

2015

Senior Class Speaker 97th Commencement Address

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Remarks to the Class of 2015

By Senior Class Speaker Caroline Lazar

May 17, 2015

Good morning. What an honor it is to speak before you all.

I'd like to take a moment before I begin to thank the faculty members who have led our academic exploration and the College staff members who give more of themselves than we ever recognize. Thank your friends, without whom we would all sink, and thank anyone who sacrificed anything for you to be here today because it has been a gift, an honor, and a privilege to be the recipient of a Connecticut College education. Mom, dad, thank you. I'm sorry I turned out so weird.

As a young person, I wanted to be a great deal many things- a philosopher, Cleopatra, Toni Morrison, and once, in an instance of heatstroke on the beach, I wanted to be a hot dog. So far, I have been a Camel, a person of dubious athletic ability, and a writer of absurdist fiction (the latter of which should come as no surprise given the hot dog incident). I am also proud to be a graduating member of the Connecticut College Class of 2015.

We made it! Isn't that what people like to say? We did it! We made it! I wonder if we have not "made it," as so many speakers of commencements past have suggested, but if we have arrived. We have arrived at a moment in our nation's history, and our college's history, when indifference will no longer do. We have faced and will continue to face issues of equity in our world. We, as a new generation of thinkers, armed with the tools attained through our Connecticut College educations, should be prepared to take up the mantle of leadership in working toward those elusive answers to impossible questions.

But what can we do fulfill our generation's responsibility to understand the most conscious applications of our crafts and, in doing so, not shy away from confrontation of difficult truths? The answer, to me, is to bring a moral center to whatever we choose to

do and whichever field we may enter. I am not suggesting the creation of art, work, or research that transmits a right vs. wrong message or espouses (God forbid) a *lesson*. “True art,” the novelist John Gardner once said, “is by its nature moral. We recognize true art by its careful, thoroughly honest search for and analysis of views.” I am calling for lives lived and art created in that honest fashion. Moral work weighs and considers, asks difficult questions, rakes us over coals, shakes us to our core, and makes us, rightfully, as uncomfortable as possible.

Honest and hard examination of our world strikes me as the essence of morality, through any means a person is best equipped. Perhaps obviously, I find fiction to be truer and more investigative than anything in this world. To write fiction, one must keenly understand mankind well enough to convince us of a character’s humanity. The undertaking of that understanding, that empathy for our fellow man, is not only essential to fiction but to all true art and life. The only way to keep hold of your kindness is to give it away freely.

Connecticut College has exposed me to incredible working artists (primarily through the English Department’s biennial Klagsbrun Symposium), providing access to example and making my aspirations look less like pipe-dreams and more like real, true possibilities for the future. Novelist Colum McCann, who spoke at the college in November, encouraged us to “write what we *want* to know,” reinforcing the Symposium’s mission to marry the creative arts with moral vision.

I’m suggesting that you pour your dreams in concrete and harden them into true possibilities and plans. As a child, my parents, two of the greatest thinkers I’ve had the pleasure of knowing, always asked me, “Why not you? Someone has to be this or earn that or go there or do that. If you want it badly enough and are willing to work as hard as it takes, why not you?” So, at the risk of sounding like an overly optimistic freshman (Ugh, 2018, am I right?), I have to ask you all today, “Why *not* you?” Learn the painful but necessary art of selling yourself. Get hungrier each time you hear the word NO. Come to understand that a good sense of humor is not merely helpful but necessitous.

Pour gasoline on the fire in your belly but never lose sight of humility and compassion, those twin pillars of humanity without which there is no success.

If you can't wrap your mind around a specific future, email your heroes. Ask what makes them tick. I wrote to a few of mine:

MacArthur Genius George Saunders said, "Be kind."

Emmy Award winner Jack Handey said, "Be lucky."

Nobel Prize recipient Toni Morrison said, "Please stop contacting me."

But perhaps my favorite piece of advice is Steve Martin's famous line: "Be so good they can't ignore you," which, to me, has always been a reminder to work harder.

I'd love to conclude by imparting to you a sense that our story is complete but life just isn't a cleanly plotted piece of fiction where everything wraps up neatly and you get to be Toni Morrison or Cleopatra or a hot dog just like that, and that's a good thing. Work is good. Hard work is better. The end of our time at Connecticut College does not signify an end to discovery nor does it mean an end to progress. We have arrived and are poised at the edge of a new era of creation.

For who was it that said, "If there's a book you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it"? Ah yes. Toni Morrison.

Thank you.

(Remarks as prepared by Caroline Lazar '15.)