

Just Pass The Favor On

It is a tremendous pleasure to be here, and an even greater honor. For a classroom teacher such as myself, there is simply no greater honor than to be singled out in this way by one's students. So to start, I want to thank the Class of '95 for this one, final opportunity to talk to you. I am deeply honored by your invitation. Thank you.

It is also a great pleasure to have this opportunity to speak to the long suffering parents of the Class of '95. In the classroom, of course, I concentrate on the intricacies of American foreign policy and global capital markets, and on making sure that my students master the dry details. But the real fun of my job almost parental; it is watching--and occasionally helping--young men and women become competent, self-confident adults. For the last eleven years, it is a quasi-parental pleasure I have shared with the real parents of the literally thousands of students who have passed through my classroom. I am proud to say that starting in September I will really be one of you when my eldest daughter Moon Hee becomes a member of the Douglass Class of 1999.

Now as those of you who know about such things know, baccalaureate addresses tend to the academic. They tend to be erudite expositions on subjects you carefully avoided for four years in college. They tend, in short, to smack of the classroom. Well, after four years in the classroom, I thought you'd prefer something else. And frankly, having already delivered fifty six classroom lectures this academic year, I knew I would prefer offering you something else, too.

So I thought I would instead take a few minutes to remind you that for all the great stuff you have learned in the classroom--that you read about, studied, researched, experimented with and, of course, were tested on--that for all that, the most important things you learned never appeared on a course syllabus or final exam. I know that it is heretical for me, a professor, to say such a thing, but it is true.

The most important things you learned about, you learned about yourself and your relationship to others. The most important things you learned about, you learned about yourself as a woman who belonged to, who had rights in, and who had obligations to this Douglass community. And just as what you learned in the classroom was preparation for the challenges of the real working world out there, I want to argue tonight that what you learned here at Douglass about community is preparation for the greatest challenge of our time: the challenge of forging of a new American community--of forging an American community that is not--as many desire--a community of reinvigorated exclusion in which women and minorities “know their places,” but rather a new American community that actually lives up to the founders’ promise of tolerance and equality, a new American community that glories in and is rendered glorious by its diversity.

I thought I would start with a story, a very personal story, because what I really want to talk about tonight are the personal connections, the intimate bonds of friendship and caring and experience that constitute you as a community, as the Class of ‘95. And because I think that it is these “habits of the heart,” this reflexive sense of connectedness to others, that forms the bedrock of community and the foundation of a new America.

My father died last year. In fact, almost exactly a year ago today I was addressing a memorial service for him. My father was an overwhelming presence in my life, and his final illness and death left me struggling to make sense of him, of his legacy to me, and of myself. As I tried to figure out what I would say about him at the memorial service, I first thought that I would talk about his accomplishments. And he was a remarkably accomplished man: a bomber pilot and then a test pilot in the Air Force; a brilliant chemist; a gifted teacher; a pretty good rock-and-roll bass player; a fine technical rock climber; as ornery an old coot as ever walked the face of the earth; and a father not only to my two blood brothers and me, but also to Tenagne and Mamo, my Ethiopian brother and sister, to Okasa Kamin-a-Kilau, Polina Kliemavizskaya, Julie Reddy, and many, many others who made his Thanksgiving table a raucous and joyous mini-UN.

But somehow such a rendition of my father’s accomplishments didn’t capture what he was all about. So I thought maybe I would talk about how he had shaped my life--and there is little about my life that does not show his

influence, witness the fact that I've never been, and will surely never be, anything but a college professor.

But again, this approach seemed to miss the mark. To do justice to my father, I needed somehow to capture his spirit, his legacy, his lesson to all of us. And then I remembered an incident from when I was very young.

When I was a kid, we didn't have much money, so we went camping for our vacations. One of our favorite spots was small cabin on a low ridge over the Dead Diamond river in northern New Hampshire. One evening, when I was about ten, we were driving up the dirt road along the river and came upon a man stuck in the middle of a ford across the river. It was almost dark. It was early summer and up there in northern New Hampshire the river was still running very cold. But my father spent close to two hours in and out of the river to get that guy's car out safely. When his car was back on the road and running again, this guy tried to pay my father for his help. My father refused. When pressed, he said simply: "Just pass the favor on someday."

Just pass the favor on.

It is such a simple admonition--and yet so hard to live up to. It was my father's greatest gift to me, and his greatest challenge:

- You will pass on more than you have received.
- You will give more than you take.
- Your measure will be how much better you leave things than you found them.

This is my challenge to you, too: to take this gift, this Douglass education, and pass it on as you do your part to remake America.

What do I mean? Well, to explain, we must make two moves: first, we need to re-think your time here at Douglass in ways I've already suggested; and then we must re-think America.

I started off tonight by suggesting that the really important stuff you learned here at Douglass you didn't learn in the classroom--and I mean it. Oh, there is no question that the formal education you received was not only first rate, but also important to your future career. But your classroom education was a purely private matter, a personal pursuit. It was about acquiring the specialized knowledge and the credentials necessary to get into graduate school or get a job. You. Yourself. Alone.

And we on the faculty encouraged you and rewarded you, yourself, alone, for your successes. Or, to put it the other way around, we made very, very clear to you that any cooperative efforts on your part--we call it cheating--would be severely punished. How ironic. After all, can any of you think of a job that you might want that doesn't depend on a capacity to share? To work collaboratively?

So, to start, I would suggest that as you leave Douglass for the greater community, it is important that you re-value the education you got here. Not that you devalue that private, academic education you received, but that you fully appreciate the social education you received, the all important education in community.

And this brings me to the second move you must make, because as you leave Douglass for the greater community, I think it is critical that you also rethink America, that you take up the challenge of, if you will, feminizing America.

The current myth of America is, of course, a male myth, a myth of rugged individualism and private enterprise, a myth of gun fighters dignified as "heroes" and robber barons dignified as "captains of industry." But as American women have always known, and as feminist scholars have amply demonstrated, life in America--and America itself--had communal beginnings.

We talk about American individualism--and there's a lot to that. But the real story of America is a story of communalism and individual sacrifice for others.

The real story of America not just a story of individual achievements. It is not just a story of great men and great women, though there have been

many great men and great women in American history. Nor is it--as the myth of the Wild West would have us believe--a story of loners.

The real story of America is the story of barn raisings and town meetings. It is the story of volunteer fire departments and church socials to raise the money to send a town's best student to college. It is the story of neighborhood social clubs and Hadasah and the Knights of Columbus and the Rotary Club and the Grange and barrio parishes.

For all our individualism, what has always made Americans stand out is our powerful sense of civic virtue and our extraordinary propensity to join in community organizations.

Nothing impressed Alexis de Tocqueville more than this when he visited the United States more than a hundred and fifty years ago. And even today, research shows that Americans are far more likely to belong to civic organizations and to engage in community service work than people anywhere else in the world.

Now, of course, if you're even mildly skeptical of this rosy, communitarian version of American history, you want to say: "But, hey, what about the nasty underbelly of American history? What about our ugly history of union busting? What about slavery, Jim Crow, Selma and Montgomery? What about the glass ceiling? What about Prop 187?"

Well, yes, of course--but think again. Think about where each of these has gone, because what's really remarkable about American history is that the radical protest movements that have transformed this country socially, economically and politically have all been nurtured by the same community roots I've been talking about.

Consider the labor movement.

In New York city, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union which transformed the garment industry at the beginning of the century and today defends Dominican and Vietnamese seamstresses working in the sweatshops of Chinatown grew out of the communal organizations created by East European Jewish immigrant women on the Lower East Side.

In Appalachia, tight knit mountain communities gave the United Mine Workers Union the strength to survive the attacks of the mine owners and their thugs.

In Pittsburgh and Bethlehem and Allentown, Pennsylvania, Ukrainian Clubs and Polish churches were the seed beds of the United Steel Workers.

And of course without these unions, millions of Americans would have been excluded from the American dream, and we as a nation would have been far poorer.

Or consider the civil rights movement.

Where did it get its strength? Oh, to be sure, Martin Luther King mattered--without his leadership and his golden rhetoric, the civil rights movement would have been far poorer. But where would he have had to speak if he had not had the pulpits of churches across this country? Who would he have had to lead if he had not been able to mobilize whole congregations? Who would have heard his great "I Have a Dream" speech if churches and unions and Lions Clubs all across America had not rented buses and come to Washington?

Or consider the women's movement.

There is no gainsaying the importance of my personal hero, Jane Addams, or of Betty Friedan, or Bella Abzug, or Gloria Steinem, or Geraldine Ferraro, or, yes, Mary Hartman. There is no gainsaying the importance of Mabel Smith Douglass to whose tireless efforts we owe--you owe--Douglass College. But I would also remind you that Mabel Smith Douglass's efforts would all have been for naught without the New Jersey Federation of Women's Clubs--clubs that were but the visible, organized tip of the vast and ubiquitous network of sewing circles, coffee klatches, communal child care groups and so on by which women constituted the American community long before anyone recognized or celebrated their contributions.

Or consider Prop 187.

It is cruel. It is mean spirited. And it is still the law. But what has Prop 187 done? It has mobilized and focused whole communities and has helped

forge new ties among what were once separate communities. It has made many who were once silent, who once stood outside the democratic process into active citizens. And if American history is any guide, mobilized communities of active citizens eventually get their way.

Here, then, we have both the communal foundations of America and the present challenge to America, because if civic engagement was the source of our greatness, the problem today is civic **dis**engagement.

The evidence of civic disengagement is everywhere.

Since 1960, voter participation has fallen to the point that today our presidents are elected by just a quarter of the electorate.

Since 1972, the number of Americans reporting that they went to even one public meeting has declined to a pathetic 13%.

Attendance at religious services has plummeted.

So has union membership.

So has membership in PTAs.

So has volunteering to lead Girl Scout troops.

So has volunteering with the Red Cross.

So has participation in volunteer fire departments and EMS squads.

So has simple socializing with neighbors. Where once the most common way people spent their free time was hanging out with neighbors, today only 61% of Americans say that they spent one--just one--evening with their neighbors in the last year.

"So what?," you ask.

Consider, for a moment, the critical social issues we are wrestling with today: education; poverty and joblessness; crime, gangs and drugs.

In each and every case, community matters.

In education, studies have found that the critical key to school success is community. Where families and community structures are strong, kids flourish. Where families and community structures are weak, kids fail.

In employment, too, community matters. For example, without regard for race, wealth or whatever, youths whose neighbors attend church--that is, where community institutions are strong--are much more likely to have jobs and to stay out of trouble. Youths whose neighbors don't attend church are more likely to be out of work and in trouble.

Where do we find drugs, gangs, prostitution and violent crime? In broken communities.

And I could go on and on and on.

The point is simple: unless we can do something--and fast--about the decline of education, about the rise of an unemployable underclass, about drugs and crime, we are all at risk.

Or, to put it more generally, unless we can do something--and fast--to stop the rising tide of intolerance and the erosion of community, we are all at risk. You are at risk. For if your world was built on community, if it was a sense of community that nurtured your families and gave meaning to their lives, then this erosion of community is also eroding the foundations of your future and your future families' futures.

So what's the challenge?

The challenge is to rebuild community. The challenge is to move America and Americans from civic disengagement to civic reengagement.

But how? And where is this going to happen, and who's going to do it?

Here, finally, we get back to you and to that social education, that education in community you have received here at Douglass.

Here we get back to the favor you must pass on.

Why? Because by its very nature, community rebuilding can't be taken up at the national level. It can't be taken up at the state level. It can't even be taken up at the city level. It must be taken up at the community level, in individual neighborhoods by individuals.

And by its very nature, community rebuilding isn't something that is done by government bureaucracies. It isn't something done by corporations. It isn't a policy thing done at arms length. It's done bit by bit, volunteer action by volunteer action, PTA meeting by PTA meeting.

And by its very nature, community rebuilding isn't done by makers and shakers all hung up in their drawers about how important they are. It is done face to face by everyday people.

Rebuilding America isn't celebrity stuff. Rebuilding America isn't about dramatic initiatives. Rebuilding America isn't about big projects undertaken someplace else. Rebuilding America will begin--and will end--as hundreds and thousands of tiny, individual, and uncelebrated efforts.

So as you leave here tonight, as you leave Douglass College tomorrow, to take your places in the real world, I would ask you to remember best what was most important in your Douglass education, that you never forget the great gift of belonging to this wonderful community of strong women.

I am not asking you all to be heroes, though some of you will be. I am not asking you all to be CEOs or Senators or even perhaps President, though some of you will be the one--and one of you might even be the one.

No, I am asking simply that in your day-to-day lives--in the way you live, in the way you work, in the way raise your children--that you never forget the essential feminist lesson you learned here at Douglass: that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

Your parents sitting here with you have given you all they can. The faculty, for whom I speak, have given you all they can. Now it is up to you:

- To pass on more than you have received; and
- To give more than you take.
- For your measure will be how much better you leave things than you found them.

Please, just pass the favor on.

Thank you.

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