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Joan Growe's 1998 CSB Commencement Address

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Minnesota Secretary of State

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**REMARKS OF JOAN ANDERSON GROWE
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
THE COLLEGE OF SAINT BENEDICT
MAY 23, 1998**

**** DRAFT ****

LESSONS LEARNED

Thank you, Susan, for that kind introduction.

Sometimes you worry that when your friends introduce you, they know you so well, they may let something slip. Thank you, Susan, for keeping to the script. — — — — —

I want to begin by recognizing those on the platform with me today: President Lyons. Dr. Hendley. Dr. Knuesel. Sister Hollermann. Ms. Sinner. Good afternoon to all of you

Students. Faculty. Family. Friends. Trustees and staff. I am honored to be here to congratulate you -- the 1998 graduating class of the College of Saint Benedict.

This is your day, marking an important milestone in the journey of your lives, and I am proud to help you celebrate it.

You chose well in selecting the College of Saint Benedict, with its high academic standards and its history of community service. By advancing your knowledge, you have equipped yourself to better enjoy life and to better serve your neighbors. What happens next, of course, is up to you.

Work. Graduate School. Public service. Family life. It's your call.

More than any generation in history, you now have within your hands the opportunity and the tools to live in harmony with your creator. You have already witnessed more change than most generations see in their entire lifetimes. How exciting. How humbling. And it's just the beginning. — — — — —

Futurists tell us that the 21st century will see average life spans growing to as much as 140 years as we unlock the genetic codes by which human beings operate. Imagine that. Living for 140 years. How many different careers? How many families? How will you fit into the next century? Into your century.

During the 21st century, Virtual Reality, combined with our Information Society's enormous databanks, will allow for unprecedented advances in every field of endeavor from health care to employment.

Already last year, the MIT Computer Lab held the inaugural showing of computer based clothing. The hardware and software was, literally, woven into the fabric of the clothes. Eye glasses will be your monitor screen with commands given by voice or the wink of an eye. Such a suit of computer clothes could diagnosis the difference between indigestion and a heart problem, consult your medical records, and arrange for proper care. The next step is to merge human beings with advanced technologies more directly - such as the use of a bionic eye, which is a reality in the laboratory today.

Few can predict, with any certainty, how these advances will play out in your individual lives. And that's as it should be. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, and I quote, "Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive."

My friends, I suspect there will be no shortage of curiosity in the lives of the class of '98.

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In 26 years of public life, I have given somewhere over 2,000 speeches. Only one of those was a commencement speech. In 1975, I addressed my alma mater, St. Cloud State College (now a state university.) I was truly hesitant about giving that speech, just as I was hesitant about speaking to you today. I hold no advanced degrees. I doubt that I can add one whit to your academic knowledge. And I don't believe in giving advice.

But now, at age 62, as I prepare to leave public life, my hope is that you can glean some insight from my experiences. My life has taught me to recognize that life simply happens - often in unexpected ways. Fair or unfair. Pleasant or unpleasant. Life occurs.

Helen Keller put it well, and I quote: "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. "To put our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable."

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MY LIFE

I grew up about 40 miles southwest of here, in the small town of Buffalo. My brother and I had wonderful childhoods. My mom worked as a registered nurse, but stayed home after we were born. My dad operated the Gamble hardware store, with a little seasonal help from my mom, and also served several terms as Buffalo's mayor.

And, contrary to what you saw on TV last week, I was my dad in Buffalo that wrote the Good Samaritan Law long before the producers of Seinfeld ever even heard of it. Buffalo would have sent Jerry and his friends away for life, not just a year.

As kids, our main task in life was to get good grades in school. I also earned a little summer cash detasseling corn -- and believe me, you know don't what hot feels like until you've detasseled on a 95 degree day. Aside from the detasseling, ours was a good life. Popular radio shows. Victories in World War II. Magical new appliances. The birth of television. Milton Berle. Ed Sullivan. Lucille Ball. Probably even Dick Clark.

Life was grand.

Like many young women coming of age in the 50s, I believed that my "Prince Charming" would come along and take care of me for the rest of my life. Fortunately, my parents told me early on, to go to college because an education, not money, would be my inheritance.

I earned my bachelor of science degree at St. Cloud State. I taught. I married. We set up house in a small town, and I gave birth to my first three children.

Then, something happened on the way to the ball. My Prince Charming turned out be alcoholic and abusive, and after years of trying to change his behavior, I decided, for the sake of my children and myself, that we had to leave.

Suddenly, I was a single mom, terribly frightened, with three young children, and no money. My "Cinderella" illusions were shattered.

#

EMBRACE CHANGE

What would I do? One, my children and I would no longer live in terror. Two, I would update my teaching credentials. And three, I would make a friend of change.

In my personal journey, I went back to school for a degree in special education. I returned to teaching. I eventually remarried. I raised my family. I adapted. I sought and found opportunity and satisfaction beyond measure. I do believe that we have been equipped by our creator with enormous strengths, most notably, adaptability. It is an over simplification, but history argues that change and prosperity go together.

So, lesson number one for me, was to "embrace change." The future I went on to create, bore little resemblance to the one I had imagined. In fact, it turned out to be much better than advertised.

#

CHALLENGE THE EXPERTS

By the mid-Sixties, I had restored a sense of order to my life. We were living in the Minneapolis suburb of Minnetonka, where I devoted myself to raising my four children. Then, once again, the music changed. The Vietnam War had been underway since the early Sixties, and showed no signs of ending soon. It was the first war of the television age, and made mothers, like me, question whether war was the vocation we sought for our children.

The year was 1968. And like most people, I had never been to a political party's precinct caucus -- the neighborhood meetings held every two years to discuss issues and candidates.

Knowing that I had not raised my children for war. I decided to attend the Democratic caucus, because the Democrats in control of Washington had the power to end the war. Deciding to attend the caucuses, changed my life. Becoming involved in politics, including the League of Women Voters, led me on a journey I had never considered.

I never had a vision of myself running for elective office, as nearly all public officials were men. When I ran for the Legislature, 26 years ago, as a Democrat in a Republican district, the experts told me I could not win and that they would not waste their time with me. Not only was I of the wrong party, they told me I was the wrong gender, as if I had a choice.

At that time, only one woman served among the 201 state legislators in Minnesota. Since my supporters and I didn't know that we couldn't win, we built a grass roots coalition based on 3x5 cards of people who cared more about issues than political parties.

We suburban homemakers cared about issues like day care and early childhood education. Subjects that received little attention from legislators who rarely dealt with such concerns on a personal level. To the amazement of experts, we won with 55% of the vote and I joined four other newly elected women as legislators.

The next day's headlines warned, "the women are taking over." Not soon enough.

Two years later, in 1974, I challenged a popular Republican incumbent for election as Secretary of State. At that time, no woman had been elected in her own right to a state constitutional office in Minnesota. Again, the experts told us it could not be done. Again, we didn't listen to their advice. Instead of accepting the conventional wisdom, I challenged the experts by traveling the state talking about voting as a right, not a privilege. I said we ought to ease the voter registration bureaucracy and make it easier for working parents and students to vote.

On the campaign trail, reporters treated me like a creature from another planet, with questions

such as, "What's it like to be a woman running for statewide office?" or "Who's home making supper for your kids?" I would reassure them that my family was well fed, ask the reporters what they had made for supper last night, and then, I would move on.

In January 1999, I will leave public office having served six terms as Secretary of State. So much for the opinion of the experts.

So, lesson number two for me was, "Do not listen to what people tell you you can not do." Just don't listen.

It is your life. Be governed by your own beliefs.

#

PERSEVERE

The final lesson I will share with you today, comes from the geese of the field. In their yearly migrations, they travel the distance from the Canadian prairies to the shores of the Chesapeake. When geese fly cross country, they do so in a group. Their V formation allows the birds to float along on air currents created by the lead members of their flock. The geese take turns flying in the lead position so that some birds might rest in flight on the strength of their leaders.

If a bird becomes sick or injured during its journey, and falls to the ground, two healthy birds will break formation to safeguard and aid in the recovery. Working as a team, rotating the leadership, and aiding those in need, the geese make successful long distance flights, year in and year out.

In doing so, the geese illustrate my third lesson, perseverance.

Let me give you a personal example.

In 1994, I had the honor to serve as a United Nations observer in the first all-race election in South Africa. This election, that would take Nelson Mandela from prisoner to president, was a lifetime in the making.

In the rural township of Bokum, I witnessed hundreds of people walking, some for six, seven or eight miles, to wait in seemingly endless lines in order to vote for the first time. They were excited. They were nervous. And yet they approached this day with reverence.

After inspecting a voting station, I would walk down the line to reassure voters that they

would soon have the opportunity to vote and that we weren't going to run out of ballots. At one voting station, an elderly South African woman stopped me, put her hand on my arm and said, "I've been waiting 80 years to vote. Eight more hours won't make any difference."

Eighty years. What a lesson in perseverance

As you take your turn to lead our fast forward society, remember the perseverance of women everywhere from the Helen Kellers and the Eleanor Roosevelts, to the courageous South Africans. Their example can be a continuing inspiration for all of us.

Our lives are a humbling responsibility. They deserve prayerful consideration. Though your particular endeavor may be a difficult one, remember that very little in life - like your studies here at St. Ben's or the raising of a family - is accomplished overnight. Enjoy this life and all the beauty that is in it.

Work a little. Pray a little. Trust a lot. Trust in your friends. Trust in yourself. Trust in your God, whoever she may be.

I congratulate you on your success here at Saint Benedict's. You have shown strength and determination that will carry you far in life. I leave you with three lessons from my experiences. Embrace change. Do not listen to what people tell you you can not do. And persevere.

May your journeys always find you home.