

CONVOCATION – SEPT. 7, 2007

Welcome to Colby-Sawyer College and the 2007 Convocation. This is a very exciting day for us because it is the start of the school year and it gives those of us who work here a chance to do what we love: work together at a wonderful college to provide and participate in your education. We are also excited because you are the largest and one of the best and most diverse classes we have ever had here at Colby-Sawyer. We are already better because you are here. We are honored that you have chosen Colby-Sawyer as the place to pursue your college education and we pledge to do our part to continue to make every decision by asking how you—our students—will benefit. We promise to provide you with an engaging, challenging, interdisciplinary, and wonderful educational experience in a supportive and caring community.

This is the most important and, in some ways, the hardest speech that I have to give all year. It is the first opportunity I have to talk with you as a college student at Colby-Sawyer and as one cohesive group, and from my perspective, that is important. Ironically, while this is the first time, I don't get that many chances to talk to all of you in one group. In fact, the next time I will talk to all of you as a group will be when you graduate, so I don't want to blow this first and very rare chance. I want to say something important and meaningful, academic and memorable, and maybe even a little funny, all at once. I want to set the right tone but I don't want to be preachy. When I told someone how I feel about this talk, he said: "Don't worry about it; in a couple of hours, they won't remember a word you said." That potential reality made me feel even more nervous about saying the right thing. So, here I go.

Last June 29, a Friday, I went to Fenway Park for the very first time to see the Red Sox play and defeat the Texas Rangers, 2-1. Sammy Sosa struck out with the bases loaded and Tim Wakefield got the win. I went with about 100 young Colby-Sawyer graduates and their friends, my daughter Sarah, and some of her friends. It was a great evening. Driving home after the game, I was alone and traveling on I-93; listening to my XM Radio—probably Channel 46 or 49 or 40 or maybe 6 or 7 or 8 or 15 or 44 or 50 (now you know my tastes)—and was tooling along at about the speed limit (at least that's the story I'm sticking to), when I crossed the New Hampshire border. Then within about ten minutes, it happened. I saw the sign. "Road Work Ahead." They were paving the highway and they were doing it at night. I realize that is the intelligent thing to do since there are fewer cars on the road at midnight than at almost any other time of the day, but I was not happy. I became even more unhappy when I saw another sign that said: "Left lane ends in 1 ½ miles." I shrugged; I knew what I was in for—the merge—two lanes collapsing into one. Stop and go, squeeze and go; squeeze and stop.

That next 1 ½ miles took me about 20 or 30 minutes to travel. We stopped; we inched; we pulled in; people went by on the left to try and get as far ahead as they could before pulling in. People in the right stayed on the tail of the car in front of them so those cars in the left, when they finally decided to move over, could not get in. And that just caused the people in the left to decide to try and fly ahead even further.

I could feel my ears getting hot. I had advice, albeit unspoken, to give to the people in the left lane flying by; I had some other advice for the people in the right lane who would not let those in the left lane in. I had yet more commentary to offer the state, the city, and even the federal government. I figured out that all this advice I had was really just anger. It didn't matter how good the song was that came on the radio; I was still mad. I took a deep breath and slumped into my car seat with what I can only imagine was an angry scowl on my face.

I started to think about all that I had to do; I started to think about all the good things in my life—a great family, a great job, being at wonderful school, a great new class on the way. It worked for a few minutes and then I felt the anger surge as someone in a Suburban went by me on the left at about 35 miles per hour. I thought about this speech of all things and what I might talk about. And then I had it—it struck me that college is a bit like learning to merge.

What do I mean by that? Think about those cars going from two lanes to one. The most sensible way for us to behave would have been to start merging as soon as we saw the sign that a lane was closing ahead. It would have been smart, efficient, and safe for us to start an alternate feed, to try and weave the two lanes together into one so we could move forward effectively together rather than to race until the end and then push or be pushed out.

Now, think about what you will do here at college. You will be learning new things, new ways of thinking and learning, new information and skills. Certainly you will change and grow, but you will also remain the same person you are today. And you will be most successful in your college career if you find ways to merge those new ideas, skills and experiences into the person you already are and with your individual dreams and aspirations.

In the coming years, you must learn to merge many different academic disciplines and what they have to offer you. As I began college the emphasis was on specialization—focusing in on one area and learning as much as one could about that area. We were encouraged to dig deeper and deeper and deeper into that specific body of knowledge. Sticking with my merging metaphor, my college experience was almost as if we were told; don't merge. Instead, get off the main road and drive around here by yourself, or with others just like you. There are certainly benefits to

that specialized educational experience. Today we know that while the specialized learning is important, we must all learn to look at problems from multiple perspectives. We must learn to look at them from the perspective of the scientist, the historian, the writer, the business person, the nurse, the exercise scientist, the artist. That is, we must learn to merge those different views. To appreciate how things do and might fit together, how they merge, is critical. That is why our liberal education program is designed the way it is; why our Pathways are thematic, interdisciplinary and idea based. That is the way life comes at you. The great problem solvers of your generation will be the ones who both specialize and combine—the ones who learn much about one area and merge that knowledge with the rest of their educational experience.

Now, combining may involve multiple experts—a chemist, a writer, an economist, and a biologist. That is, you have to be able to work together and we want you to come away from Colby-Sawyer with an appreciation of how important that is. Again, notice the merge metaphor. On the night of June 29, we all would have moved through that road construction faster if we had worked cooperatively. It would have meant giving up some self-interest for the greater good.. Maybe I would have gotten here quicker if I had stayed in the left lane until the very end and then cut over at the last second, but that tactic might have caused many other people to arrive later. Working together would have yielded a better overall result. You will face many such situations here at college and in your professional lives. Learn to merge.

We will also want you to learn to merge with new and different people. You will meet people here at Colby-Sawyer and when you graduate who are vastly different than you. They come from different places, backgrounds and experiences. They may behave and think differently from you. You can learn from them, but not if you don't learn to merge, not if you don't try and weave what they can teach you about themselves, and about yourself. If you go flying by in the left lane, you won't learn from the people in the right lane. If you are in the right lane and don't let folks in the left merge, you won't learn from them either.

We also want you to learn to merge and deal with the different opportunities and demands we will place upon you. We want you to be involved, dedicated students. We will ask you to learn about all sorts of areas--from anatomy to biomechanics to organizational theory to American literature to chemistry to American history to abnormal psychology. We want you to be excited about living in the world of ideas.

We also encourage you to be involved and engaged outside the classroom and in college life. A lot of what you learn in college will be outside the classroom, laboratory, and clinic. We want

you to engage in student activities, community service, residence hall life, and athletics. Take what you are learning and experiencing inside the classroom and the laboratory and into the residence hall, to the internship, to the student organization, to the playing field, and to the community. But make sure—every once in a while and I would urge that once a day is not too often—to get outside and appreciate the natural world around us here. Enjoy and cherish it so generations to come can have the chance you do to live and work in such a beautiful place.

To put it all slightly differently, we want to encourage you to live balanced and full lives. Again, note the merge—we want you to learn to merge academic, co-curricular, and the natural world.

Think about that night and those people on the road—merging would have meant moving forward together. Merging would have entailed moving forward and making progress. From the educational perspective you will learn to merge—you will learn to combine old knowledge, new knowledge, and refined skills. You will advance your knowledge, your skills, and your lives. At the same time, you must learn, like the cars on the highway, to be patient with the process, to collaborate with others, and to take the perspectives of others (other learners and other drivers) into perspective.

Finally, for now, we want you to fall in love with learning or stay in love with learning. We think that if you love learning and all that it entails we will have succeeded in helping you to live fuller, more meaningful lives. So, we want you to merge a love of learning with who you are at the very core. Part of learning to merge is always being able to think for yourself and merge that current identity with the person you will become.

Let me close by once again saying welcome and congratulations. We are all anxious to get to know you even better and to do our part to provide you with an incredible Colby-Sawyer education. Have a wonderful, challenging, and full experience here.