

President's Welcome to the Class of 2014
2010 Convocation
By President Tom Galligan

Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to Convocation. I'm Tom Galligan, president and a professor in the Humanities Department. We come together today to celebrate your arrival, to officially begin our academic year, and to honor the significance of the work we will accomplish together in the year ahead. Before we do all that I'd like to introduce some important people for you to know.

First, I would like to introduce the faculty and staff and ask them to stand. The faculty are the people who will be your academic, intellectual and professional guides. They will teach and challenge you in the classroom, the laboratory, the field, and beyond. They will work with you while you develop new knowledge, expertise, and intellectual curiosity. They are the heart and mind of this great college.

The staff will also guide and teach you. Some have recruited you and admitted you to Colby-Sawyer. Now, they will keep you safe, healthy and involved. They will work with you from campus activities to athletics. They will work every day to help the faculty provide you with a great Colby-Sawyer education. It is the faculty and staff's dynamic devotion to excellence and their passion for our engaged teaching and learning that makes Colby-Sawyer such a fantastic place for learning.

Each and every one of you has a story of how you got here and I do not mean by car, plane, or train. What I mean is each of you has a story about who influenced you and who challenged you and who spurred you on. Each of you has a story about your own personal guides. And that gets me to the subject of my message to you this afternoon—Guides.

This summer, just less than two months ago in fact, I was in Venice with my wife—Venice, Italy that is, not Venice Beach in California, although I have been there too. Both are worth visiting. But anyway we were in Venice, Italy and we went to see the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Peggy Guggenheim was a collector and patroness of the arts who, based on the advice of close friends in the art world, like Marcel Duchamps, decided to focus her collection on what we used

to call modern art when I was your age. Now we call the artists she collected the masters of the twentieth century.

Anyway, virtually all of the work, whether cubist or surrealist or avant-garde, is what I will call abstract. What I mean by that is that it is not something you look at and say that is a portrait of a girl with an earring or that is a portrait of a Dutch burger or that is a beautiful New York landscape. The work of the moderns, the work of the artists in the Guggenheim collection—Duchamps, Picasso, Ernst, Pollack, Dali—can be hard to grasp, at least for me. It is challenging; it is edgy; it is scary at times. And it is by no means obvious.

That said, I can honestly say that when I have previously seen abstract art, I have not always fully appreciated it. I have tried but in larger museums, I tend to spend my time with the work I can most easily grasp—the more concrete, traditional forms. Maybe that is my taste; maybe it is my psyche; maybe it is why I am a lawyer and not an artist.

So, as we approached the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, I did so with some small bit of trepidation: did I really want to spend a day looking at modern art? Of course, when we got there, we did the smart thing. We rented headsets and set them on English. And I listened to the commentary. The voice told me when I might look for a cube or a shape or a bird or the Eiffel Tower. The voice told me how Pollack dripped and dripped with purpose. The voice told me about Freudian influences and Jungian influences. And as I listened to the voice I saw more. The voice quoted the artists and quoted Peggy Guggenheim and some fabric of meaning began to come together for me. At one point the voice offhandedly said art and modern art is a combination of memory, feeling, nostalgia, hope, sense, and tradition. It started making sense.

In any event, as I listened to the voice, I realized that the voice was my guide. The voice was helping me through the collection and helping me appreciate it so much more than I otherwise would have appreciated the work without the voice. And as the voice was my guide, I realized that the artists too had guides.

The voice told me how the Dutch masters and Impressionists and so many others influenced what came after. The voice told me that even some of the most out there of the avant-garde

artists viewed some forms as timeless. Their listening to and learning from their artistic guides was critical to their growth, creation and creativity.

Today, I would like to think that we are about to become your guides. The faculty and staff at Colby-Sawyer will be your guides on your educational journey. Up to now family, friends, and teachers have guided you; today, you may add us to the list.

It is our jobs as your guides to contribute to what you know, to add to your body of knowledge. And it is our jobs as your guides to challenge you and to push you and to demand from you. It is our jobs as your guides to try and get you to intellectual places that you have never visited before. It is our job to get you to try things and learn things and expand your horizons. It is our job to get you to be engaged in your learning. It is our job to make you responsible for your education. We can guide you and push you and challenge you but ultimately you have to do it yourself. And we expect you to do it yourself. This education we will provide is not passive; it is active and engaging and we expect you to do your part. The artists' guides could not move the brush for them or shape the clay or the rock. The artists had to do it themselves. And, let me tell you something, we expect you to do it for yourself too, from day one. If you are thinking the serious stuff starts in a week or a month or at midterms, you are wrong. The serious stuff starts this afternoon. So, be ready and go get it.

Families and friends, let me give you the same message I am trying to give to our students. Our serious work of guiding begins now. Are we kind, gentle, and considerate? Yes we are but we are also challenging, demanding, and devoted to our teaching, advising, and involving. Students, we want you engaged and we will do our darndest to get you involved and that process begins right now.

But you know what? There is something else that is inevitable about guides and their role and those they guide. Early on, what the guide strives for is for you to follow but, as I have indicated, what guides want is not just for you to follow but for you to start to take charge of yourself and do some self-guiding.

Another way to put it is that the guide must know and should know that at some point the guided really are out on their own. For instance, that day at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, as my

tour went on and I listened to my guide voice, I also began to see things for myself. I began to even huff at some of what I was told, seeing slightly different things myself. I continued through the collection with some self-confidence.

And think of those artists whose work I was viewing and with which I was interacting. And here I will greatly oversimplify. They were led by guides who had been led by guides who, in many ways had painted and sculpted what they saw. They were led by guides whose world had been shaped by centuries of relatively static views of politics and religion. But these modern artists were living in a world of photograph and film; they were in a world where suddenly there were ways to capture the real world without paint or clay or granite and to do so very accurately. What would they paint or sculpt? They were in a world where traditional conceptions of God and church and government and the mind and virtually everything else were being challenged. They were in a world either about to be or recently ravaged by wars and death on a scale that the pre-modern world might imagine as Armageddon. They were in a world where the role of the state and politics was going through a metamorphosis.

So, what did they do? They revolted against their guides in many ways. They violated rules. They challenged. They provoked. And in challenging what their guides said, did, and taught, they created a new art. They challenged themselves and in doing so, they created a new way to look at the world. They unleashed shape, color, form, and material in ways never imagined.

And so it will be with you. We will guide. You will follow. Then, you will lead yourself. And then you will challenge and in challenging you will demand that we open our eyes and acknowledge what you have to say.

And whether you create a new art form or a new business concept or a new energy source we, your guides, will be proud of you because you will have taken what we had to offer and made it your own and you will have done so in the process of making a better world for all.

Thank you; we are all very glad you are here.

President Galligan delivered this address on the Front Lawn of Colby-Sawyer College at the Convocation Ceremony on Friday, Sept. 3, 2010.