibility to others.

First, Dworkin he says we have an ethical obligation to take our lives seriously, to live up to our lives, to make something meaningful of our lives. Ethically, then, it is up to us to create some dignity for ourselves.

And, second, we have a moral responsibility to others to take their lives seriously, to let them live up to their lives, to let them make something meaningful of their lives, and to allow them to live with dignity. Morally, we must then respect others’ rights to live their own ethical lives. It sounds so simple. Golden rulish.

Each of us has an ethical obligation to ourselves to make something of our lives. But for all of us that obligation is different and it is hard work. Once we compromise, once we let up, once we accept someone else's idea of what we should make of our lives, we have failed. It is up to each of us to make something of each of our lives. It is up to each of us to define what making something of our lives means.

At the same time, we have a moral duty to others to allow them the freedom to make something of their lives. If we do not comply with that duty, we run the risk that others will not comply with that duty to us.

Focusing on the ethical aspect of Dworkin's theory and applying it to any trip to the art museum those artists whose work Susan and I saw at the Guggenheim broke the mold; they made something of their lives by defining new ways for all of us to see the world. That took creativity; it took courage; it took determination; and it took hard work.

But it also took something else, and here I begin to get to an answer to my own self cross-examination, my own reflection, my own why. **Those artists thought for themselves.** Making something of their lives meant they needed the freedom to create their art in the ways they chose. They needed to think and create independently—for themselves.

So, that is “why,” for me. In order to define how my life will or will not be a success, I need to think for myself. And when it comes to my life’s work—teaching. I believe it is my duty to help you and to give you the right and the tools to think for yourselves.

Being a liberally educated person gives you the ability to think for yourself, to evaluate, to question, to then decide, and then to ask again, and again and again.

As your teacher, I expose you to the traditions and knowledge of the past. I model how I or other thinkers might solve the problems of today. I push you to think, to analyze, to speak, to write, to explain. But then I expect and hope that what you do, you do for yourself. And, I hope very much that what you think, you think for yourself.

When you give the power to someone else to fill your head and take over your head with their ideas, you have lost your freedom. You have stopped asking questions and you have become the passive recipient of information—propaganda if you will. You have given up your right to control your own thoughts. You have failed to live up to your obligation to define your success and to make something

of your life as you define it. You have compromised your own dignity. When you expect others to think like you do, you stifle their creativity. You do not give them the respect they deserve. You breach your moral duty to allow them to make the most of their lives. By denying others the right to think for themselves you dehumanize them. And, of course you increase the chances others will dehumanize you.

So, back to me. I do not teach with the expectation that you will accept my philosophies of law, the government, or whatever else I may be teaching. I do not teach to get you to adopt my political views. I do not teach to convince you to love the same writers, film makers, or thinkers that I do. I teach to give you the tools to make up your own mind. For me, that is my highest and best purpose.

And, at the same time, I demand more of both you and me. I demand that we continue, like Professor Stecker, to privilege the question. I demand that we examine and then reexamine what we think are the answers. I demand that we use our reasoning powers to justify our views and thoughts to ourselves and others. I demand that we continue to refuse to take anything for granted and that we ask if what we believed yesterday is still what we believe today. I demand that when you or I analyze an issue or construct an argument we consider the best counter arguments or contrary thoughts available and that we respond to them and/or incorporate them.

Thinking for yourself is hard work.

So, I do think I know myself a bit better than I did four years ago. I think I know myself a little better than I did before I read Dworkin. And I think I know myself just a tad better than I did before I wrote and gave this address. I also think you all probably know yourselves better, too, than you did when you came here. I think your education has contributed to that. I hope so.

As you leave us, you face and continue to face a world of bosses, graduate school professors, television and radio commentators, advertisers, tweeters, snapchatters, friends and family members. It is a wonderful world and it is a challenging world. You face a world that wants to think for you. You face a world that wants you to think like it does. But it is up to you and me to reshape that world and as you recreate it, as you make it a better place, please keep thinking for yourself. Thank you!