

Last Day, First Day, This Day
Commencement Address 2009

By
Robert A. Scott, President
Adelphi University

Introduction

Good morning Adelphi!

Welcome to the 113th Commencement, an exercise that has launched more than 100,000 life stories, with 3,000 more added today!

And welcome to the home of the undefeated national champion Women's Lacrosse Team!

Today, on Ruth Harley's birthday, yes, the namesake of the Harley University Center, we should think about how each of us is part of a long line of Adelphi students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Ruth was born in 1902, graduated in 1924, retired in 1978, and remained connected to Adelphi until her death in 2005 at age 103. Today, we present the Ruth S. Harley Award to Joan Kuster, Class of 1951, a friend and admirer of Ruth's, and an active, informed, committed Adelphi alumnae volunteer.

We also acknowledge members of the Class of 1959 celebrating their 50th Anniversary, including Diane Abbey, Irwin Kwatek, and Judge Ornstein. Thank you for being with us.

Today, let us think about this Adelphi graduation in three parts: as "last day;" "first day;" and "this day" - - your last day as a student for this degree, your first day as an alum, and a suggestion on how to think about "each day" yet to come.

Last Day

This is your last day as an Adelphi candidate for today's degree. It is not your last day as a "student," but it is a major milestone. We call it "graduation" for a reason.

As the last day in this station, it is a day to celebrate, and a day for reflection. It is a day to remember classes, competitors, costumes, and colleagues.

What memories come to your mind? You are musicians like Arielle Adamy and management majors like Eva Yevdayev; accounting majors like Josselyn Portillo and Stephen Fregosi; nurses like Jasmine Travers and Janice Lehman; actors like Kevin Russo, Natalie Margiotta, and Benjamin Guralnik; Biologists like Pranay Sinha; English majors like Molly Mann; painters like Katie Hillman and Tiffany O'Shea; Social Work majors like Uma Balakrishnan; Education students like Tia Glover; Communications

majors like Jennifer Ganley, Sean Magaldi, and Chris Gampat; Physics majors like Kaitlin O'Neill; Psychology students like Amy McCue; and Exercise Science students like Brant Kummerfeld.

You may have picked Adelphi for one reason - - Physics or tennis, but you grew to love it for other reasons: bonding with roommates, teammates, and classmates; Midnight Madness; your graduate student colleagues; a faculty mentor who challenged you intellectually without leaving you feeling vulnerable; an honors program; or studying or volunteering in El Salvador, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, England, India, Italy, Haiti, Mexico, or the Bahamas. Yes, Adelphi students studied and worked in all these countries.

This last day is a time to celebrate challenges met, the accomplishments thought impossible, the experience of bringing ideas to fruition - - the memory of arriving shy and gaining self-confidence.

For some of you, memories of Adelphi are family affairs because your parents, grandparents, or siblings, attended, or are attending. There are dozens of you, like Heather Lobianco.

For 47 of you, Adelphi is your employer, and you somehow balance work and studies, like Maggie Yoon and Christine Murphy.

Some of you are "stars," having been recognized on and off-campus for your achievements. I think of Craig Fox, Katie Quintana, and Rachel Ray. You, more than most, know you are only as successful as your cast, or cabinet, or team. You know you didn't do it all by yourself, even if we and the media treated you that way. So, we all should learn from you and remember those who serve as seconds, back-ups, and understudies - they too have been active, knowing full well, even if we didn't acknowledge it, that they are needed, valued, and deserving of the glow that comes from being part of an acclaimed enterprise.

From what you have told me, I know that part of your memory on this "last day" is the experience of having lived, worked, and played with students from other countries and cultures. Indeed, the assembly before us includes representatives of 31 countries and 24 states.

Your Adelphi education includes a journey from Nigeria, Niger, Niagra, North Carolina, and many parts of Nassau County.

You talk about Adelphi as "family," support group, and laud your cohort and their camaraderie. Your memories include Katrina, a teammate in Iraq, a professor in Djibouti, and the election of President Obama. Your memories are both individual and collective.

To an astonishing extent, your memories of Adelphi are related to humanitarian activities involving assistance to others on Long Island, elsewhere in the U.S., and in other countries. And these activities have influenced your decision to join the Peace Corps, to study dentistry or medicine in order to serve the less fortunate, to study law to become an advocate for international justice, to use your accounting background in international service. Your future path will lead to still new vistas and accomplishments.

Your memories also include your families, and the sacrifices they made. Such a commitment is exemplified by Jiri Podany, winner of the Parent Association Parent Recognition Award, who “cooked, cleaned, and did laundry so (his daughter Marie) could study” (and graduate today).

Your memories are also about the construction on campus, which caused inconvenience at times, but now provides the beautiful new spaces in the Performing Arts Center; the Recreation and Sports Center, fields and courts; the Early Learning Center; the Klapper Fine Arts Center; green energy systems; and, yes, the underground garage so welcome on winter mornings when others’ cars were buried in snow and ice.

Finally, your memories are of those who started with you but could not finish and are missed.

First Day

But this is not only your “last day,” it is also your “first day.” It is a day to pause, reflect, celebrate, and start anew in reaching for your dreams. When I asked students like Caren Bendror, Vivek Singh, Alex Molotsky, Alvin Vivican, Elizabeth Age, and Lauren Brickman about concerns for the future, they asked me to give you hope, to give encouragement. Well, I can. I look at you and know what you already have accomplished, often more than you conceived attainable. And I think of the alumni who preceded you and all that they have achieved.

You have demonstrated through your studies, extracurricular activities, and jobs, that you know “success” is the achievement of symmetry in the use of talent, time, and treasure. You have come to realize that status, power, and money are measures used by others without regard to your own values.

You have learned that to succeed, one must know the “fundamentals”; set priorities; work through problems collaboratively; listen intently; be flexible and adaptable; and appreciate the needs and interests of others.¹

You know these lessons, and we have attempted to introduce you to alumni who can serve as models and mentors.

¹ Levine, Stuart. “Ways to reach the zone of hope – and stay there.” Long Island Business News, April 2, 2009.

The career, or more likely, the careers in which you flourish may not be the first you enter, the one about which you first dreamed, or the one your parents encouraged. It may not even exist as we speak.

In my case, I went to college to be a minister, entered marketing with Procter & Gamble, served in the U.S. Navy teaching cryptography, became a college professor and administrator, worked in state government, consulted for a publisher, and became a college president. How many careers is that?

Although neither of my parents attended college, I have been a university or college president for 24 years, and am the only American to hold the three top jobs in higher education: head of a state coordinating board, a public college, and a private university - - and at each step I was told that if I took the post I would never move to the next.

Success requires passion, a love for what you do. And those with passion have a special talent to listen to an inner voice, to hear and see what others do not. They understand the world on their own terms, not just on the basis of what they have been told.

As Jessie Niemiec said in the program notes to her senior dance project, “Poor, Sore and Hungry,”

With a falling economy, a lack of health insurance upon graduation, and only enough money for Ramen noodles and bagels, it seems it would take a truly crazy person to choose a career to leave them even more poor, sore, and hungry. But sometimes a love for the arts is beyond choice. It is a risk that is worth the empty wallet, fatigue, and restless desire in order to energize and connect with an audience. The life of a dancer, as rigorous as it may be, gives us the opportunity to express love, life and all they consist of.²

Jessie has it right. Follow your dreams, with passion. Give it a try, even if it means “pounding the pavement,” going on your own, using your Adelphi contacts for networking and still more contacts. We are here for you.

This is how careers evolve. While some go in a straight-line, many do not. For example, Noreen Harrington came to Adelphi to be a swimmer and Physical Education major, then joined a Wall Street firm, started a business in London, and came home to challenge and reform the Mutual Fund industry.

Tom Motamed was a Biology major, became a teacher, went to law school, progressed through the ranks of a large insurance company, and is now chairman and CEO of a major public corporation.

² Niemiec, Jessie. Program for “Poor, Sore and Hungry,” Adelphi University Dance Recital, May 3, 2009.

Silvia Ortiz Gosnell, born in exile of Cuban parents, lived in Puerto Rico, studied for the B.A. and J.D., worked in corporate law, earned her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Adelphi, and now treats those in need in the U.S. and developing countries.

These alumni and many others credit their Adelphi education with preparing them to take advantage of opportunities. Their choices did not close off possibilities; they continued learning to be ready when luck appeared.

Our honorees today are great examples also. Seymour Topping knew he wanted to be a journalist, but his path crossed many borders, and he went where others declined to go.

The same can be said about Audrey Topping and Suzy Sonenberg. Neither of their careers was a straight line from start to now. They zigged and zagged, following their passions as their dreams evolved. You will find the same.

This Day

This is the “last day” and the “first day.” How should we think about “each day”?

Each day is new - - it is “today,” a day in which to build on what has gone before. It is the “someday” you have been anticipating, but “right now.”³

A friend of mine concluded a speech on ethical living by saying that we should “choose to act so the act of choosing remains possible.”⁴ This statement means not only that we should keep personal options open, but also that we should ensure that our choices will not unintentionally close off the options of others.

It means more than, “we are our brother’s and sister’s keeper”: it is a statement that each of us, individually and collectively, is the keeper of all freedoms, for everyone. If we act so the act of choosing is no longer possible, for example with regard to the environment, then everyone is diminished, and freedom of choice is lost. This, too, is our responsibility, each day.

But we are not alone in our tasks. It was a mentor who reminded me to “secure your footing before you extend your reach,” as a way of encouraging reflection, putting ambition in its place, and acknowledging the importance of a team in order to achieve progress, however defined, one day at a time. You are not alone either.

A focus on “this day” reminds us of the philosophy of “mindfulness,” being alert to one’s present experience, feelings, and consciousness in creating a sense of total

³ Freedman, Samuel G. “On Religion – Finding Help in a Book that Spread the Prairie Fire.” The New York Times, April 18, 2009.

⁴ Artigiani, Robert. “History, Science and Hope: Making Sense of Modernity.” Speech at University of California at Berkeley, January 2009. Personal Correspondence.

awareness.⁵ We hope that graduates of Adelphi will be lifelong learners, effective workers, active citizens, and good mentors, respectful of the past, hopeful for the future, mindful of the present.⁶

Conclusion

“Last day,” “first day,” “this day”: A model for thinking about one’s life at the moment of graduation. It is a model that incorporates memories of the past, dreams for the future, and strategies for living each day. Our goal for you is to be author of your life, not just an actor in a script by another’s hand. Our hope is that you have learned that education is as much about character and citizenship as it is about careers and commerce.

On each new day, draw on the well of experience gained at Adelphi; remember our commitments to you; tell us of your progress; return to campus; help future generations of students as you have been helped.

Be well. Do well. Go far.

Last day. First day. This day -- is your day.

Congratulations, Class of 2009. Thank you.

⁵ “Mindfulness.” Wikipedia.

⁶ Reis, Rick. “TP Msg #835. What Do You Want Your Students To Be Doing 20 Years From Now?” Reis@stanford.edu, April 3, 2009.