

# “All About You.”

*Commencement Address by Joan M. Huber*

Trustees, President Stuebner, proud parents and family members, faculty colleagues and thrilled members of the Class of 2017 – good morning. What an exciting day!

I would first like to thank the Class of 2017 for the great honor of this award. You had many examples of excellent professional educators from which to choose. I am so flattered by your vote of confidence.

**Today is all about you!** So, how did we get here?

First, let me tell you how I got here. Last February, on a Friday afternoon, I got a message that the Academic Vice President wanted to see me in her office the following Monday. Now, that’s the faculty equivalent to being called to the principal’s office, so I was a bit worried. I wondered if I had done something that upset someone, broken some rule or committed some egregious violation. I wracked my brain but couldn’t think of anything, so I contacted my dean and asked if she were aware of anything I might have done that would entail a summons from the Academic Vice President. She told me not to worry. Dr. Alexander, she said, was conducting a poll of faculty members and wanted to talk to professors on the front lines about their perceptions and recommendations for college priorities and ways to use our resources most effectively. The dean said, ‘You’re just one of a group of faculty with whom she will be speaking on Monday.’

What a relief! I spent that weekend thinking a lot about college processes, the challenges in the classroom and recommendations about priorities. I conscientiously made a list of topics to discuss. Monday morning I reported at the appointed time; as I waited in the anteroom, I was curious about the other faculty members who were going to join me for the meeting and thought it odd that no one else was there yet. The administrative assistant came and said Dr. Alexander was ready to see me so I went into the office, expecting to see fellow faculty, but to my surprise, there were none. The Academic Vice President was waiting for me, and to my dismay, President Stuebner was there, along with the Academic Dean, Dr. Hayward. OH...MY...GOSH! I looked at the three of them, and with great clarity I realized ... *my dean lied to me!*

There was no poll happening. I was all alone – I must be in a lot of trouble! I was in a complete panic. At that point one of them [and I don't remember which one] congratulated me and said I had won the Jack Jensen Award. I just looked dumbfounded from one to the other and couldn't respond. I could not process the information; it just didn't compute. As I looked from one to the other, I think they were concerned because I must have looked shocked, and Dr. Alexander kept saying, "This is a good thing! This is a good thing!" When the synapses in my brain began to recover, my ungracious first response was [and I'm paraphrasing here], "Oh, darn, is that the one where you have to make the Commencement speech?" To which Dr. Alexander replied again, "This is a good thing! This is a good thing!"

So I realized I would have to prepare a speech.

The challenge with writing a Commencement speech is to say something that is memorable, witty, significant, motivating and a tribute that sends you off with great inspiration and enthusiasm. So, like a good academic, I went home and Googled it. Did you know there are whole websites dedicated to how to write a Commencement speech? I found an interesting website about the 10 best commencement speeches of all time, and I read all 10. I read Winston Churchill's speech at the Harrow School in 1941 about the rising perils of Naziism. I read George Marshall's speech to Harvard in 1947 on rebuilding Europe, and I read John F. Kennedy's speech at American University in 1963 about world peace. None of them helped. I found another website of the 10 best commencement speakers [interesting that those two lists are not the same], and I read all of them as well. Steve Jobs' speech at Stanford, Conan O'Brien's speech at Harvard...Steven Colbert...Bill Gates...J. K. Rowling.... All interesting, but no help. Then I found a website about the elements of a successful speech: a dynamic introduction, a motivating conclusion and as short an interval as possible between the two. In the end, I decided to go with a subject I know well and one that is appropriate for this moment in time.

I teach pathophysiology – the study of disease processes in the body. I know that right now, your catecholamine levels are elevated; epinephrine, norepinephrine, GABA and dopamine are coursing through your blood vessels. The epinephrine means you are readying for "fight or flight;" you are excited and tense. Your hearts are racing, your blood pressure is elevated and your attention span is significantly shortened. The

norepinephrine releases the three-year old in your brain – you are deliriously happy and you are having trouble controlling it. The three-year-old in your head is going, “Look at me, Mom and Dad, look where I am!” An inhibitory neurotransmitter known as GABA is telling you to slow down and don’t get carried away; you are thinking, “I don’t want to get too excited, I have to remember when to stand and when to sit and when I’m supposed to walk across the stage. I don’t want to make a mistake, or trip, or embarrass myself, so I have to slow down.” It is the voice of caution. The dopamine is a “feel-good” neurotransmitter making you feel really happy and euphoric, almost like a runner’s high. So you are feeling excited... tense... delirious... cautious... and euphoric – all at the same time! You have severe attention deficit right now and you can’t focus at all. You’re really not listening. And, you won’t remember anything I say. Actually, I take some comfort in that. That takes some of the pressure off.

**Today is all about you.** So how did *you* get here today? For most, 17 academic years ago, your families dropped you off at the local kindergarten to begin your scholarly journey. Since then, it’s been all about you – you have been the center of attention for a lot of people – besides your parents, grandparents and siblings, your teachers, coaches, instructors, guidance counselors, college faculty, and academic advisers have worked tirelessly to prepare you for today. And you have worked hard to get here. Make no mistake – college is difficult. There’s a reason there are fewer of you sitting here today than started four years ago. But, no one gets here alone. You have succeeded because of the love and support of all those people behind you, and the knowledge and expertise of the faculty on either side of you today who are dedicated, hard-working professional educators. You may not always agree, but they were always rooting for you, being tough when necessary, and always supporting your success. Most important, you are here today because of each other. Colby-Sawyer has served as the crossroad that brought the 275 of you together from 18 states and 10 foreign countries. You might never have known each other, but now you are forever joined by a common bond. You have learned to work together, to use your resources and to accomplish great things as a team. You arrived here as 275 new faces and are leaving four years later as a community of learners.

Last fall, I was at an Open House recruiting for the Class of 2021. Some students joined a number of members of the faculty and we answered questions from the applicants and their families. One parent asked how hard the work was, how competitive the

students were and wondered if their child would fit in. Without any hesitation, one of the seniors responded, “Oh, no competition. We support each other. We help each other. We all work together or we don’t succeed. I am lucky enough to go to school with my 23 best friends.” Well, that just took my breath away. What a testament to the power of Colby-Sawyer! [You are my hero, Michaela!].

Look around you, folks. Under the tent with you today are your confidants, your future wedding attendants, your financial advisers, your marital counselors, your life coaches and your future children’s godparents. You are joined for life. You are each other’s most powerful resource. You’ve learned that, together, you can accomplish anything. Don’t lose touch. Be there for each other. In today’s audience are my college roommate and her husband who was also a classmate. Although we haven’t lived together for 45 years, we are still a constant presence in each other’s lives, have celebrated all the important events, shared all the disappointments, and we will always support each other. I wish for you the same good fortune. [Love you, Nancy & Greg!]

As you prepare for your magic walk across the stage today that will change you from a student as you enter on the right, to an alumnus as you depart on the left, receive your diploma and the acknowledgement of what you have learned, but be comfortable in knowing how much more there is to learn. Be life-long learners and continue to grow as individuals.

**Today is all about you.** You are making a lot of people very happy today. Dr. Nicholas Christakis, a physician and sociologist at Harvard University, has been doing research for more than 20 years with large cohort populations studying the effects of social forces on health. His research suggests that happiness, like the common cold, is contagious and spreads from person to person. When people who are close to us, both in terms of physical proximity and social ties (like family and friends) become happier, then we do, too. For example, when a person’s good friend becomes happier, Christakis’ data shows that the people who have day-to-day contact with that person will also become happier by about 15 percent.

Now, just do the math: There are 275 very happy people who will walk across the stage, and 275 happy groups of friends and family who support you. That’s a lot of happiness! But it gets even better. Christakis’ research shows that the effect can

surpass direct links and reach a third degree of separation. Your family and friends' coworkers, friends, neighbors, cousins and colleagues become happier, even when they don't know the source of the happiness directly. So now let's add together the 275 graduates, their families and friends, the faculty and staff of Colby-Sawyer, all the coworkers, friends, neighbors, cousins and colleagues of all those people and you can see that the numbers add up pretty quickly. Graduates, I hope you are proud of yourselves. You have made many people all over the world very happy today.

One of Christakis' theses, that you can judge a person by his or her friends, might carry much more weight than we ever imagined. The author Alex Haley wrote that the key to success was to "Find the good – and praise it." So simple... just find the good, and praise it. This class of graduates makes it very easy to find the good. In this class are good athletes, good artists, good writers, good dancers, good musicians, good leaders and good friends ...as well as good procrastinators, good negotiators and good worriers. Going forward, you *will* be good colleagues, good employees, good neighbors, good citizens and good alumni of Colby-Sawyer College. The Colby-Sawyer graduates of 2017 should take great comfort in knowing that you might someday be judged by your association with your fellow graduates.

**Today is all about you.** You have the love and support of your families and friends, the knowledge and tools you have acquired at Colby-Sawyer and you have each other. Now go out and make your way in the world. Take risks. Learn from your mistakes. Show 'em what you are made of. Knock 'em dead! Break a leg! Because, starting tomorrow, your future ... **it's all about you!**