Thank you Deb for that humbling introduction. Thank you President Galligan, members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Faculty, Staff, and students of the class of 2011 for giving me the opportunity to speak on this occasion. Before I begin my actual remarks, I would like to take a moment to tip my hat to the students of the class of 2011. I know that you will be hearing congratulations a lot over the next few days, and for overcoming all we have put in your way, you deserve all of the accolades you will receive.

Now that I have offered you a tip of my imaginary hat, allow me a moment to give you a wag of my finger as well. While I am honored and humbled by this award, the writing of this speech has forced me to confront something that I have been naively ignoring for years: I am profoundly out of touch with the lives of young people. Shame on you for forcing me to realize my old age. When I was first asked about giving a speech at commencement, I jumped at the opportunity. I was excited about the chance to address the meaning of your experiences here at Colby-Sawyer. My mind immediately went to the often quoted line from the trial of Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Condemned to death by his fellow citizens for the questions he asked, Socrates stands as a hero for those who believe in the power of intellectual freedom and analysis. I have always been intrigued by this claim, and began to build a speech around this idea.

Unfortunately, this elation did not last long. My wife, whose honesty is a characteristic I typically find refreshing, chose this moment to be painfully honest about my choice of an ancient Greek philosopher as a relevant framework for my speech. I reluctantly agreed, and tried to
start over in my quest for relevance. I honestly believed that this would be easy, because I have always considered myself to be a reasonably hip person, someone who understands the world of young people. I appreciate the nuance of Jersey Shore, can differentiate between “Paparazzi” and “Bad Romance”, and believe that I could pick Justin Bieber out of a police lineup with reasonable accuracy. I was sure I could discuss the significance of your educational achievement in a relevant way. No need to bring in Socrates, I was sure I could make an interesting connection to something less than 2,000 years old. Unfortunately, it did not take long for this illusion to be completely destroyed. To give but one example, the only album on my now ancient ipod is Neil Diamond’s Greatest Hits. I honestly contemplated a Neil Diamond themed speech until my loving wife once again intervened. I realize that I should be embarrassed about this flirtation with Neil Diamond, but I am not: the first bit of wisdom I would like to offer is the fact that the songs of Neil Diamond will give you all the guidance you need to make it through life.

It was at this moment, when I had just abandoned my dream of a speech built around “Sweet Caroline” and “Cracklin’ Rose”, that you, the students of Colby-Sawyer, provided the inspirational moment that I needed. The moment was a 9:30 am Friday class. As my students shambled into the classroom, bleary eyed from lack of sleep, many with pony-kegs of coffee in tow, I had fond memories of my own days as a student, when 9:30 was still considered “early.” As I laughed at and, in a way, sympathized with their groans, shuffling, and vacant expressions, I knew I had found the answer to my dilemma: the zombie. Like the re-animated corpses they imitated, these students seemed to relish the unexamined life, giving the lie to Socrates’s claim that this life was not worth living.
Let me explain this seemingly terrible decision to relate your educational experience to both an Ancient Greek Philosopher and monster-movie staple. While it is clear that the successful completion of your Colby-Sawyer experience will result in the issuing of a degree, what has it provided you beyond this? I would like to tell you that your education prepared you to live an examined life, and echo the claim of Socrates that this is the only life worth living. But there was something about the disengaged, yet strangely peaceful, faces of my early morning students that pushed me to question Socrates in a way I have never done before.

So, is the examined life really the only kind of life worth living? I will begin by defending the Socratic vision. I have found three compelling reasons to agree with Socrates.

1) An examined life is multi-dimensional. While the things you have learned at Colby-Sawyer may lead to promotions at work and witty conversations during leisure, an examined life provides much more than career advancement and topics for small talk. An examined life is one that identifies and transcends the false divisions, like work vs leisure, that compartmentalize everyday life. Be willing to submit your life, thoughts, and experiences to examination. Be that person who finds enjoyment in her work, and intellectual stimulation in her leisure.

2) An examined life is one of limitless growth – The Socratic mind is one that asks questions, even though the answers to these questions will only lead to further, more interesting questions. As you continue through your life, continue to ask questions and open doors, even if it is just to poke your head in and look around. As you do, you will realize that the world is a fascinating and ultimately un-knowable place. While frustrating at times, the tensions and contradictions of the world and the humans that populate it are precisely the reason why the world is such an interesting
place. Be a person that embraces this complexity. Live in a world of constantly shifting horizons. A world in which the seemingly distant is brought close, and new complications are found in that which is seemingly close at hand.

3) Finally, examining your life will make you a better citizen – this aspect of the examined life is very dear to my heart. The world we live in right now is an uncertain and at times terrifying place. There are a variety of problems that are looming on our horizon, and it often seems impossible to differentiate between the problems that are real, and the problems that are really just distractions. A critical, Socratic mind will allow you to be the kind of citizen that can step up, and address these problems. Keep in mind that “The real world” that has loomed on the horizon of your educational experience is not set in stone, it is often not even set in sturdy plastic. While it often feels like reality is a solid thing, examination provides you with the tools you need to engage with, and ultimately improve, reality. An intellectually curious mind will help you see through the empty and inflammatory rhetoric that fills our public spaces and clouds our common sense, so that you can think new thoughts and do new things.

As a whole, thinking critically about your life and world pushes you to continually grow. It is an absolutely vital task, but on the other hand, I have found some compelling reasons to embrace the unexamined life, and its champion: the zombie. While rarely held up as an ideal, the zombie’s unexamined life has a number of things going for it that Socrates simply cannot match.
1) The unexamined life is a life of peaceful tranquility. While Socrates found that his quest for answers led only to the certainty of his own ignorance, the zombie knows very little, but finds contentment in the fact that it has all of the answers it needs. The zombie desires brains, and finds that it is already blessed with all of the tools it needs to pursue that goal. If you are looking for a life in which work and play are fused into one organic whole, look no further than the zombie. The zombie is always doing exactly the thing that it wants to do most. Be sure to temper your Socratic quests with a bit of zombie bliss. It is important that you find peace in a world that is unfinished, and with experiences that are precarious and unstable. Know when to slow down to a shuffle, release a few low grumbles, and relax.

2) The unexamined life is a life of action and adaptation. As any horror movie will reveal, Zombies are doers, not thinkers. Zombies do not think about what it means to be a zombie or how to be a better zombie, yet despite this it believes in itself. A zombie never accepts defeat, and never stops moving forward toward the goal it has set for itself. Even when facing insurmountable odds, the zombie continues to act. In this way, the zombie is once again an interesting foil for Socrates. The examined life is one of open doors, but there is always the temptation to wait for a new door to open, to stay secluded in a world of pure thought that is not subjected to the often wild fluctuations of the real world. The Zombie does not struggle with the tension between thought and action. It opens doors by running into them over and over again. Remember that at some point you must actually walk through one of the doors you are opening, and that adaptation is a necessary survival skill. Here again, take your cue from the zombie. The zombie adapts to whatever is thrown in its path, it
knows its strengths and overcomes its weaknesses. Once you have identified the 
goals that you seek, pursue them with the relentless action and adaptability that only 
the living dead can bring to a task.

3) Finally, an unexamined mind gets along with others. The exact same world that 
demands citizen-leaders who pursue lives of examination also requires those who can 
work together as a team. Zombies play well together, and when you find a single 
zombie it is safe to assume that many more are on their way. Like many individuals 
who have achieved great things, the zombie knows that there is strength in numbers. 
One slowly moving zombie shuffling toward you is an amusing diversion, thousands 
of zombies are a force to be reckoned with. As it is in the world of zombie movies, 
so it is in the non-zombie infested world. Like the wave of democratic revolutions 
that swept across Eastern Europe in 1989, the recent uprisings across the Middle East 
and North Africa have shown that real power derives from people acting together. In 
order to change the world, you need to be willing and able to work with others, even 
those with whom you do not completely agree. In sum, the world needs zombies just 
as much as it needs Socrates.

To paraphrase the theologian Reinhold Neihbur in a way that will make him roll over in 
his grave, we need a zombie-like serenity to accept the things that we cannot change, Socratic 
courage to change the things we can, and both zombies and Socrates to know the difference.

It is with this call to “have your brains and eat them too” that I will conclude my remarks. 
As you move on to new challenges, setbacks, and victories, try your best to combine the self 
knowledge and intellectual growth of the examined life with the tranquility and action of the
unexamined life. Subject your life and your world to critical examination. Push yourself to construct a vision of the kind of world you would like your grandchildren to inherit. Remember, though, that real change can only come about through acting on this vision with confidence, clarity of purpose, and the courage to face seemingly insurmountable odds.

Be strong in your convictions, but also willing to pick the brains of others. Be the best human that you can be, but know when this requires you to roll up your sleeves and get your zombie on.

Thank you again for this honor and this opportunity, and congratulations once more to the class of 2011.