

**Hollins University
Honors Convocation
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**Address by
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I think our brains are wired to hear and learn from stories. Most of history and our attempts to understand our place in the world are wrapped up in stories. For me, it's the stories of the natural world that are only uncovered by patient observation that are most delightful and instructive. Surely I would remember one if I gave it time and was open to inspiration. Inspiration can come in many forms and can be found in the most unlikely of places.

I found mine in the grocery store – the produce aisle – organic section to be exact. From those bins of luscious vegetables I felt the sensation of being watched. I turned and fell under the intense stare of the only vegetable capable of watching the world and me – the only one with eyes – yes, in that bin were humble potatoes clamoring to have their story told.

You might ask what potato story would be worthy of Honors Convocation. Well, potatoes have certainly made their mark on the world: the history of Ireland is shaped by potatoes; Dan Quayle's vice presidency was defined by the potato. But I don't want to tell a story about Vice Presidents, I want to tell you one of baboons. Now of course many of you may think there isn't much of a difference but I assure you there is – for baboons can be quite bright and inspiring.

In the 1950's scientists began to realize that they really couldn't understand the natural behavior of primates by watching them in tiny cages. And so field studies of primates began to crop up all over the world and a group of scientists decided to study the northern most baboon species, the Japanese macaque. Now studying monkeys in the wild is hard work – the places where they remain have challenging terrain, lots of biting insects and difficult weather conditions. So these scientists decided to make their life a little easier – they would study the baboons in the wild but they would get the monkeys to come to them. So when they were ready to make observations, they would boat over to the island of Kimura, paddle in to shore, dump a whole bunch of food on the beach and then retreat back to watch the baboons from the comfort of a boat. Baboons are a smart lot and they quickly learned to come out of the forest for the free handout. And soon the scientists had learned quite a bit: males were large and dominated the picnic, stealing food from females and juveniles, females stuck together taking care of the young – nothing terribly surprising for the primate world.

And then one day about a year into their study, Imo, a young female baboon that was on the cusp of adult responsibilities – not unlike most of you – did something so surprising, so noteworthy that it has been talked about for more than fifty years. Imo picked up a potato from the sandy beach, but instead of eating it sand and all as she had done in the past, she went down to the sea and washed it free of sand. How she came up with the idea is a mystery; I prefer to think it was youthful insight and a willingness to experiment, but after that first bite, she never ate another dirty potato. Day after day she would pick up her potato and wash it off before eating it. Pretty

soon, the scientists noticed that Imo's friends, the other young females in the troop, started washing their potatoes, too. The young males and the adult females in the troop were a bit slower to catch on, but eventually they too could be seen washing at the sea's edge. And what about the large dominant males? Well, they kept doing what they always had done, taking food from everyone else – they never learned. But you know, no one stays in power forever, eventually those males died out and young potato-washing males assumed their place. The power of a young female with a good idea!

I'm afraid that there are lots of dirty potatoes waiting out there for you, Class of 2007. We live in a world of rapid global climate change that threatens the lives of so many, a world of prejudice (prejudice against skin color, religion, who you choose to love), a world of war and injustice, and a world with people in power that just don't seem to learn. And those big dirty potatoes are kept company by many smaller equally sandy ones including those covered in anxiety, fear, and self-doubt. But I have faith. You are bright Hollins women, and like Imo you have insight, ability, and courage. Imo washed her first potato because she figured out it was the right thing to do. I doubt she had any thoughts that she would change her culture – but she did. As you leave Hollins I hope you will think of this story and remember to be open to inspiration and to believe in yourself – because it is time to start washing some potatoes.