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CSB/SJU

SJU Convocation Address August 26, 2019

Buenos días, Thank you all for being here with me on this morning. To be honest, the task of preparing this speech has been equally exciting and terrifying for me: this is now the 21st SJU convocation I've been to, and at the first 20 of those I always said to myself, *wow, it would be sweet to win the Spaeth award but I sure wouldn't want to be the poor SOB who has to stand up in front of the Abbey Church and throw out the first pitch of the new school year.* And here I am, a goofy kid from Ypsilanti Michigan, all dressed up like Lord Palpatine on his way to Mardi Gras, put in charge of welcoming you all to SJU. I grew up in a very secular family, so the idea of giving a talk in the Abbey Church kinda feels like one of those "I can't believe I went to school naked" dreams.

I joke of course because I'm nervous. Greeting the incoming class is a flattering honor. So I'm nervous. Even after 21 falls here I still get nervous during the first week – *will my classes go well? How will my students respond to me? Will I be able to balance life, teaching and scholarship this term?* (show of hands – faculty who get nervous). I am assuming that many of you too are feeling nervous on this first day. This might be your first day in a graduate program or the first day of a monastic life; it might be your first week 'on' as our interim university president; this might be the first time you experience a real winter, or the first time you share a bathroom with someone you aren't related to. English might not be your first language, yet here you are, diving head first into college in Lake Wobegon. Holy buckets. Or perhaps you are from a town like Sartell, and you know this place and understand the culture of central Minnesota like the back of your hand, but you are unsure of just how well you are

prepared for the first year of college (*I'll give you a hint – this isn't the 13th grade*). Yes - lots of firsts here, lots of reasons to feel excited, uneasy and even out of place, perhaps all at the same time. I'm going to try to find a common thread in these firsts and share two pieces of advice with you. Just two. I will also make a couple more lame Star Wars jokes along the way. Are you with me?

The first thing I want to urge you to do is to find an ally and mentor, to find your own way to be a Johnnie and to connect to this place. I'm not telling you to develop a deep relationship with all of your professors, advisors, or coaches – just find one. Get your padawan on - there are LOTS of Jedi masters here to connect with, and there are LOTS of ways to be a Johnnie and to love this place. You don't have to be white or straight or catholic or play football or be from Minnesota to make it here (of course you can be those things but you certainly don't have to).

It took me way too long to learn this. I moved here in 1999 after a long stint in Bogotá, Colombia. Bogotá is a wonderful city of nine million people that I absolutely adore, but as you can imagine it is very different from tiny Collegeville, MN. When I first got here it freaked me out when strangers looked me in the eye or greeted me in passing – this is St. John's – that's how we do it. I had also just finished a Ph.D. program at a major research institution where I was trained mostly to produce more Ph.D.s just like myself. I had never spent any real time preparing for work at a small liberal arts college. So when I got here I was simultaneously over and under-prepared for the academic and social components of my new job. Add in the challenges of everyday life – a move, illness, marriage, kids, divorce, etc. and even after more than a decade here I continued to feel out of place and off-balance. I even contemplated throwing in the towel on my teaching career to become a chef. That's when I called on my own

Johnnie Jedi Master, professor Jorge Febles. Dr. Febles was my favorite undergraduate prof. He graduated from St. John's back in 1974. He always told funny and loving stories about his Alma Mater, so when I was finishing my Ph.D. and saw a job opening for SJU I asked him and another Johnnie – Dr. Brian Larkin – about this place. Like so many alumni these two were very enthusiastic – what a fantastic college: great faculty, great students, 3500 acres of woodlands, the Sag, John Gagliardi, Marcel Breuer and Johnnie Bread. I applied and I landed the job.

But even after a decade here I was still struggling. And when I called Dr. Febles back to ask for guidance, instead of him asking me what I didn't like about my job, students, colleagues, etc. he instead asked me a question I had not contemplated: *Corey, who are you and who do you want to be?* I had figured we needed to talk about work, scholarship my book project, not personal stuff. I really didn't know how to answer, and the idea of thinking about his question terrified me. So he told me his own unique story as a Johnnie. That he was born in Cárdenas Cuba, that his father fought with Fidel Castro in 1958, but that by 1961 he was disillusioned with the Revolution and thanks to the Cuban Adjustment Act the Febles family was granted exile in Iowa. He talked about how he struggled to adjust to this new life and language while completing high school in small town America, that he had applied to SJU in part because it was one of a few schools that did not require an English language proficiency exam. He joked that when he got to campus he alone was the 'foreign student body.' Yet he figured it out, he balanced life and study and forged his own identity as a Johnnie.

Dr. Febles also helped me figure out who I was and who I wanted to be. He helped me breathe new life into my teaching, he helped me reorient my scholarship, he helped me find my own way to be a Johnnie. In so doing, the things that I once struggled with went away – turns

out it wasn't my colleagues or students or even Stearns county – it was me and how I related to these things.

You don't have 10 years to figure this out. If you are lucky you have 8 semesters. That's not a long time for you to find your way as Johnnies. And there will be challenges – maybe the first will be a Spanish class, or FYS or organic chemistry. Maybe you will struggle with your chosen major or will discover you have a problem with substance abuse. Maybe your first challenge will be balancing sports and study; maybe it will be financial or a family crisis at home. As this is a college for men I can say this confidently – guys, sometimes we aren't the best at asking for help when we need it. *Bruh I got this* won't be enough. Fortunately, this isn't a sprawling state university where you take biology in a class of 500 students taught by a distracted graduate student. You are not a number here. You are surrounded by highly trained faculty and staff who are here to help you find your way. Find your Jedi master.

The second recommendation I will make is for you to embrace the liberal arts with good will, an open mind and if possible, an open heart. Understand that what we do here is shaped by an ethical imperative. In this country we are already terribly good at self-improvement: we have self-help books, yoga, journaling, crossfit, self-care, retreat workshops – you name it and we do it. And we do these things in the information age, when communication and access to knowledge have never been easier. The greatest irony of all of this is, of course, that we live in a society that is more fragmented and more conflict-ridden than it has been in a very long time. The more we tweet or insta or hashtag the more we have the impression that we are at the center of our own tiny universes. I have a buddy who calls the smart phone a “solipsistic echo-chamber” – it is the ultimate device for navel gazing, isolation and social entrenchment.

Now of course you are here for self-improvement: you seek an education, an internship, a diploma, a means to pay student loans, to buy a house, to make a life for yourselves – a license to the middle class. I get it. And you might not be fully stoked that you have to meet requirements in theology, FYS, foreign language, social science, math, etc. to get those things. As a professor of Spanish I understand. But as a former colleague of mine used to tell his students, pretentiously, *an educated person speaks more than one language*. I can only imagine the eye rolling. And while obnoxious, I do agree with part of this sentiment, but would add that an educated person can use the tools of language, as well as history, art, economics, theology and the sciences to understand the connections, conflicts and dynamics that shape our world today. Our course catalog says that all the students in my Spanish 211 must demonstrate intermediate-low proficiency in speech and writing, but that isn't enough. Nor is it enough for them to simply know that the United States is the 4th largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, that the Spanish colonial town of San Agustine, Florida is our oldest city, or that Santa Fe, New Mexico is our oldest state capital. No. I – and I feel comfortable speaking for my colleagues here – we want something else. If you take a red-hot issue like immigration, for example, and you ask our professors in Hispanic Studies, Political Science, Theology, Philosophy, Global Business, Environmental Studies or Communications how they understand immigration, you are going to get a wide range of responses that don't always reconcile easily. Yet if you approach these varied disciplinary responses with an open mind and, god forbid an open heart, they will provide you with the tools without which you cannot hope to understand issues like this or the world we live in. This is true for you as an individual and as part of a community.

Sadly, today we cannot tweet our way to a brighter future. We afford to isolate ourselves behind a steering wheel, a keyboard or the trigger of an AR-15: that cyclist in your way on your

way to work, that Trump supporter that pissed you off on social media, those “unlike you” who were murdered in Orlando, Charlottesville, Pittsburgh and El Paso – they are all we. They are different and they are the same. As dramatic as this might sound, the future of our democracy depends on what young people like you will do with the tools of the liberal arts.

I firmly believe that if you give our curriculum and our faculty the chance, my fellow Ph.D. Jedis can help you understand yourselves and to build a better community. This doesn't have to be anything revolutionary: you need only step outside yourself and use your education to act. In my own life I sometimes work as an interpreter, harnessing many areas of my life and training to help build bridges between people. Of course this also feeds me as a human being, teacher and scholar. Many of my colleagues make similar contributions and are here to help you do the same.

So are these things we are willing to do? Find a Jedi, build community? (can I get a WE WILL?!).

Can I get an adios?

Thank you for your time and I wish you all a fantastic school year.