

2019

105th Convocation 2019 Address - Of Giraffes and Mission Statements

Virginia Anderson
Connecticut College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/convo>

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Virginia, "105th Convocation 2019 Address - Of Giraffes and Mission Statements" (2019). *Convocation Addresses*. 22.
<https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/convo/22>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Communications at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Convocation Addresses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Of Giraffes and Mission Statements / www.govtrack.us

**Remarks by Virginia Anderson, Associate Professor of Theater
105th Convocation
August 26, 2019**

Before I begin, I would like to prime you for a bit of a scavenger hunt. I'm a professor of theater, but for this speech, in true liberal arts fashion, I draw upon multiple areas of study, including – but not limited to - American Studies, Classics, Environmental Science, History, Linguistics, Political Science, Theater (yes), and Zoology. See if you can catch them all.

I don't remember getting my grandfather's mug.

But I do remember that it was—that it *is* special.

It's white, average-sized, and printed on the outside is a blue circle with a red interior. Emerging from that blue circle is the long neck of a giraffe. Yellow with blue where black or brown spots should be, it looks out at the viewer, and if I'm not mistaken, the giraffe has an eyebrow raised. Can a giraffe raise its eyebrow? Well, this one does, and almost in a challenge.

I don't pick this mug up often enough. I don't want to stain it with coffee and I don't want my 4-year old to knock it over with one of the projectile toys that so often permeate the airspace of my kitchen.

But when I do pick it up, when I make the effort to look inside of it, under the dust and random dog or cat hair that somehow got inside of it, I see a message printed on the bottom. It reads, all in caps, “STICK YOUR NECK OUT TODAY!”

My grandfather, Cleve Anderson, was a chemical engineer for over 35 years. He ultimately risked some aspects of his career by advocating against the unsafe storage of plutonium in Nevada's Yucca mountain. I rarely saw my granddad's professional side. I do have one vague memory, though—something that apparently stood out to him, too. I was about 5 years old, [and] I was drawing at our kitchen table. I remember he was worried about something. I would later learn that he and my father were talking about how he could best communicate his deep concern about the impact of precarious storage of plutonium on the natural environment. According to my grandfather, after a few minutes, I interrupted them by asking helpfully (I'm sure), “like this?” and holding up a crayon drawing of three brightly colored balloons.

A version of that drawing would later appear on the back of his book, “The Nuclear Threat That Dwarfs the Bomb: Plutonium Poisoning of the Southwest Water Supply.” He used the carefully prepared artwork of his 5-year-old granddaughter to break down a complicated idea about shared responsibility for the safe storage of nuclear waste. He made it accessible. Clear communication

was important to him so that environmentally friendly policies and procedures could be developed across positions of power.

Anyway, my grandad's work later was recognized by an organization called The Giraffe Project. That's where the mug came from. Let's consider its mission statement and goals:

The mission of the Giraffe Heroes Project is to move people to stick their necks out for the common good, and to give them tools to succeed. Founder Ann Medlock's strategy for the Project was simple—she would find unknown heroes, commend them as “Giraffes” with a capital G, and get their stories told on radio, television, and in print. Giraffe stories would show the public that there was headway being made on the problems of the world, that there were individuals who had solutions—and the courage to move into action. The stories would feed people's souls, inform their attitudes, and get them moving on public problems that mattered to them.

I think I was about 10 years old when my grandad received this recognition. I don't think I was aware that it happened and I don't know what it meant to him at the time. But I know he saved this giraffe mug. And now, 30 years later, here it is.

Giraffes are pretty amazing creatures. I've always liked them. In fact, I've always liked all cloven-hooved animals. Goats, alpacas, springbok, you name it. But somehow, giraffes have stood out.

As we launch the 2019-2020 academic year, I think there's a lot of inspiration to be found in the giraffe.

First, let's consider etymology and binomial nomenclature. The scientific, species name for giraffe is *Giraffa Camelopardalis*:

Medieval Latin *cam?lopardus*, from Greek *kam?lopardalis*, from *kam?los* camel + *pardalis*leopard, because the giraffe was thought to have a head like a camel's and spots like a leopard's]

So, camels, we have a connection.

Second, a giraffe's entry into the world reminds me a bit of starting out in college. They might have a rough beginning, but it's worth it. Their biological mothers stand when they give birth, causing the newborn giraffe to fall five to six feet to the ground. Ouch. This drop helps to break the umbilical cord, fostering independence from the get go. Within an hour, the giraffe makes it to their feet and it's off walking, exploring the new world in which it finds itself. That doesn't magically happen of course—that first hour is full of struggle and confusion but over time, the young giraffe becomes a part of a group in which the giraffes look out for one another. New students, you've made that metaphorical drop and after a few days of acclimation, I'm proud to be among the first to welcome you to our herd. Actually, a group of giraffes is called a tower.

Third, they have a HUGE heart.

A giraffe's heart is two feet long and weighs about 25 pounds. It makes sense, of course, as giraffes have such long necks and need to keep blood flowing to the brain.?

This connection between the heart and the brain makes sense to me, too. And you know, it's what we need now. Think about what is happening in this country, in this world. Think about what matters to you. We need to think critically and with an open mind (the brain), and we need to lead with compassion and care for others (the heart). It's what my grandfather did in regard to the environment and it's what that eyebrow raising giraffe challenges us to do today.

My grandad had a mission. The Giraffe Project has a mission. Connecticut College has one, too:

Connecticut College educates students to put the liberal arts into action as citizens in a global society.

I'm speaking to all of you when I ask, what does that mean? What does such a mission statement mean for you as students? And what does that mean for you, my colleagues, fellow faculty, staff, and administrators?

What does it actually mean *today*? And perhaps more importantly, what **can** it mean?

The Connecticut College mission isn't *just* to embrace a mindset of critical, cross-disciplinary thinking. But what do we do with that mindset? We strive to put it into *action*. We stick our necks out.

The Connecticut College mission statement needs to be more than a mission *statement*. It needs to be an embodied experience. Connecticut College students, your education *will* be founded in the liberal arts. You are here and we will support you and challenge you and help you to find—and raise—your voice. Faculty and staff colleagues, your teaching, your scholarship, your daily work, and your camaraderie contributes to that liberal arts education. But I couldn't live with myself if I left you with the impression that that is enough. Not here. Not now. We ALL need to put the liberal arts—our liberal arts—into actual action.

“STICK YOUR NECK OUT TODAY” this mug encourages from the inside – not “stick your neck out” [period]. “Stick your neck out TODAY.”

There are so many ways to take meaningful action, and it doesn't need to be a grandiose project. Of course, I encourage you to get to know and work closely with community organizations; to think critically about representations of race, gender, and class in the art that you create; to learn a foreign language not only to communicate your own needs but to understand the nuanced needs of others. I encourage you to embrace every opportunity you have to work with science and scientists.

Engagement with a global society, while at the heart of the Connecticut College mission, is not enough. Policy determines our future. Even voting, whether for SGA President, FSCC, Staff

Council, school board, state senator, or any number of other elected positions, while obviously important, is not *enough*.

A former congressional staffer recently told a friend of mine, “I think constituents often forget that representatives **>aren’t independent** actors and are **supposed to** represent them, and they can’t do that if they don’t know what their constituents are thinking.”

So, we stick our necks out. We let them know.

Your voice—your experience and your ability to think critically and compassionately—matters. Your voice matters in the classroom and it matters at this college. It matters in this country, no matter where in the world you are from.

I’m going to invite you to do something that feels counter intuitive for me as a theater practitioner: if you happen to have a smart phone with you, I invite you—I even encourage you—to take it out. I can’t prevent you from checking your email or your favorite social media account, but I hope you’ll stay with me.

If you have a smart phone with you, go to govtrack.us—the address is in your program—it’s part of my speech’s title. Enter your zip code if you live in the United States. You can also enter the Connecticut College zip code, which is 06320. Scroll down and see the faces of the individual people who are representing you.

Again, how can we possibly expect these people to represent us if we don’t tell them what’s important to us?

There’s some social anxiety around making phone calls these days. I admit I feel that way sometimes. If that’s you, you’re in luck—after business hours you’re highly likely to get voicemail. And in a world of data analysis, voicemails count as much as any direct phone conversation.

Augusto Boal said that theatre is a rehearsal for real-world action for actors and audiences. I would add that performance offers a rehearsal of community. I hope that the following live performance of a very simple action will empower you. I present: a performance inspired by Connecticut College’s mission and values.

- Go to govtrack.us
- Enter my zip code
- I won’t put the call on speaker because of laws against recording someone without their explicit permission.
 - Good afternoon, Senator Blumenthal.

- My name is Virginia Anderson I'm a voting constituent from zip code 06357.
- Calling to encourage your **vocal** support of LGBTQIA rights.
- I look forward to following your actions in this area. Thank you.

That's it. It can be that simple. I could have gotten more specific by encouraging the senator to champion the Equality Act of 2019—which you may or may not know about. I could have shared more about my personal beliefs, I could have drawn upon my expertise and experience, but while helpful, it's not necessary to influence how your representatives will, well, represent you.

When you make that call, you're sticking your neck out. You're taking action. And you can do it every day.

We all have so much going on, and you might not know what you would call about. But I bet there is something. And your personal mission and values will evolve through and with your education and experience over the years ahead. How exciting, and how challenging.

Shared governance is almost hidden within the stated mission and values of Connecticut College. It has the fraught potential to become an empty term, almost jargon—unless we make it mean something.

My son sometimes takes toys from his 2-year-old sister, justifying, “sharing is caring.” I have to admit, he's not wrong. Sharing *is* caring. Shared governance is caring. Caring enough to take thoughtful, respectful, informed action.

For my course, “Theater of the AIDS Epidemic,” I ask my students to interview someone who was at least 18 years old in the year 1981—the year generally thought to mark the entry of the AIDS epidemic into public consciousness. Eighteen-years-old—roughly the age of many of you. Interview subjects weren't *necessarily* directly affected (though many were), but everyone had memories of fear and stigma as they recalled how the epidemic played out in the news and in TV or movies. Inevitably, interview questions begin along the lines of “what was it like” and almost always, a similar, sometimes sub-textual question emerges: What did you do?

So my friends, old and new, I implore you, as difficult as it can be, as busy as I know you'll be, pay attention to what's happening within and beyond the boundaries of this campus...so that 38 years from now, when people ask you what it was like to live through this remarkable period of turbulence in our nation and in our world, you'll have a ready answer. And consider, too, what you will say when you are asked—and you *will* be asked, “What did you do?” I wish for you an answer you'll be proud to give.

I also wish I could remember receiving this mug from my grandfather. I wish I could remember that moment. I wish I could tell him how cool I thought it was that he was recognized for making

a difference in the lives of others while striving to positively affect our natural world. How much I admire him for taking risks and speaking up.

I can't do that.

What I can do, though, is reflect on the etymological bond between giraffes and camels.

And together, we can embrace not only Connecticut College's mission and values but, through education and community, we can define—and live by—our own. And today, and every day, we can find ways to stick our necks out.

Thank you.

(Remarks as prepared by Virginia Anderson.)