

Remarks to the Class of 2020

*President Susan D. Stuebner*

This Commencement ceremony and its rituals provide an opportunity to reflect on your journey to this point and to look forward to your next steps. Today, we celebrate Colby-Sawyer's history, we honor those whose service and leadership exemplify its values, and we anticipate the promise of your bright futures.

Today, we will also honor three individuals who have led extraordinary careers in education and as a philanthropist. Dr. Pat Anderson and Ann Page Stecker have each devoted over forty years of their lives to educating, mentoring and advising Colby-Sawyer students. Natalie Davis Rooke has exemplified generosity and selflessness throughout her life in support of numerous organizations including Colby-Sawyer.

One of Colby-Sawyer's traditions is to ask the Jack Jensen Award recipient, the college's highest teaching honor, to offer the Commencement Address. This tradition exemplifies our core strength at Colby-Sawyer and the enormous and transformative power of the relationships between our students, faculty and staff. We look forward to hearing from Professor of Psychology Lynn Garrioch in a bit.

As your president, however, I am supposed to impart some words of wisdom as well.

Your class will always have a special spot in my memory as we arrived at Colby-Sawyer at the same time. And regrettably, your four years have been marked by overcoming challenges, most recently with COVID-19 interrupting your senior year and causing you to finish your educations remotely and preventing us from being together today. But you are a class that is epitomized by resilience. You hung in there as the college found its way financially, having to make some difficult decisions during your time here. And even enduring an especially late Mountain Day your junior year on which there was snow on the trail!

Despite all of the challenges, there are many positives as well, I ask that you to think about the many things from Colby-Sawyer that you will carry with you.

Four summers ago, I attended a week-long conference for new presidents at which I met some amazing people. I want to borrow a thought from one of my colleagues, Dr. Paula A. Johnson, president of Wellesley College. In her first commencement speech, she implored her students to do the following: "Always err in favor of human connection. It's in relationships – in those connections – that magic happens. It is often where we find the inspiration, where we connect most deeply with the best parts of ourselves."

Here at Colby-Sawyer, your education has been fostered through the power of relationships – the friends you have made, the faculty who have invested time and support in your success, the staff members who served as your job supervisor or friendly face in the dining hall. You undoubtedly have also learned a great deal from those individuals with whom you do not agree and who see the world differently than you do. What I have come to learn during my years at Colby-Sawyer is that the relationships built here endure and they serve as a great foundation upon which you can build and pursue your dreams. Throughout the COVID-19 weeks when you were forced to finish off campus, I was awed by the creative ways you found to stay connected to one another and maintain your

relationships. As you head off to new adventures, find strength in the relationships you have built here and continue to draw upon one another as you face your new adventures and next challenges.

Here in New London, we are graced by beauty every day. I imagine each of you has been moved by some aspect of this beautiful landscape, whether it be the profile of Mount Kearsarge at the edge of our campus, the beautiful sunrises and sunsets, the sound of snow crunching under your boots, or the abundant stars. As you move on from this special place, finding that beauty on a daily basis may be more difficult. Remember, though, what Henry David Thoreau said: "It is not what you look at that matters, it is what you see." I implore you not only to look for beauty every day, but to see it – and help others to see it, as well.

There is a proliferation of information in our world that all too often is applied in more simplistic and inaccurate ways than ever. At Colby-Sawyer, you learned how to think critically, to reason, to see connections between disciplines, to question on what basis an argument was made, and to imagine and develop your own contributions to knowledge. Albert Einstein said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." In a world that bombards us with information and data often used to make arguments that support freighted points of view, we need you to add your voices to the conversation – we need you to question, to seek answers, to have the courage to speak up and share your perspectives and knowledge just as you have done throughout your time here.

Today, we send you off into a world that is, quite frankly, polarized. During your time at Colby-Sawyer, you have confronted differences. Think about how many times you realized that not everyone sees the world the way you do. Sometimes our instinct is to see those differences as threats but resist that tendency. Malcolm Gladwell, author of many thought-provoking books including *Outliers*, *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*, said, "The key to good decision making is not knowledge. It is understanding. We are swimming in the former. We are desperately lacking in the latter." At Colby-Sawyer, you not only gained considerable knowledge, you have practiced understanding. As you go forward, continue to respect other's points of views, to seek to understand, to complement one another's various talents and backgrounds, and to illustrate to those around you that differences do not mean we have to distrust.

Believe and trust in who *you* have grown to be and will continue to become. I know each of you is ready for what comes next.

Finally, each of you has had someone who supported you along the way ... a parent, a family member, a best friend, a faculty mentor or staff member ... The fortunate among you had more than one champion who celebrated your successes and supported you through your challenges. Many of them are cheering you on today either in person or remotely. Be sure to take time to thank them for their support.

Thank you, Class of 2020, and best wishes.