

## **President's Charge to the Class of 2012**

President Thomas C. Galligan Jr.

May 5, 2012

Well here we are again—together under a tent. You may recall that the last time we did this was four years ago in September, 2008. That day was Convocation, the day most of you entered Colby-Sawyer College. Of course some of you might not have been here that day; you might have transferred here later. If so don't worry, my message should be as true for you as it is for those who were here on that late summer day in 2008.

That day I told you about my grandparents' kitchen in Rumson, New Jersey; it was the place where they fed me Swedish meatballs, Swedish pancakes—what I now call crepes—pickled herring, the best chocolate cake and chocolate chip cookies I have ever had, and my family history. It was in that kitchen that I learned a lot about just who I was and about where my family—on my mother's side—came from.

In that speech, I also told you about a decorative plate my grandparents had on their wall, a ceramic plate. It had a beautiful picture on it of two people—a couple—appearing over and over again on the steps of what looked like a Mesopotamian or Mayan ziggurat or pyramid. The couple climbed up one side and they climbed down the other side. On the lowest step of the climbing side, the couple was crawling; they were young children, still really babies. By the third step they were about your age when you started college. As they climbed, they aged. At the top of the platform, I'd say they were a few years younger than me. Then, as they descended they aged further; and as they aged they became stooped until on the last step going down they were bent over on canes and leaning on each other. You get the picture I hope—the plate depicted the process of aging, the arc of life, from young to old, from crawling to standing to leaning over.

And at the top of the plate was an expression. As I recall it was “Tiden flyger (teedin fleager).” What did it mean? “Time flies” my grandfather told me. “Time flies.” My grandmother said that in Latin the expression was “Tempis fuget.” The idea of the plate was that over the course of the life of the couple ascending and descending the stairs, time had literally flown by. You could see it passing before your eyes.

And, in September, 2008, I opined that I thought time would fly by for you at Colby-Sawyer. I urged you to try and stay in the moment and learn as much as you could. I concluded the talk, if I may quote myself, by saying: “And, I am willing to bet that even as you succeed in focusing on the moment for the next four years here at Colby-Sawyer that in just a few short years when we meet again under the tent for Commencement, you will look back fondly, shake your head and ask where did it go? Tiden flyger (teedin fleager).”

Was I right? Has it flown by? Do you remember saying good bye to your families as you left for Colby-Sawyer or as they left campus that summer afternoon? Do you remember your Pathways? Your first dance here? Your first game or match if you are an athlete? Your first residence hall? The clubs to which you have belonged? Your first play if you are an actor? Your first art exhibition? Meeting with your advisor to talk about your major? Major acceptance? Studying away if you were able to do that? Your Capstone presentation two weeks ago? Mountain Days? Do you recall those days and those things?

Family members—am I right? Has it flown by? Do you recall saying good bye to them that day? Do you recall worrying about whether and how they would make their way? Do you recall how proud you felt as they succeeded? And, let me encourage you to please cherish and embrace how proud you feel today. Let that last forever.

Today is a good day to think back. It is a good day to both celebrate and reflect. And, as I do that, I suppose it is natural that I remember my own graduation from college. My father was there and my grandmother—she of the kitchen, my late mother’s mother was there. During my four years at college she had lost her daughter as I had lost my mother and she had lost her husband as I had lost my grandfather. So I am sure for her being there with me at graduation brought sadness mixed with her pride and her happiness—sadness that her daughter and husband could not be physically present with her and happiness that her grandson would be the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Now, let me slightly digress, to any student who has lost a family member or dear friend since we last met under the tent, I know a little bit about how you feel. And trust me when I say that although they may not be here in the sense we are here at this moment in this place they are always a part of you and they would be very, very proud of you today as my grandmother, Eva

Benson Reuterskiold, was of me that day in 1977 as I graduated from college in Stanford, California. She had never been to California before. She was 81 and she had never even been on an airplane before that trip. And here she had flown all the way across the country with my father—an accomplishment in itself if you knew him—to be with me.

At one point during the weekend, we were looking at the brownish California hills behind my college and she sighed. “This is a beautiful place,” she said. “Tom, [she might have said Tommy, but let’s nip that possibility in the bud—anyway she went on] if I were younger I might think about coming out here.” I don’t think she had ever been to New Hampshire so we can forgive her for not thinking about moving here.

“It is nice,” I said. “I am glad you got to see it.”

“I am too,” she added. Then she pondered for a bit and said, “I have seen a lot.” I did not say anything; I just let her speak and she continued. “I saw Buffalo Bill in Madison Square Garden when I was a little girl. I saw silent movies and then talkies. I saw the phonograph become available for everyone. I remember the night when your grandfather came home with an Edison phonograph under his arm. I saw and heard the development of radio, air planes, and television. Think of all that change. I never could have dreamed it and I have lived through it.”

I am pretty sure I said something like “Wow,” but actually, I was a tad depressed because, while I appreciated her experience and her reflection upon it, I also felt a little sorry for myself. Why? Because I sensed my grandmother’s aging and, in light of the loss I had suffered, the inevitability of even more loss was on the horizon. But I also felt sorry for myself because I thought: she has seen so much and that is great but I will never see that much change in my life.

I knew it: I would never see that much change in my life. It just could not happen. Ugh!

Boy was I an idiot? Has time flown? Yes. But was I right about not seeing change? No way! What’s happened? Computers, the Berlin Wall coming down, cable TV, the Internet, smart phones, mapping the genome, AIDS, global warming, September 11, iTunes, iMax, iPads, even the Red Sox winning the World Series! Lehman Brothers going bankrupt. Globalization! Wal-Mart! I feel like Billy Joel—I didn’t start the fire but I was as wrong as wrong can be that

day. The world has changed incredibly. I can't claim to have ever seen Buffalo Bill like my grandmother but I have seen a heck of a lot of things change in my life.

So what can I tell you? Before you know it, you will be where I am. And you will look back and say 'My gosh, look how different things are today than they were that day I graduated from Colby-Sawyer and Tom Galligan talked about his grandmother.'

And will you do well with change? I think you will do wonderfully well. Why? Because I know you and I have faith in you; I think you have the personalities to deal with the pressure, the challenge, and the excitement of change. Why else do I think you will be fine?

I think you will be fine because you have all these people sitting in this tent rooting for you—your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, professors, and the staff here at Colby-Sawyer—and they will continue to root for you.

And I think you will be fine because you have a college education. You have a great, Colby-Sawyer education. You have an education that will help you succeed in your careers. You have an education that will allow you to meaningfully participate as a citizen in our American experiment in democracy. You have an education that encourages you to always ask why. You have an education that encourages you to know yourselves and know yourselves well. You understand how the world works and you understand how your body works. You can read a novel, read a poem, see a film, and meaningfully discuss it with others. You have an education that has made you quantitatively literate. You have benefited here from knowing students from other backgrounds—cities, rural areas, and suburbs. You have met students from other nations, whether you are from China or the US. You have met people from around the world. I hope you have learned to appreciate their perspectives.

You have hopefully gained the ability to decipher what has to change and the wisdom to preserve what does not need to change. You appreciate your obligation to work to preserve the natural world around us. You can read. You can write. And you can speak in front of others.

In short your education has prepared you to be able to learn and to teach yourself for the rest of your life. And that ability to teach yourself is exactly what will get you through the changing world in which you will live.

So, when you are in my place and you look back on today and you think Tiden flyger (teedin fleager) please never forget that in these four years that have flown by you got your college education—a very useful thing in a changing world like ours. Today you are honored for accomplishing much and for preparing yourself to save the world for you and all of us. So don't ever let your memory of this day and this college fly by. Freeze it and keep it forever. Thank you.

*This address was delivered at the 174<sup>th</sup> Commencement Ceremony of Colby-Sawyer College.*