

Come Alive
Student Commencement Address
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Good Morning ☺

Someone once told me that there is a power in not knowing your next step, or not knowing where you belong. That this time in our lives, littered with possibilities and chaos, is actually a gift to be embraced. Because someday, we will know what is coming next, and there won't be as much room for the chaos that has kept us going for the past few years. This is without a doubt a transformative time in our lives.

Graduating from college is a dream we have all shared together. The degrees we receive today from the various arts and sciences stand as a representation of who we are and all of the work we have done within the Colby-Sawyer community. It would be easy for me to stand here before you and talk about the meaning of success or wealth. It would be even easier for me to discuss the many hardships our nation and the world are facing today, calling my graduating class to stand up and fight the "good" fight. These thoughts are important, but there is a different message I would like to convey.

Howard Thurman, a civil rights leader from Florida, said "Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." The truth is that we do know what the world needs. We know what the true meaning of success and a rich life are. We know that life is not simple and that the degrees we receive today are not a guarantee. So it is important to ask yourself, what makes you *come alive*? Think back to the moments when you were the most passionate about something. Maybe it was an internship, job, class, or even a conversation. Maybe it was a story. Maybe it was the affect someone else had on you. What was it about that specific moment that stands out in your memory more than anything else?

One of the times I found this moment was during this past fall semester. I was studying abroad in East Africa, doing a program focusing on community and wildlife management in Tanzania and Kenya. I began my semester in Tanzania, learning about wildlife ecology,

management, and policy with twenty-three other American students. Half way through the semester, we switched to Kenya where we would conduct our directed research projects. I was part of the environmental policy group, and spent my days of fieldwork traveling on foot throughout the villages of Kenya with a local translator to help me conduct interviews. I hiked through farmland, swamps, rocky outcrops, and endless, orange dust, all the while in a long skirt and sandals made out of old tires. The goal of my team's project was to understand the area's environmental and cultural issues from the local people's point of view. I was trying to understand what the locals were facing related to socio-economics and wildlife conservation. In a few weeks time, I would be presenting my findings to government officials and non-profit organizations.

On my final day of fieldwork, I was exhausted and feeling discouraged. I had walked for miles and hardly found anyone willing to talk to me and for the first time in my life understood what it was like to be judged by my skin color. How could I hope to make a difference in these people's lives if I couldn't get them to talk to me? Towards the end of the day, my guide and I wandered through a neighborhood dotted with banana plants and knocked on the door of a small family home. A woman named Josephine greeted us and listened to my guide's explanation of who I was and what I was trying to accomplish. She immediately invited me into her home to sit with her family and help in any way possible. Her home was simple: a series of small structures made out of mud, dung, and straw with a fire pit outside surrounded by old fallen trees to use as benches. I interviewed Josephine with one of her kids sitting in my lap, mesmerized by the pen I used to record her responses. Her other family members, a few small kids and young adults, gathered around and watched intently as I communicated through my translator to help the woman understand my questions. Occasionally, one of them would reach out and carefully run their fingers through my hair, or peer over my shoulder to see what I was writing. The girl sitting in my lap traced the palm of my left hand with her fingers while my right hand took notes. As I finished my interview, Josephine expressed her deepest gratitude, and offered me a pitcher of fresh mango juice. I sat with her family for a long time, listening to stories and drinking in the afternoon's light contained in a single cup. I looked down and saw an English slogan on the little girl's shirt. It said, "Challenge is opportunity." This image, of a Kenyan child sitting in my lap smiling up at me, unaware of the encouraging words written across her chest, stands out in my mind as one of the most inspiring moments I have ever had. The challenges we face are not

simply bumps in the road to get over; they are the opportunities we need to create something beautiful. I needed a little girl in the middle-of-nowhere Africa to tell me that.

When I was in East Africa, I was more alive and more inspired than I have ever felt. Working with the local community in a developing country made me come alive, and this is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. As we close this ceremony, receive our degrees, and move forward, ask yourself: what makes you come *alive*? Because the world needs a lot of things, but if it could be full of people who are passionate and follow what inspires them, then I believe those things will become possible.

I would like to end with an immense “thank you” on behalf of my classmates. To the Colby-Sawyer community: President Tom Galligan, faculty and staff, the board of trustees, and distinguished guests. And to all of our loved ones, both family and friends, either present today or carried within our hearts. Without the support, patience, tough love, encouragement, and guidance from each of these parties, receiving our degrees today wouldn’t be as deeply meaningful.

As I look at my graduating class, I see hundreds of opportunities, passions, possibilities, hopes, and beauty. I am empowered by the energy I have seen each of you demonstrate and look forward to seeing where your passion takes you. I am proud and honored to walk with you today.

Thank you.