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## "Hindsight, Foresight, and Insight": College of Saint Benedict Convocation Address, August 29, 2006

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# “Hindsight, Foresight, and Insight”

College of Saint Benedict  
Convocation Address  
August 29, 2006

*Welcome Saint Ben’s class of 2010.*

Seventeen years ago, I was fidgeting in a similar gathering at Augustana College. For me, that was exactly half a lifetime ago (I’ll let you do the math) and long before I had “smile” lines. When I contemplated what to say today, I thought about what I would have wanted to hear. I then tried, with no luck, to remember our speaker of 17 years ago. So, if all of you completely forget me, I’ll forgive you.

Saint Ben’s class of 2010: You are 548 strong and intelligent women eager to begin your communal journey; you’ve come from 19 different countries and what brought each of you here is the dream of a college education. This convocation signifies the realization of that dream — for you, and for your parents. Your parents may not have dreamed about paying for your education, but they are proud you are here.

Now, the question in front of you is, “What will you do with the next four years?” During your time here, you will come face to face with who you are, and who you seek to be. Unfortunately, these aren’t always neatly matched. As you embark on your journey, please take time to think about what lies behind you, what lies before you, and most important, what lies within you.

Most likely, you’re hoping the next four years will lead to a degree, a career, and financial prosperity. I had hoped the same, but haven’t yet reached the financial prosperity part. Fortunately, I’ve come to realize there is much more to living than earning. Our culture may define success by material possessions, but real success is finding what fills you up and makes you whole. You’ve arrived here with expectations set by yourself, your family, and your peers. But I encourage you to find what makes you intellectually, physically, and emotionally content; the thing that is your passion.

In stating this, I fondly recall my own soul searching. When I was four, I proudly announced that when I grew up, I wanted to be an A&W carhop or a brain surgeon!

Turns out, I was a lousy roller-skater and got sick at the sight of blood. New plan.

At 17, I wanted to be the next Barbara Walters. I entered the journalism program at Augustana College, but panicked whenever a camera was pointed at me. Again, new plan!

During my junior year of college, my academic advisor pulled me aside and said he had noticed I did a lot of peer mentoring. He encouraged me to use my talents and enroll in graduate school. I always felt most alive while teaching, so the next thing I knew, I was a 22-year-old graduate assistant trying to teach 21-year-olds at Illinois State University. I was scared to death, but I had found my passion! I was told more than once that women can't survive in academia, but, here I am.

In 2000, I was hired as an assistant professor at a large research university. Though I loved teaching, I was pressured to focus on research instead of on students. When my teaching evaluations finally arrived, I excitedly ran into a colleague's office to share the results. My colleague glanced at them and said, "Good. But what have you published lately?" Devastated, I knew I could no longer teach there. Fortunately, I found a home at Saint Ben's and Saint John's, where I'm not only allowed, but encouraged, to feed my passion for teaching.

Why did I share this personal story? Because it illustrates a woman's search for her passion; because I didn't allow others' expectations to constrain which path I followed. I still get comments like "You can't possibly be a professor." But I am! I was true to myself, and I hope you will be, too.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of being a professor is watching students discover who they are. One 2005 graduate accepted a high-paying position with a financial planning company, but was left unfulfilled. Against her parents' wishes, she quit her job, made lattes at a local coffee shop for a while, and finally accepted a position with an Internet advertising company. She's happier than I've ever seen her, and consequently, so are her parents. Currently, a 2004 graduate and advertising executive is applying to graduate school to study kinesiology. Another 2005 alumna is leaving a major corporation to pursue her master's degree in public health. In short, these students didn't follow the path they set out on, but they followed their passions.

To look for your passion in a magical place like this is a personal journey, full of tears and laughter. We should approach this voyage as we would climb a mountain: occasional glimpses of the peak keep the goal in sight, yet unique scenes are visible with each individual step. We should take our time as we climb, relishing each moment. The problem is, we often focus our energy on lamenting the past or anticipating the future, giving up the opportunity to influence the here-and-now. There are three keys to gaining insight into the present moment.

First, *be open to all possibilities*. College is a time to discover facets of the universe not previously evident. To name just a small sampling of the treasures arrayed before you: You can write for our award-winning student newspaper, *The Record*, join PRISM or the Senate, involve yourself in Companions on a Journey, or become a member of the Cultural Fusion Club. And by all means, take advantage of our nationally recognized study-abroad program. In short, try new things!

You won't agree with every perspective you encounter. However, you can develop a tolerance and respect for ideas that are not your own. One of the most important lessons in this adventure of self-discovery is not to be fearful of difference, but to welcome it. Don't be constrained by prejudice. Confront it.

Second, *examine your character*. About 2,500 years ago, Socrates warned that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Now is the perfect time to start that self-examination. Make the sacrifices to be the human being you desire to be. Turn off the TV, take out your earpods, log off of Facebook, wake up early (that means before 11 o'clock!), volunteer for something out of your comfort zone, reach out to someone different from you.

Don't miss the opportunity to be driven by what is timeless and meaningful. It isn't enough to be talented or smart. Lifelong education cannot occur without integrity, contemplation, and dedication. These are virtues we live by on these campuses. We will help you discover amazing things about yourself and will encourage you to embrace your role as empowered women. However, we can only do this if *you* accept responsibility for the future you want to live in. Such a system cannot prosper on rhetoric or good intentions alone.

As an example of a woman in touch with her character, consider Helen Thomas, "The First Lady of the Press." At age 86, she remains an active journalist. What sustains her energy is her passion. She refuses to become complacent. "There's no such thing as success," she says. "There's always another mountain to climb." Thomas's life illustrates that true success is finding new mountains with new challenges and evolving because of them.

Third, *look at things another way*. In high school, you were the best of the best. As unpleasant as it may be to hear, however, the women in this auditorium are as good, if not better, than you are. You're also about to start classes with professors who have more rigorous expectations than you're accustomed to. In a sense, you've gone from regionals to nationals. Many of you will be disheartened to receive your first C; mine was in pottery! But disappointment can teach you an invaluable lesson. When you think about it, the way you learned how to walk, read, or ride a bike — was by trying, failing, and trying again. We must look at our failures "another way," considering them to be important educational experiences.

Consider, for example, John Grisham. Many of you have read his novels, but did you know his first book was rejected 24 times before being published? Yet, Grisham discarded his rejections. His lesson of perseverance is one of the most important lessons we can learn.

This past May, a remarkable 2006 Saint Ben's graduate gave me a copy of the book *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. In the front cover she wrote, "Thank you for being such a positive person in my life, always challenging me to see things in new ways and to live out my full potential." These are the lessons learned from *The Little Prince* as well. The story laments how "grown-ups" lose the sense of discovery and imagination that is so important to childhood — how we lose our ability to "look at things another way." The book opens with the narrator as a small child drawing a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant (it really looks like a hat). He says, "I showed the grown-ups my masterpiece and asked if my drawing scared them. They answered, 'Why be scared of a hat?' . . . The grown-ups advised me to put away my drawings. . . . That is why I abandoned, at the age of 6, a magnificent career as an artist."

Was the problem really the child's drawing, or the adults' inability to imagine the picture another way? As adults, we tend to define first, and then see. But what we can only *imagine* is so much more important than what we can actually see. As a fox tells the Little Prince, "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes."

Our heart is the telescope of our soul. Insight is our best vision. Use your heart to seriously "look" at yourself another way. As you climb your mountains, listen to what motivates and excites you. Find your character. As Sir Edmund Hillary, the first person to reach the summit of Mount Everest, said: "It's not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves." To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson: Remember, what lies behind you or before you are minute considerations compared to what lies within you.

I wish you success as you embark upon on a new school year and climb new mountains. Thank you and best of luck.

*Erin A. Szabo is an Associate Professor of Communication. She delivered the opening convocation address as 2006 winner of the Sister Mary Grell Teacher of Distinction Award at the College of Saint Benedict.*