

THE TURNING POINT IN YOUR LIVES (The Graduate Hooding Ceremony Address, May 12, 2011)

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I am so honored to have been invited to speak with you this evening — this is a rare opportunity to engage with you at such an amazing turning point in your lives. I want to congratulate the graduates on your great achievement. And I want to thank the faculty and administration and all the family and friends here for all their hard work and support.

The fact of the matter is that life is really very short and death is absolutely certain for all of us. It really is true that none of us are getting out of here alive and we should never forget this fundamental existential truth. Since death is real and inevitable for all of us, how then should we live our lives? For me the answer to this question has been clear since I was young: We should commit ourselves to following our hearts and doing what we most love and what we most want to do in life.

Now that you're graduating from graduate school, and are about to launch yourselves in new directions, it is absolutely essential that you ask yourself what it is that you really care the most about? What are your passions? What are your deepest yearnings? If you could do absolutely anything in the world, what is it that you would do? Your heart knows the answers to these questions. It is whispering to you right now this very moment even as I speak these words to you. So listen to it and follow it. It will always be your best guide in life.

There are two important aspects to following our heart. First, develop your self-awareness skills so that you can know when you are truly following our hearts and when you've lost your way. It is actually easier than it sounds because when you are truly following your hearts you are tapped into your deepest passions in life. When you are doing what you most love, and you find your life full of increased energy, greater creativity, purpose, joy, and happiness. You simply feel more alive and are moving within the flow of life. How do you know when you've stopped following your heart? When the opposite occurs—decreased energy, lack of creativity, no real sense of purpose and you aren't particularly happy. You have stepped out of the flow of life and are just drifting along. When this happens the solution is simple: Choose again. Reconnect again with your heart. As long as you are alive, it is never too late. You are free in each moment to choose the path of your heart and it never stops whispering to you, urging you to follow it.

The second key to successfully following your heart is that you will need to learn how to deal with fear. It is fear which prevents most people from reaching their fullest potential in life—fear of failure, fear of rejection from people you care about, fear that you simply aren't good enough, and sometimes even fear of your own potential greatness. Unfortunately no one else can overcome fear for us. Fear is something that you must learn to master on your own. Of course courage is the major strategy for learning to master fear for most people and you should certainly develop courage to the greatest extent you are able to. However, for me the insight that has personally helped me the most when dealing with fear has been to understand that fear is primarily a creation of the mind. I create it in my mind—it doesn't really exist outside the mind. I can dissolve it there as well. So can you and you will need to learn how to do this if you really want to be free in life and stay connected to your heart.

My next message to the Rivier Graduates of Advanced Degrees is to emphasize the absolute

importance of love as the cardinal virtue to nurture and cultivate in your lives. I don't believe there is anything more important in life than love. I'm not talking about romantic love here, or "eros", which is a very wonderful state of intoxication, but which also tends to fade over time. Rather, I'm talking about love as care and compassion, which actively flows out of our hearts toward other people and sentient beings through empathy and appreciation. This type of love need not fade over time, but is capable of continued growth all our lives if we will consciously nurture it. When we are truly following our hearts we are very likely tapped into the flow of love as well. But love is also a virtue that we can consciously develop in our lives to higher and higher levels. Such efforts are well worth making, for nothing enriches us, teaches us, or makes life more rewarding than developing our capacity for love. In cultivating love in my own life I've found practicing three other related virtues to be essential.

First is gratitude. Being alive is absolutely extraordinary and there are endless things to be thankful and grateful for. Try to take a few minutes early in the morning to be very quiet and to appreciate the people you love and to express gratitude in your heart for the many wonderful things that fill your life with joy.

Second is forgiveness. Nothing stops the flow of love in our lives quicker than the various judgments we make toward others and the grievances that we allow to fester in our minds against other people. What we don't fully understand is how much we harm ourselves with our judgments and grievances, because if we did understand we would stop indulging ourselves with them. Instead, we would see them for the poisons that they truly are. Fortunately, there is one virtue that we can practice that will eliminate them from our minds—forgiveness. Practicing forgiveness isn't always easy, however. Our desire to be "right" is very strong and this usually requires us to judge others as "wrong", and therefore not really forgivable. We also frequently make the mistake of believing that if we forgive others we are also condoning their harmful behavior. However, forgiveness simply means to relinquish our resentment and anger toward others, it doesn't mean relinquishing our values and ethics. When we forgive others we free ourselves from the past and allow our hearts to be fully in the present moment, which is where love exists.

Third is generosity. It would be difficult to exaggerate the value of practicing generosity. The virtue of generosity does not merely apply to giving money, but primarily to the gift of ourselves—our time and our service to others. True generosity should not be thought of as some kind of self-sacrifice where what we give to others comes at our own expense—their gain is our loss. Rather it is an extension of love from our own hearts, which takes genuine delight in the flourishing of other people. In believe generosity is a virtue that is best cultivated at first with small steps—acts of giving and kindness that may stretch us a bit, but which do not feel like any kind of sacrifice. As we practice generosity over time we will gradually discover that we want to take larger steps and extend our generosity further, because our sense of who we are and what we care about has expanded as well.

My next message to the Rivier graduates of advanced degrees this evening is that life has many, many challenges—it isn't easy. You will face many disappointments, frustrations, losses, and injustices, as well as inevitable illness, aging, and eventually death. See these difficulties as opportunities to help you grow—lessons that are presented to you to help you go further than you have gone before. I have not found it to be useful to see myself as a victim of circumstances. Self-pity is a remarkably self-destructive emotion, which you should consciously work to eliminate from your emotional life because it dis-empowers you and moves you away from being able to follow your heart.

You are our hope. So cherish this time in your life. Remember who you are. Because, right now, you have it all: The power of your imagination, the velocity of your dreams, and the passion of your heart. Don't lose it. Don't let it evaporate or get stripped away or worn away. And, as time passes, if you

find you've come far away from yourself, allow the breeze of humility to remind you of who you were—who you really are.

I would encourage you, with all my heart, just to be present. Be present and open to the moment that is unfolding before you. Because, ultimately, your life is made up of moments. So don't miss them by being lost in the past or anticipating the future. Don't be absent from your own life.

You will find that life is not governed by will or intention. It is ultimately the collection of these sense memories stored in our nerves, built up in our cells. Simple things:

- A certain slant of light coming through a window on a winter's afternoon
- The sound of spring peepers at twilight
- The taste of a strawberry still warm from the sun
- Your child's laughter
- Your mother's voice.

These are the things that shape our lives and settle into the fiber of our beings. Don't take them for granted. Slow down for them, they will take root. And someday 20-30-40 years from now, you may be going about your day when by chance the smell of bread-baking or the sound of a mockingbird singing will stop you in your tracks and carry you heart and soul back to yourself. Moments of pure happiness, bliss—come upon you unexpectedly. Don't be too preoccupied to experience them. Enjoy idleness—the art of doing nothing. Perhaps it's not in our cultural DNA. What is this desperate need we have to fill the emptiness with iPods, Blackberries, cell phones, computers, video games, and television? Perhaps we should ask ourselves, how do we really understand pleasure and happiness? We are goal oriented, result driven. Success is measured in how much we can get done.

The Tibetan Buddhists have a saying, "Tomorrow or the next life—which comes first, we never know."

So I encourage you—don't keep anticipating that your life is up ahead of you. Don't always be waiting for the next thing. Don't put all your energies into some idea of the future. And with that in mind, you open the door to endless possibilities. Just allow life to take you on an adventure. Be receptive to the winds of change. So, I guess the point I want to make is this: you just have to let life take you on its glorious journey. And the best time to do it is now. Don't constrain yourself with expectations of success. Success will be a by-product of the life you lead. All success is individual, and sometimes, completely accidental.

So you are setting off on your next adventure. You are beginning again, and what makes beginnings so thrilling is the unknown. What is vital is this initial confrontation with the unknown and how you decide to embrace it. The world is waiting for you. Explore it through your own humanity. Be guided by your higher self. Don't be dissuaded or discouraged, but do allow yourself to be sidetracked if that's what you want. Get off the fast track, off the grid—go out and wander.

I hope that you will commit yourselves to the pursuit of peace—to the practice of tolerance and compassion. And be good stewards to our precious Earth. I wish you all the courage to have an adventurer's heart and a life lived in the moment.

Dear Graduates of Advanced Degrees! This is more than enough advice. You need to reflect on your own feelings, your own desires. The world badly wants your brains and energy: give them freely, but try to stay conscious of what it is you're giving of yourself and why. Meanwhile, celebrate your success at Rivier College and bask in the pride we all feel for you this evening.

*** Introduction of Farewell Speaker**

by Paula Williams, Ed.D., Chairperson of Division of Nursing

Dr. Denise Baxter received her Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing from Boston College, her Master of Science Degree in Primary Care Nursing from the University of Massachusetts, Lowell and her Doctor of Education Degree in Higher Education Administration from Vanderbilt University. Dr. Baxter is a tenured Professor who began teaching within the Division of Nursing at Rivier College in 1984 where she collaborated in the planning of the first education program within the Division of Nursing. She continues to perform diversified activities requisite to the instruction, supervision, and education of nursing students at the Associate of Science, Baccalaureate and Master's degree levels. As a family nurse practitioner, Dr. Baxter practiced at the Growth and Nutrition Clinic at Saints Medical Center in Lowell, Massachusetts, where she collaborated with a multi-disciplinary team in planning the care and treatment of children diagnosed with lack of normal physiologic growth. A true patriot, Dr. Baxter served as a 1st Lieutenant in the United States Air Force as a charge nurse in the states, Frankfurt and Wiesbaden, Germany. Dr. Baxter holds memberships in numerous international, national, regional and local nursing organizations and holds certification as a Family Nurse Practitioner, perinatal and neonatal certification, and is a certified nurse educator. She is active in the Robert Wood Johnson Nurse of the Future endeavor in New Hampshire. Within the Rivier College Community, Dr. Baxter serves as Chair of the Assessment and Grievance Committees.

It is indeed appropriate, timely and with great honor that I introduce my colleague and friend of nearly thirty years, Dr. Denise Baxter, as our farewell speaker this evening which happens to coincide with the birthday of Florence Nightingale, an English nurse, writer and statistician who laid the foundation of modern nursing.