

## AS NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS, WE PERSEVERED (RIVIER COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS, MAY 13, 2006)

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I want to share an allegory with you that helps frame this collegial pursuit of achieving a degree in our chosen professions. The allegory goes like this: *“Three men were walking on a wall: Fact, Faith and Feeling. When Feeling took an awful fall, Faith was taken back. So close to Faith was Feeling that he stumbled and fell, too; but Fact remained and pulled Faith up and with Faith came Feeling, too.”*

As I thought of the journey that brought each of us here, this allegory came to my mind. As a nontraditional student at Rivier College and on a personal level, these three realities of life—Fact, Faith and Feeling—were constantly in play.

Created in the image of God, each one of us has been given intellect, emotion and will—the three necessary ingredients for these allegorical figures to exist. The acquisition of **Facts** is only possible through the mind, the intellect, and the thought processes that develop there; the fine tuning of our emotional beings is that **Feeling** part of us; and **Faith** is our belief that we are soul beings working together with God in choosing pathways that make our lives meaningful and purposeful.

The **fact** is all of us receiving degrees today, in each specific profession or field, whether, education, liberal arts and sciences, business, or nursing, made the commitment to refine the talents given to us at birth. My journey, within this collegial pursuit, was centered in nursing, so my words have a nursing focus. However, all of us realized, at some point in our lives, a college education was necessary to see these talents flourish.

A college education was never a subject we discussed in my home when I was growing up. My mother was the seventeenth child of 19 children and lived in a tenement high-rise in Lowell Massachusetts. My father was the second of 14 children who was raised and then worked on the family farm in Dracut, Massachusetts. Both were taken out of school in the sixth grade to work and help support their families. Their educational goals for me and my siblings were to simply finish high school. They were successful in reaching that goal.

It wasn't until I met my husband Dan that I realized there was more to me than a high school education and that being college educated was not just a personal endeavor but a necessity. My husband was an objective observer who visualized for me something I never saw for myself. He observed abilities and talents in me and challenged me to pursue my dream in the field of Nursing. As with most of you, that encouragement and support provided me the segue to this journey and this destination. His persistence and selflessness kept moving me forward and urging me to build upon the foundation my parents prepared in order to go farther in my education. And here I am today, receiving my Baccalaureate Degree in Nursing.

Along this journey I came to understand some **facts**, as some of you might have learned—that all the tools necessary to become what we celebrate today were given to us the day we were born. From a nursing perspective, we were given eyes to see things others cannot see; a keen sense of smell and hearing that raise an awareness in us others are not privy to; the ability to touch a person in such a way that healing, comfort and care are conveyed; and the intuitive sense to know something is not right when all signs tell a different story. It is said of nurses that we are “present when souls enter the earth and when souls leave the earth”; that we go into situations where the ordinary person would retreat; and that

we instinctively are helpers of humanity existing with an altruistic focus; others in need. Nurses are the “Good Samaritans” described in the *New Testament* of the *Bible* by the writer and physician, Luke. Like the varied fields of accomplishment we are all witness to today, nursing graduates have achieved the validation of refinement and global readiness in receiving our degrees.

The **fact** exists that most, if not all here today, had discouraging times as we journeyed to this destination. In spite of these natural abilities given to us at birth, the process of refining and professionalizing our talents was often hard, discouraging, frustrating, and seemingly never-ending. What takes most students 4 years to accomplish, took some of us more than 10 years. As nontraditional students, we persevered.

The **feeling** that this collegial pursuit was possible waxed and waned. As in the allegory, at times, our feelings would tumble. Our other lives—families, jobs, personal pursuits and interests—often took a back seat to achieving our goal. We grappled with the feelings of guilt, never doing what we should be doing or being where we should be. Most of us made many pauses along this journey to do what needed to be done: raise and support our children and see them achieve a college education; help our families when needs arose; minister to our sick family members; have babies and/or bury our loved ones; even heal ourselves when sickness or injury detoured us from our goal. In spite of **feeling** discouraged at times, as nontraditional students, we persevered.

Like many programs at the College, the Rivier Nursing program, over the years, has developed in ways that allowed the nontraditional student to complete the journey more easily. The staff was helpful in encouraging us to press on in our pursuit and they walked with us through the struggles. Most members of the faculty, being nurses themselves, understood the need to support us, offering hope and care when we all needed it. In talking with non-nursing majors, I learned that you, too, experienced a similar support structure that was integral in completing your journey.

This College continually explored ways to refine its programs so it would accommodate all types of students, ensuring our eventual success. All of us here today are a testament to a diligent work effort and mutual desire that we each be college educated in our specialties and, for nurses, that we professionalize our care-giving. Thank you Rivier College and faculty! I know I speak for us all when I say we will never forget you.

In closing, there were times, when our **Feelings** ruled and we tumbled off the wall of our goal and with it went the **Faith** that we were destined to complete this journey, but **Fact**, that knowledge that we are divinely designed with specific talents for a specific purpose, pulled our **Faith up** and with **Faith** came our **Feelings**, too. By God’s grace and with support from our families, friends, co-workers and professors, we found the encouragement and strength to complete the journey. And here we are as nontraditional students who persevered.

King Solomon penned, in the *Book of Ecclesiastes* (chapter 9, verse 10), words I leave you with today as you go forward with your achievement in hand: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.” And may I add to those words of wisdom these words: let us always serve humankind with humility and selflessness; let us always continue to pursue a higher quality of service through higher education and specialization of our profession; and let us always remember that we are divine vessels, created for specialized service to all people, of all races, and in all places. May each of us leave an impact on those lives we touch, and may each attribute that makes us who we are ever be the things people see when we encounter them along life’s journey.

Thank you and congratulations class of 2006!

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\* SUSAN P. COAKLEY, RNC, BSN earned B. S. in Nursing (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Rivier College in May 2006.