

Hollins University
Commencement Address
May 17, 2009
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WHAT IS HOLLINS?

Chairman Baruch, President Gray, fellow trustees, faculty and staff, families, graduates, friends: Good morning. I can't resist mentioning that at my graduation in 1958 I sat right there, exactly where you are sitting now, surrounded by these same trees, and by these same historic buildings-- though they are much more historic now!

A few years ago, I got an email out of the blue from a polite man named Peter J. Smith, whom I had never met. Would I mind, he asked, if he included the 1983 commencement speech I gave here at Hollins in an anthology of commencement speeches he was about to publish? He apologized for not being able to pay me, but said my speech would be in good company: he was including speeches by four presidents of the US, other famous Americans, Mother Teresa, and The Dalai Lama. I promptly replied to Peter J. Smith that I would not only give him permission to include my remarks, I would happily pay HIM a small stipend to do so! He politely declined my offer.

Later, on reflection, I imagined that before publication someone with superior judgment would vet the selections and that a discerning editor would scratch my speech. And for several months I thought no more about this.

Then a book arrived on my stoop from Scribner entitled *Onward!* and sub-titled *Twenty-five Years of Advice Exhortation and Inspiration from America's Best Commencement Speeches*. The entries were excerpts from some 220 speeches made in last twenty-five years of the 20th century, and guess what? When I looked at the year 1983, there were indeed excerpts from my only other commencement speech here at Hollins, nestled in with excerpts that same year from E. L. Doctorow, Margaret Atwood, Coretta Scott King, and Meryl Streep.

Why am I telling you this boastful story? You may think I am edging toward an obligatory bullet of advice, something such as “if you don’t toot your own horn, no one else will do it for you.” Actually, no. I’m not even sure I believe that.

This morning, in fact, I will give advice short shrift. When the seniors honored me with their invitation, I went to my bookshelf, took down one of the dozen or so copies of *Onward!* I just happen to own, and read it all the way through. This was a numbing mistake, because all the advice that should be given is given in *Onward!*, and usually with far more grace and eloquence than I possess. I recommend you check this book out on Amazon, where it is now available for a song.

I will return to the book shortly, to make a point on the topic of this talk. My topic is not advice but a question. The question is, “What is Hollins?”

I was asked this question fifty-one years ago, memorably, in New York City shortly after I graduated. With my degree in hand, I had gone to Manhattan to find a job. Early on, I answered an ad in the *New York Times*, and soon found myself at an employment agency sitting in front of a man who was, of course, smoking a cigar. He looked up from my resume and asked me that question: “What is Hollins?”

I probably told him it was a small liberal arts college for women in Virginia. Whatever I said, he took to mean it was like Smith College (which was a good thing apparently) and he sent me along to meet the people with the job opening at Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, where I got that all-important first job.

You too will be asked some version of the question What is Hollins?, probably many times, once you leave this place. And if you say it is a small liberal-arts university in Virginia, with undergraduate programs for women and coed graduate programs, you will be missing an opportunity.

Hollins, of course, is distinctive in many ways. It has all these amazing teachers seated up here to my right, some of whom you are going to remember forever. That in itself is not so unusual. Here’s what is: **THEY** are going to remember **YOU!** Never take for granted that you had the good sense to choose a university at which you would actually get to

know the faculty. A frequent lament of professors at large highly prestigious universities is that, when students ask them to write recommendations for, say, graduate schools, the professors have absolutely no idea who the students are. As an added bonus, most of you have gotten to know your president, and she you, which would be a rare privilege at any university, but which is a special privilege at Hollins now because there is no more effective president, and no finer role model, than Nancy Oliver Gray.

I know that many of you, and your parents, have borrowed and sacrificed for your Hollins education, and I just want to underscore that you have gotten something very valuable in return.

Hollins, at the undergraduate level, is also special because it is for women only. This says something about our mission, and our focus, but it also says something about you. The writer and director Nora Ephron, who is more or less my vintage (as in paleolithic), is a Wellesley graduate. When she spoke at Wellesley's commencement in 1996, she told the seniors that in her day (our day) many of us went to women's colleges because it was "what you did in those days." She added, "Just the fact that you *chose* to come to a single-sex college" shows you are "smarter than we were." How *did* you resist the mass allure of big universities, with their winning teams on television, their mascots and cheerleaders, and their adorable jumping-bean students in the stands? You are uncommon women, not crowd followers. What could be rarer

than a student body of independent thinkers, each having access to a tailor-made education?

Moving now from the merely distinctive to the utterly unique: No other institution of higher learning in America has Tinker Day and ADA, two of the weirdest traditions ever devised by womankind. I have always loved Hollins 's healthy appetite for wackiness, and its advanced institutional sense of humor. You may find, as I have, that Hollins is envied for this.

Really, though, the overarching thing that sets Hollins apart, the answer you might give when asked What is Hollins?, is that Hollins is distinguished by the achievements of its graduates. Four have won Pulitzer prizes. One singlehandedly changed the landscape for women in politics by inventing Emily's List. Graduates hold top positions in the news divisions of NBC and CBS, and one has long been a familiar face on ABC. We have our share of doctors and lawyers and successful businesswomen, in the financial and fashion worlds especially, and entrepreneurs too, graduates making money making everything from clothes to books to outdoor furniture to cakes. Just one graduate was the first woman ever to be publisher of, successively, LIFE, PEOPLE, and TIME magazines. One is a path-breaking scientist at Rockefeller University. Another was a college president and is now a vice president at Yale. Graduates who are dancers pop up in the *New York Times* with regularity. As do reviews of work by the small army of Hollins graduates who are poets and writers. One of the nation's most famous

photographers has two degrees from Hollins, and other Hollins artists sell their paintings and sculptures at prices I wish I could afford.

Many Hollins graduates are known and widely admired for their professional or volunteer roles in their communities. I have been traveling around the US lately on behalf of the *Hollins Campaign for Women Who Are Going Places*, and I can tell you that in cities like Tampa and Jacksonville and Atlanta and Dallas and Richmond and Washington and even San Diego, our alumnae are leading citizens. They play top roles in the Chamber of Commerce or the community foundation or the ballet or the museum or in hospitals or hospice, libraries, environmental groups, historic preservation, their churches, the schools. Hollins alumnae are standouts, highly visible, doing transforming things.

How remarkable is this? One of our nation's great assets is that some 60 million Americans have baccalaureate degrees. In that vast firmament you can count a mere 12,000 living graduates of Hollins, just 2/100^{ths} of one percent. We are only one in every 5,000, a smattering so small that by all statistical measures we should be invisible. And yet there we are, outshining ourselves.

The thing I left out of the story about the book *Onward!* is that mine was not the only Hollins commencement address in that collection of the 220 best. There are in fact three others, all by Hollins graduates. In 1993, there is novelist Lee Smith, Class of 1967. She shared space that year with Ronald Reagan, Jodie Foster, and John Updike. In 1995, there

is M. L. Flynn, Class of 1973, and senior producer of NBC Nightly News, along with Bill Clinton and Vaclav Havel and Gloria Steinem. And in 1996, there is Wendy Walker, Class of 1975, longtime executive producer of the Larry King Show, sandwiched in with George Bush, Cornel West, and Mary Higgins Clark.

I believe that all four of us, as commencement speakers here, were inspired by the strong sense of connection that most Hollins graduates have to this place and to the way we were educated here. Moreover, graduates have increasingly made close connections to students like you. I know that some members of this senior class have worked at internships provided by Hollins graduates, stayed in the homes of graduates while working at those internships, or been entertained by graduates when you were in places like New York City and Atlanta and the Triangle in North Carolina, where I live. As an aside, let me say I wish all of you could hear the nice things your employers say behind your backs.

Now, at last, you're about to graduate and join the ranks of the 12,000. Your timing, I needn't mention, is terrible. But there will always be a market for smart, hungry, talented Hollins graduates. And you can count on Hollins alumnae to help when they can. In closing, here's some help from three of them, advice straight from the pages of *Onward!*

From Wendy Walker: "Take any job to get a foot in the door....Work harder than the next guy—come early and stay late....If you don't

understand something, don't fake it. Ask questions and more questions....Treat your peers with respect and help them as much as you can."

From M.L. Flynn: "Don't panic. The waves of self-doubt and anxiety you have been suffering from and will continue to be paralyzed by for weeks, months—though I trust not years—is known as post-college depression. We have all had it. You will survive."

From Lee Smith: "Whenever your life seems hardest...there is the chance to find deeper and greater powers within yourself."

I leave you with this final thought: There is no better measure of an educational institution's value than the achievements of its graduates. Starting minutes from now, "graduates" means you. So go out and do something wonderful with your lives!

What is Hollins? Hollins is all of us. Hollins is you! Thank you.