Welcome to Your Third Cup of Tea
Presentation to First-Year Students, November 2008

By President Tom Galligan

As part of New Student Orientation in September 2008, students and many others in the college community read *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time* by Greg Mortenson. As part of orientation, the students were invited to three different “cups of tea” events from September to November to discuss the book and their process of joining a new community.

Welcome to your third cup of tea. I know by this time you are all perhaps just a little bit sick of the book “Three Cups of Tea.” You know it inside and out. Bear with me for the next few minutes. You know that it is about the great things one person can accomplish in the world if he or she has big dreams. It is about how much people can improve the lives of other people through their commitment, hard work and generosity.

One wonderful thing about this world is that one person really can accomplish an incredible amount if they put their mind to it. Just think back to last week and the election. For the first time ever in American history, a multi-racial person, an African-American, was elected president. And President-elect Barack Obama came from humble financial origins. What he managed to do says a great deal about what’s possible in our country and in our world. And for you McCain supporters in the room, let’s not leave him out. He was a vibrant, aggressive campaigner for the nation’s highest office, despite being 72 years old, having suffered torture as a prisoner of war, and having survived cancer.

Closer to home, I think of Susan Colby, who in 1837 became the first head of school at Colby Academy in New London, N.H., and who saw our school through its formative years. I also think of H. Leslie Sawyer, who was our college’s first president from 1929—the year the Great
Depression began—until 1955. He saw us through our transition to a college, the Great Depression, World War II, and the start of the Cold War. I have read about him and heard about him and everyone—to a person—has positive things to say. On the human level, Beth Crockford tells me that Mrs. Sawyer used to make her cookies as a little girl and that you could hear the television at the Sawyers’ house through the walls because he had to turn it up loud so he could hear it. These folks, Barrack Obama, John McCain, Susan Colby and Leslie Sawyer, like Greg Mortenson, made positive differences in people’s lives. They embody the powerful strength of the human spirit at the heart of the story in “Three Cups of Tea.”

You also know that “Three Cups of Tea” is about understanding another culture and being part of a culture far from home. On that score, we have a very special guest with us this year, Dr. Isaac Nyamongo. Dr. Nyamongo is Colby-Sawyer’s first Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence. The Fulbright Scholar program welcomes scholars from other countries to American colleges and sends American scholars overseas to be at schools in the rest of the world. Dr. Nyamongo is director of African Studies at the University of Nairobi in Nairobi, Kenya. Here he will be teaching and working with our Environmental Studies programs and others and speaking and teaching us about health, sickness and healing in Africa. We are very fortunate to have him here, and I would now like to ask him to stand and be recognized. Isaac, we are all very glad you are here and hope very much that your year-long adventure with us is as good and fun for you as we know it will be for us.

Dr. Nyamongo actually arrived on campus after you did earlier this fall so he is newer than you are to Colby-Sawyer. What does that mean? It means you are no longer new to our community. And in a few months, we will welcome transfer students, and it will be up to you to help them adjust to campus. All of that is a way of saying that your new student tag or label has already expired. You are now full-fledged members of the Colby-Sawyer College community.
Switching gears back to the book, you also know that “Three Cups of Tea” is about one person’s search for meaning and love in this incomprehensible world. It is about trying to learn a little bit of humility and trying to be patient as one goes through the process of learning and growing and accomplishing. You also know, whether you want to admit it or not, that learning, growing and accomplishing is not easy. We may want it to be easy, but we all know that it is better in the end if it is challenging. If it isn’t hard then there is probably not a lot of learning, growing and accomplishing going on. And if there is not a lot of learning, growing and accomplishing going on, then there is probably not a whole lot of change going on. Do you think it was easy for Barrack Obama, John McCain, Susan Colby, Leslie Sawyer or Greg Mortenson?

Remember page 150 in the book. Greg Mortenson wants to get going on building schools, and he wants to get going fast. Remember what I told you in my convocation speech—time flies—teeler fleegin. And Greg Mortenson is cognizant of time flying and does not want to waste any precious time. He wants to do it his way. He thinks that if he can get going faster it will be better. Recall what Haji Ali says to him:

“If you want to survive in Baltistan, you must respect our ways… The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die…Doctor Greg, you must take time to share three cups of tea.”

Well, even though time flies, you must take time to share three cups of tea. You must take time to learn and understand the culture you are entering. Greg Mortenson does not want to wait. Tom Petty says that the waiting is the hardest part. Well, the waiting is very hard for Greg Mortenson. For him, waiting becomes a real challenge. Like many Americans, he just wants to get going. But it is in the waiting that he learns the most about himself and the culture he is working in. It is the waiting and the learning that, in many ways, ends up making him effective. He is able to get done what he gets done because by rising to the challenge—waiting and reaching an understanding—he becomes part of the cultural landscape and is thus able to accomplish so much more.

Taking time to learn and understand the culture a person is entering is one of the reasons why we decided to extend orientation at Colby-Sawyer this fall. We used to welcome the first-year class
on Friday, do orientation over the weekend and then tell everyone on Sunday night that they were oriented, ready, prepared and fully part of the community. Well, I know darn well and so do you that nobody gets oriented to a new place that quickly, and so to be honest with you and ourselves, and to try very hard to help you succeed here, and feel welcome and a part of our college family, we extended our orientation throughout the fall. In many ways our old system did not challenge our students enough; it rushed them through the orientation process and then claimed to be complete even though we all knew better. This year we have extended the program, and I hope that by extending it we have challenged you. This year, we took the time to offer you three cups of tea. The first cup encouraged you to focus on diversity, culture, the role of the United States in the world, and more. I hope it made you think. The second cup of tea forced you to look at poverty, disease, health care and other difficult issues. It was not comfortable. Addressing hard issues and reflecting upon one’s response to them never is. If you want to change the world, you probably have to change yourself in the process, and neither one of those transitions is ever comfortable.

And tonight is the third cup. Tonight it is my great pleasure to offer you the third cup of tea. Tonight it is my treat to close orientation and fully welcome you to Colby-Sawyer. But while I welcome you fully to our college community—remember your new student ticket is invalid as of this evening—I want to keep challenging you. I want you to keep thinking about the difference you can make here and in the wider world. One of the funny things about change, challenge, learning, growing and accomplishing is that as you change, you can change the world around you. I venture to say again that the challenge of being patient and having three cups of tea changed Greg Mortenson but it was that personal change that then facilitated the change in the world around him. So, I hope that while you continue to grow and change here, you will also work to change this college. You will work to make us better.
You have already done much to make us better. You have worked to get the vote out and voted. You have been as incredibly engaged a class as we have had in a good while. You have excelled in athletic competition already. You have come from all around the world and helped us internationalize our campus in an unprecedented manner. Keep it up. In just two semesters you will be participating in your Sophomore Pathway. When you get together as a group in January 2010, how will you tell your colleagues that you have made a difference here?

Will you have made a greener campus? Will we have reduced our paper usage? Will we recycle more? Will you have achieved the highest GPA ever at Colby-Sawyer through your first three semesters? Will you have created a new club? Set an athletic record? Written a play? Performed in the Dance Show? Given a speech in public even though you are afraid of public speaking? Learned how to swim? Volunteered with disadvantaged children? I could go on. But, instead, I’d like to bring it back to me and a family story about learning, growth, accomplishment and challenge—all in the context of the fact that if you want to change or grow or accomplish something, it is sometimes a little uncomfortable. So, here’s my story.

Actually, I thought first about telling you a story about my first year in college and how my mother passed away and my first real girlfriend broke up with me, and how I was 3000 miles from home without a car and without much money. And while it is a pretty good story, I thought you would think I was feeling sorry for myself. So instead I chose a story about my youngest daughter, Jennifer—a story that is still in process. Because it is a story in process my wife Susan said I should not tell it because I do not know how it ends, but I told her that was OK because any real story—even one told with a little dose of literary license—is an ongoing story that hasn’t ended yet. So I am going to tell you a story about Jennifer that has no ending because the story is not over yet. We still don’t really know how it will work out.

Jennifer is 16 and a junior in high school. She has a driver’s license, and she thinks she is pretty special and pretty mature and pretty self confident. But she was not always so self-confident.
When she was younger she very much hated to be away from us, especially her mother, and she would sometimes feel sick to her stomach when we went out and her three older siblings—Patrick, Sarah, and Aisling—would either have to deal with it or would call us and let us know that Jenny was crying and did not feel well. Sometimes it would be so bad that we would have to go home from wherever we were. As we hoped, she slowly got over it as she got older.

Then, a few years ago when she was about 11, she went off to camp for two weeks; she went to the same camp one of her friends was going to. The rule at the camp was that cell phones were supposed to be embargoed and unavailable, but somehow my daughter, Jennifer, who can be very convincing, got her counselor to let her have her cell phone. And then every night we would get phone calls from Jenny with a tear in her voice and a sniffle—or worse—telling us how miserable camp was, how she did not feel well (the stomach problems again), how she wanted to come home. We got a couple of letters from her—she is definitely the best letter writer in the family, having inherited the trait, I believe, from my late father. Her letters told us how bad the weather was, how bad the food was, and how she had clearly made a terrible mistake attending the camp. Well, the two weeks finally came to an end, and her sister Aisling, brother Patrick, and I set off to pick her up.

Upon arriving, I had every notion that we would be at the camp for about five minutes—just long enough for Jenny to throw her bags into the car and race away from the hated place. Boy, was I wrong! We were there for about two hours, making our way from place to place, hall to hall, field to field so that we could be introduced to her friends, counselors and camp leaders. Tears of separation were shed. As we drove away, I presented Jennifer with what I saw as the inconsistency between the phone calls and the letters and the length and feeling of the goodbyes. Aisling giggled at my question. I waited anxiously for the answer.

Jennifer sighed in exasperation. “Dad,” she said. “Camp was hard but you have to realize, some of what I told you was only venting. I have to vent, you know.” And then she went right back to the Harry Potter book we had brought her and which had been released while she was camping. I appreciated the message. It was hard; I did it; and as a parent, you should be pleased that I vent to you.
Now jump forward with me to Jenny’s first year of high school. She is a day student at a boarding school—Proctor Academy—which is right down the road in Andover. At her school, everyone must go on a three- or four-day backpacking trip at the time they begin school. It is part of the orientation process and a graduation requirement. Jenny is not a backpacker or a camper, and she was a bit nervous about the trip. But you know what? She survived; she even saw a moose.

Now, let’s move to the present, or at least closer to the present. Last year, Jennifer came home one night and told us she wanted to go on something her school participates in called Ocean Classroom. What is it? Sixty-five days on a traditional sailboat, or what I would call a schooner, sailing from Maine to Puerto Rico. I assume you will not be surprised when I tell you that Jenny is not a sailor and not a boat person.

Anyway, we did not try and dissuade her other than to say: “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am,” she said.

Well, sometime last March or so, she applied, was accepted, and informed us she was going to go. And she did it all with confidence. In fact, she told us that for the first time in the history of her school there would be two schooners not just one, and 40 of her closest friends were all going. And actually, two of her very closest friends and a boy upon whom she had a crush were going. But at that point no one knew which boat they would be on. We would not know that until later.

As summer began, the fall seemed like a long time away and we settled into our lives. Aisling was home from college and for Jennifer there was driver’s ed and sleeping late. As the days passed, Susan and Jennifer bought her stuff for the trip—rain gear, flashlights, a knife and more. As the fall got closer we could all feel the tension building.
Jenny found out what boat she would be on. It turned out she would be with one of her very close friends but not a couple of others and not the boy—you know, the crush boy. Then, as the first of September arrived with just 16 days until departure, the stress became palpable. Jennifer was clearly nervous and clearly afraid. She was definitely having second thoughts, and she was starting to get a little quiver in her voice. You know, that little fear sound that could be the start of a cry.

On Sept. 14, we dropped her off at a cabin her school owns in the woods for a three-day orientation; we hugged her and we drove off. We were all a little sad but we also knew we would see her three days later in Maine—Booth Bay Harbor—as we said goodbye and she sailed off. I would imagine that those three days in the cabin in the woods being oriented were her first cup of tea. And drinking that first cup she somehow managed to cut her finger.

On Wednesday, Susan, Aisling and I drove to Maine on a beautiful early fall day. We got to the boat, which had just come out of dry dock—the place they rebuild and repair boats. We saw Jenny; we saw her friends; we saw their families. We listened to the captain and the teachers talk. We checked out both boats. We saw the little area in the bow where Jenny and three of her soon-to-be closest friends would sleep—you know, the bow is the roughest and wettest part of a sailboat.

And we all saw something else—Jenny has these big sort of Tom Cruise “Top Gun” aviator mirror sunglasses, and she did not take them off almost the entire time we were with her. I can tell you why that is—it was because I bet her eyes were red, and there were a whole bunch of tears going on—tears of separation, tears of trepidation, tears of wondering whether she could do it or not. We hugged her and said “have fun.”

Now, parents are a little bit like we were at Colby-Sawyer before we extended our orientation—not always very realistic. As Jenny’s parents we hoped that we would hug her; we would cry a
little; she would cry a little and then it would all be fine and all the fun would start. Yeah, yeah! Well, that just is not realistic. That would take the challenge out of it.

And there was indeed challenge. It turns out that, according to the Coast Guard, Jenny’s boat was not quite ready to come out of dry dock and needed more repairs; thus, rather than sail off into the sunset that day, we bid her adieu, and she had to wait in Maine for a day or so until they got another boat to take her boat’s place. So Jenny and her compatriots temporarily loaded all their stuff into another boat and had to sail around New England until their boat was repaired.

They went from Maine to Mystic, Conn., to Cape Cod, to Boston, back to Cape Cod, back to Boston. Susan drove down to visit in Mystic, and it was a rough day. Jennifer was homesick—as a day student she was not just at sea, but she was also away from home for the first time other than those wonderful weeks at camp. She was also seasick. Remember the stomach stuff—you knew she’d get seasick, right! By the time Susan visited, Jenny had not only thrown up but she had thrown up on her own pants and they—those awful people—had made her clean it up herself. To make matters worse, her best friend on board was not seasick at all! And on top of it all, Jennifer had a cold.

I got to talk to her on the phone and because of the cold and the tears I could barely understand a word—congestion and quiver and even sobbing. Maybe we should just take her home, I thought, but I did not say it.

Jenny told Susan that she wanted to come home, and Susan said she could say that as much as she wanted, but Jenny really did not want that. Amidst a good cry, Jenny agreed.

Jennifer left again; we got a letter. It was no better. She still had a cold; she still was homesick; her stomach was a little better. She drew a frowning face at the bottom. I think Jenny was in the middle of her second cup of tea. But it was not necessarily a happy family.

We got another letter. The tone was only slightly better. Susan had told Jenny that when she felt bad she should put a pencil in her mouth because it would make her smile. In the letter, Jenny said that she had a pencil in her mouth, and it was not helping at all. The face she drew at the bottom of the page was not frowning—it had a straight but squiggly line for a mouth.
Now, because of all the boat problems and the New England cruise, Jenny’s crew and boat were way north of the other one which had wound its way down the coast to the Chesapeake Bay. Back in Boston, the original boat was repaired and Jenny’s crew loaded back on—it turned out the original boat was smaller than the substitute and even leakier. No matter. Jenny and her bunkmates had packed diapers in the top of their bunk area to sop up water. Next for them was to sail straight from Boston to Charleston—eight days at sea!

Right before she left we got a call: she was scared of the eight days; she did not want to be seasick again; and could we please send her some money? Money: a good sign.

Then came the call from Charleston more than one week later. They had gone 500 miles off the coast to avoid hurricanes; she had swum in 10,000 feet of water. She forgot what a shower felt like. She had been strapped to the mast during her watch so she would not fall overboard. She had thrown up three times but that was OK because Hannah somebody or other had thrown up 20 times. The money had come. And so had a package with stuff and a letter from me and a note from her mother on an index card—Susan is not much of a letter writer. Jenny said: “Thanks for the stuff, Mom, and the money and thanks to Dad for the letter. But, Mom, an index card! Come on! I take the time to write you a letter, can’t you do better than an index card?”

Things were looking up.

But then the next call from Georgia came and there were more tears; something involving the crush boy and one of her friends and who knows what, but if I share any more on that score, she will kill me, so I will move on.

Later, we got a wonderful, positive upbeat call. Jenny had settled in at sea and was on her way to Puerto Rico. On Friday, Susan heard from her, and she had been hit by a mast sail, had a fat lip, and had also only recently used her knife for the first time and cut her finger. Despite those adventures, she was happy, having fun, and still excited about seeing us soon. Last night, as if she knew about this talk, she called again: on a stolen phone. The cut was deep. She had been to a clinic and was on antibiotics. The hand felt better. They were in Puerto Rico and taking day sails. She had a lot of homework and tests and reports all coming due—sound familiar? And even though she is stressed, she knows she will get it done. She also has told us she’s served as junior watch commander and has been in charge of sailing the boat into the
harbor and setting it to anchor, i.e., she was responsible for telling everyone else what to do, something she’s very good at.

I believe at this point that Jennifer has had her third cup of tea at sea. I believe she is beginning to understand the world and the culture of which she is a part. Now she is still our daughter, but she is also a key and meaningful part of a crew sailing a ship from Maine to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Now, those people on her boat are her family too. I hope that the same is true for you at Colby-Sawyer. I hope you feel now as we do—that you are family; that you are a key and full member of this college community.

How does Jenny’s story at sea turn out? I don’t know. Like your story here, it is not over yet; it is just reaching a new stage, a stage of hopefully fuller and more complete involvement. I won’t know how this part of her story turns out until I see her again on the Saturday before Thanksgiving at Logan Airport, Nov. 22. And I won’t know how your story at Colby-Sawyer turns out for a couple of years, but I am happy you are here and have all the confidence you will continue to do great things here.

Today we celebrate your total arrival and inclusion in our community, and we celebrate the future with the third cup of tea. I know it won’t always be easy, and I know that if we did not challenge you we would not be doing our job. But I also know you will change us and challenge us and make us better. I am glad you are here. Today, you are family.

Thank you.