

Dragonflies on a Lemonade Road

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Welcome...Trustees, President Stuebner, honored guests, faculty, staff, students, families, and especially the Class of 2019.

For those who don't know me, I have been a professor for 21 years now and am a member of the wonderful Natural and Environmental Sciences Department here at Colby-Sawyer. My Ph.D. is in Pharmacology and Toxicology and my students call me Dr. B. I teach Intro Biology, anatomy and physiology, epidemiology, human biology, toxicology, and lots of microbiology.

Basically, I'm known for teaching about diseases. More often than not, these scenarios that I teach end with me saying the same thing ... "and then you die".

I would love to talk about things like that but they wouldn't let me have a screen and projector to show you all of the appropriately disturbing pictures... so I had to think of something else to say...

So today, I want to talk to you about the road you have traveled and the road ahead. Who does an academic think of when talking about roads to travel? Robert Frost:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

That that's all I'm going to say about Robert Frost... except that you should consider traveling a path designed for you and you shouldn't blindly follow others.

Several years ago, I was at a Convocation (the opening of the academic year ceremony), under a big tent like this one. I don't remember a word of what the speaker said... but I DO remember a dragonfly. It was high up in the tent and looking for a way out... I remember thinking that the dragonfly was a lot like the new freshmen sitting in that tent, who'd just arrived on campus to begin their academic adventure as college students. Ahead of them was the choosing of majors, the changing of majors, the weighing of career paths... and they'd encounter a few roadblocks along the way,

but would also have some victories, until finally, in 4 years, they would find their way out into the larger world...

If only someone could help that little dragonfly to find his way, to offer a kind of a roadmap so it could find the right path...

Graduates, in the last 4 years here at Colby-Sawyer, advisors, professors and staff have offered you wisdom and guidance... and now, it's time to find your own path. Life doesn't come with a roadmap... but even if it did, the unexpected happens and sends you on a detour. Or maybe it appears to be a detour and it's actually the right path. It's hard to know sometimes.

You came here 4 years ago with big dreams of your future, and in the ever-so-slightly-altered words of Pink:

Every night you lied in bed
The brightest colors filled your head
A million dreams were keeping you awake
You'd think of what the world could be
A vision of the one you see
A million dreams is all it's gonna take
A million dreams for the world you're gonna make

Hopefully, with your diploma in hand, you will leave here today full of dreams of the world you're gonna make.

So you need to consider your options... what path will you take? What turns will you make? How will you make your dreams into a reality?

According to Tom Cochrane (or Rascal Flatts) Life is a highway...

Life's like a road that you travel on
When there's one day here and the next day gone
Sometimes you bend and sometimes you stand
Sometimes you turn your back to the wind

And as you go down your particular highway, you need to choose to bend or to stand...

Why? Because the road will not be a perfect, just-paved road. There will be pot holes and frost heaves (especially in New Hampshire!). Things will happen unexpectedly that will be both good and bad. It's how you deal with these unexpected occurrences that will determine your success in life.

Your education here has given you the tools to navigate your road... ways to decide which turn to take... the ability to question others who suggest paths to you... ways to think, be inquisitive, be logical, and ask for help when you need it..

So you will leave here today, on your own particular pathway... finding the best route to get you to your ultimate goal and life of fulfillment.

But, what happens when something goes wrong? If you plan, double check, make all of the right choices and something goes wrong... what do you do?

Sugarland says:

Life don't go quite like you planned it
We try so hard to understand it
Irrefutable, indisputable
Fact is pssh
It happens

When you are going down your road of life and you hit a frost heave, come across an avalanche... what do you do?

Let me give you a couple of stories of the best laid paths taking drastic turns...

Back in 1928, there was a bacteriologist in the United Kingdom named Alexander Fleming. He was a scientist, thanks to a series of fortuitous circumstances, and he was working with a microbe, *Staphylococcus aureus*. Now, he wasn't the neatest scientist and he went off for a month-long vacation. During that time, he left his stacks of petri dishes growing bacteria all over his lab.

When he returned, he noticed mold growing on one of his bacterial cultures.

Now, all of you who have just gone through Capstone, can probably appreciate how frustrating it can be when things don't go as you planned... Do you throw it all out and start over? Do you give up?

In the words of Alexander Fleming: "I have been trying to point out that in our lives chance may have an astonishing influence and, if I may offer advice to the young laboratory worker, it would be this-never neglect an extraordinary appearance or happening. It may be-usually is, in fact-a false alarm that leads to nothing, but may on the other hand be the clue provided by fate to lead you to some important advance."

Luckily, Fleming noticed that wherever the mold was growing, the bacteria he was studying, wasn't. It looked like the mold was killing the bacteria.

To quote him again:

"One sometimes finds what one is not looking for. When I woke up just after dawn on Sept. 28, 1928, I certainly didn't plan to revolutionize all medicine by discovering the world's first antibiotic, or bacteria killer. But I guess that was exactly what I did."

The mold contaminating his bacterial cultures was making a chemical that was killing the bacteria and we NOW know that mold-produced chemical as penicillin.

Fleming said:

"[The discovery of penicillin] was a triumph of accident, a fortunate occurrence which happened while I was working on a purely academic bacteriological problem."

What would life be like today without the discovery of antibiotics? Until Fleming's discovery of penicillin, more soldiers in war died of infections rather than battle wounds. Imagine what would have happened if Fleming had gotten mad about the mold contamination and had just thrown it all away.

So when life gives you a bucket of lemons as you travel down your road, what will you do? Make lemonade (as Elbert Hubbard, American writer, publisher, artist, and philosopher) suggested?

Or in the words of Bill Watterson (creator of the Calvin and Hobbes comic): When life gives you lemons, chuck it right back.”

It’s hard to figure out what the right path can be. I remember, believe me. I was a biology major with a chemistry minor and a special ed minor because I was also getting my certification to teach. I had always loved science and was going to become a high school science teacher, but a couple of things happened that changed that plan.

First, going into my sophomore year, I received a research fellowship and worked for the summer on finding a vaccine for *Cytomegalovirus* at a research institution with some amazing scientists. That fellowship turned into a job that lasted throughout my undergraduate years. The experience I got from that job was life altering. I had never considered research as a career option.

Then, one of my cousins, who had always been like a big brother to me, died from an extremely rare type of heart cancer. He was 26. Shortly after that, both of my grandfathers died after battles with stomach cancer. That’s a lot for a 20 year old to deal with. For a while there, it felt like it was raining lemons.

To this day, I am sensitive to the fact that life is short and can be cut even shorter in the blink of an eye. These words of Tim McGraw resonate with me: and maybe it’s not such a bad idea, when “you get the chance, to live like you were dying.”

I toyed around with the idea of going to medical school, but decided I wanted to find a cure for cancer, and that road led me to five years of graduate school in Hanover. It’s a little funny because I did end up at Dartmouth Medical School but to get a Ph.D., not an M.D.

I threw myself into the world of academic research but somewhere between years three and four of grad school, I started to get burned out. I began to realize that in order to be successful in my field I would have to dedicate my life to this work. It would be a 7 day, way-over-40 hour week, every single week. This was not the right career for me as I wouldn’t be able to have the work-life balance I sought.

After some soul searching, I knew I had to once again, change my path. So, I decided to go back to my interest in teaching and combine it with my new research skills and

my knowledge and became a professor. Did I give up on my dreams to cure cancer? No, I really don't think so because now I can do it by inspiring a new generation of scientists. Maybe one of you out there will find the silver bullet to cure cancer or find a vaccine for HIV or discover a new medicine that bacteria can't become resistant to, maybe you'll go into politics and pass bills for research funding or, perhaps, you'll become a billionaire like Bill Gates and work to eradicate disease through vaccination programs... YOU, all of you, are my lemonade, and I like lemonade.

What will you make of your life, I wonder. No one knows yet, but this is what I wish for you, in the words of Jason Mraz:

May you have auspiciousness and causes of success
May you have the confidence to always do your best
May you take no effort in your being generous
Sharing what you can, nothing more nothing less
May you know the meaning of the word happiness
May you always lead from the beating in your chest
May you be treated like an esteemed guest
May you get to rest, may you catch your breath
And may the best of your todays be the worst of your tomorrows
And may the road less paved be the road that you follow

I want you to have it all.

So, dragonflies, as you fly off today... pick good paths, but make your own when you have to; be brilliant and make wise choices; when life gives you lemons, make some lemonade; and remember to always come back to your home, here on this hill.