

# FOREVER BEGIN

REMARKS AT THE SKIDMORE COLLEGE 99<sup>TH</sup> COMMENCEMENT  
22 MAY 2010

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PRESIDENT

PARENTS, TRUSTEES, MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY AND STAFF, HONORED GUESTS, AND MEMBERS OF THE CLASS OF 2010, LET ME TOO EXTEND MY WELCOME TO EVERYONE IN ATTENDANCE TODAY AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE'S 99<sup>TH</sup> COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES.

MOST OF YOU WHO ARE GRADUATING TODAY BEGAN YOUR SKIDMORE CAREERS IN THE SUMMER OF 2006 WITH THAT YEAR'S COMMON TEXT, *LIFE ON THE COLOR LINE*, BY GREGORY HOWARD WILLIAMS, WHO JOINS YOU IN RECEIVING A DEGREE TODAY. AS YOU WILL RECALL, AND AS OTHERS WILL HEAR IN A FEW MOMENTS, IN 1953 AT THE AGE OF TEN, GREGORY AND HIS BROTHER WERE THRUST INTO A SOCIAL WORLD PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN TO THEM WHERE THEY HAD TO REINVENT THEMSELVES, IF THEY WERE TO SURVIVE. THAT NEW LIFE WAS DEFINED NOT ONLY BY POVERTY BUT ALSO BY RACE AND RACISM – ISSUES THAT CONTINUE TO HAUNT OUR NATION.

I DO NOT AT ALL INTEND TO EQUATE GREGORY WILLIAMS' NEW BEGINNING WITH YOUR OWN TRANSITION WHEN YOU FIRST CAME TO SKIDMORE. BUT THERE ARE ANALOGIES. SOME OF YOU CAME FROM OTHER COUNTRIES – AS INDICATED BY THE FLAGS FLANKING THE STAGE. YOU TOO ENTERED A NEW AND UNFAMILIAR CONTEXT – A PLACE WHERE YOU DID NOT YET BELONG AND WHERE YOUR PREVIOUS IDENTITY WAS PLACED IN QUESTION. YOU TOO WERE FORCED TO START OVER, TO BECOME A BEGINNER. YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO FIND THINGS. THE LOCAL DIALECT WAS UNFAMILIAR. YOU WONDERED HOW YOU WOULD BE TREATED BY OTHERS. YOU DIDN'T YET KNOW YOUR ROLE – YOUR PLACE IN THIS NEW ORDER BECAUSE YOU HADN'T YET CREATED IT. AND THIS WAS EQUALLY TRUE FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO CAME AS TRANSFER STUDENTS, AS RETURNING STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS PROGRAM, OR AS GRADUATE STUDENTS SETTING YOUR COURSE FOR A MASTERS OF LIBERAL STUDIES DEGREE.

YOUR PRESENCE HERE TODAY INDICATES THAT, LIKE GREGORY WILLIAMS, YOU NOT ONLY SURVIVED BUT YOU CREATED YOUR OWN PATHWAY TO SUCCESS. CONGRATULATIONS TO ONE AND ALL.

NOW YOU FACE ANOTHER TRANSITION FROM FAMILIAR GROUND TO FOREIGN SHORES, FROM FEELING THAT YOU KNOW A GOOD DEAL TO REALIZING THAT, IN FACT, YOU STILL HAVE MUCH TO LEARN. ONCE AGAIN, THERE WILL BE NEW SITUATIONS TO MASTER, NEW PEOPLE TO MEET, NEW CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME – NOT THE LEAST

OF WHICH IS AN ECONOMY THAT WILL MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR MANY OF YOU TO FIND THAT FIRST JOB.

IN TRUTH, WE ALL ARE DESTINED TO BECOME BEGINNERS AGAIN AND AGAIN, WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT. ONE'S LIFE UNFOLDS AS A SUCCESSION OF NEW RELATIONSHIPS, NEW JOBS, NEW CAREERS, NEW COMMUNITIES, NEW STAGES (SUCH AS BECOMING A PARENT FOR THE FIRST TIME AND, EVENTUALLY, CARING FOR YOUR OWN AGING PARENTS). INDEED, IF ONE REMAINS FOCUSED ON EXCELLENCE, ONE IS FOREVER FINDING THAT EACH ACHIEVEMENT JUST BECOMES A PLATFORM FROM WHICH ONE CAN SEE THE PROSPECT OF FURTHER ACCOMPLISHMENT – NEW CLIFFS TO SCALE, NEW LANDS TO EXPLORE.

MOREOVER, ANY BEGINNING IS FRAUGHT WITH PERIL. IF YOU CARE ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE DOING, AND YOU REALIZE THAT IT IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE TO FAIL – THAT PERHAPS YOUR MUSE WILL NOT CHOOSE TO VISIT YOU ON A GIVEN DAY AFTER ALL – THEN EACH NEW BEGINNING CARRIES WITH IT ITS OWN PORTION OF ANXIETY. THE NOTED ARCHITECT FRANK GEHRY, A MAN WHO HAS DESIGNED CELEBRATED BUILDINGS ACROSS THE GLOBE, ONCE SAID,

FOR ME, EACH DAY IS A NEW THING. I APPROACH EACH PROJECT WITH A NEW INSECURITY – ALMOST LIKE THE FIRST PROJECT I EVER DID. ... I GET THE SWEATS. I GO IN, START WORKING. I'M NOT SURE WHERE I'M GOING. IF I KNEW WHERE I WAS GOING I WOULDN'T DO IT. WHEN I CAN PREDICT OR PLAN IT, I DON'T DO IT. I DISCARD IT. SO I APPROACH IT WITH THE SAME TREPIDATION. OBVIOUSLY, OVER TIME I HAVE A LOT MORE CONFIDENCE THAT IT'S GOING TO BE OK. ... BUT THE ACTUAL WORK ON THE PROJECT IS WHAT I THINK [OF AS] A HEALTHY INSECURITY. YOU'RE NOT SURE.

WHEN *YOU* RUN HEAD-LONG INTO *YOUR* OWN ANXIETY AT SOME MOMENT OF BEGINNING, KNOW THAT IT IS JUST THE WORLD TELLING YOU THAT WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS IMPORTANT, AND THAT YOU ARE AWARE OF THE STAKES. YOUR JOB IS TO PUSH PAST THAT INSECURITY, TIME AND AGAIN, TO DO THE WORK NECESSARY TO SUCCEED – SO THAT YOU TOO DEVELOP THE CONFIDENCE THAT LETS YOU SAY, THE NEXT TIME *YOU* BEGIN, "IT'S GOING TO BE OK." I HOPE THAT WE HAVE GIVEN YOU SOME OF THAT CONFIDENCE.

ANOTHER TERM FOR GEARY'S "HEALTHY INSECURITY" MIGHT BE 'HUMILITY' – A VIRTUE THAT MAY SEEM A BIT OUT OF FASHION TODAY. BUT IT REALLY IS JUST THE AWARENESS THAT ONE STILL HAS SOMETHING TO LEARN, THAT BOTH THE WORLD AND ONE'S WORK ARE ALWAYS GREATER THAN ONESELF. A VIRTUE CERTAINLY WORTH CULTIVATING. THE ACCOMPLISHED GUITARIST, SONG-WRITER, AND PERFORMER ARLO GUTHRIE HAS SAID THAT EVERY TEN YEARS HE LITERALLY TAKES UP THE GUITAR AGAIN AS A BEGINNER – STARTING OVER TO RE-LEARN THE FINGER POSITIONS FOR CHORDS AND GOING ON FROM THERE – PUSHING HIMSELF, EVENTUALLY TO PLAY BETTER THAN IN THE PAST. HIS IS AN EXAMPLE WELL WORTH IMITATING.

THESE THEMES ARE EXPRESSED MORE LYRICALLY BY THE IRISH POET BRENDAN KENNELLY (A DISTANT RELATIVE OF OUR OWN PROFESSOR JAMES KENNELLY), IN A POEM ENTITLED "BEGIN":

EVERY BEGINNING IS A PROMISE  
BORN IN LIGHT AND DYING IN DARK  
DETERMINATION AND EXALTATION OF SPRINGTIME  
FLOWERING THE WAY TO WORK.

YOUR BEGINNING AT SKIDMORE CERTAINLY OFFERED SUCH A PROMISE. AND IN YOUR TIME WITH US, BOTH YOU AND WE HAVE WORKED TO FULFILL IT – TO HELP YOU LAY THE FOUNDATIONS OF THAT WORK-IN-PROGRESS THAT IS THE PERSON YOU STILL HOPE TO BECOME. KENNELLY CONCLUDES HIS POEM WITH THE FOLLOWING LINES:

THOUGH WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT DREAMS OF ENDING  
THAT ALWAYS SEEMS ABOUT TO GIVE IN  
SOMETHING THAT WILL NOT ACKNOWLEDGE CONCLUSION  
INSISTS THAT WE FOREVER BEGIN.

MAY YOU EMBRACE AND THEN CONQUER THE ANXIETY THAT COMES WITH EACH NEW CHALLENGE. MAY YOU CULTIVATE HUMILITY EVEN IN THE FACE OF YOUR OWN ACHIEVEMENTS. AND MAY **YOU** FOREVER BEGIN.