

## Founder's Day 2009

President Nancy Oliver Gray, Vice President of Academic Affairs Jeannine Stewart, other administrators, faculty and staff, Chaplain Jan Fuller, my colleague and friend, Honorees Randall K. Flory and Michelle Ann Abate, Megan Stephanie Doldron, Class President Lia Kelinsky and members of the class of 2009, thank you for your gracious invitation. Descendants of our founder, Charles Lewis Cocke, Trustees, Alum, students and friends. Happy Founder's Day. It is always a joy for me to return to Hollins.

### **The word of the prophet Jeremiah 1:4-8:**

*The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Ah, Sovereign Lord", I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child. But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.*

### **Women who are going places start at Hollins**

I vividly remember as if it were only yesterday, having a conversation with God about my destination in life. I was a junior here at Hollins and didn't have a clue. It was during that encounter that it became clear to me that I was to be a preacher. A preacher, I said, I can't be a preacher. I'm a woman! I didn't know any female preachers, hadn't heard or seen any, as far as I was concerned women weren't supposed to preach, and lots of folk agreed with me then and still do!

But God knew that I am a woman, it's fairly obvious! I love being a woman. I love walking and talking like a woman, thinking and reasoning like a woman, dressing and smelling like a woman! There is nothing like being a woman! But what did being a woman have to do with pursuing my destiny in life. Well, it sounded like a reasonable excuse to me; more reasonable than some of the excuses I've heard from folks about why they can't do what they have been called to do. Lots of women and men use flimsy excuses for not wanting to fulfill their destiny and becoming all they were created to be, present company included.

Take Jeremiah for example; Jeremiah was the greatest prophet in Israelite history. When God called Jeremiah, he was preparing to be a priest like his father and grandfather. The life of a priest was fairly routine and predictable. He knew what priests were to do. It was easy for him to be a priest.

What he had not anticipated was being called to be a prophet. When God called Jeremiah, he caught him off guard, interrupted his life, interfered with his plans, messed with Jeremiah's prearranged program, and called him out of his comfort zone. It was the same with me. I was a music major preparing to become an opera singer or a school teacher. In that moment everything changed. That's how God operates when he taps a person for a certain task. You need to know this because you have a call on your life. I know that some of you think the call is for "preachers only." But each of us has a call.

You are not here on earth by accident; you are here on assignment. Some of you have been struggling with the question of why you were even born. Of what significance is your life? What

was the point of spending the last 16 years pursuing an education, four of them here at Hollins, in the Roanoke Valley, of all places?

How in the world did you make it through in your right mind, with every need met, tuition paid or almost paid, even though you were not sure at times where the funds would come from, especially given these tough economic times. How did you survive all your messes and mishaps? It's simple!

God has a plan and purpose for your life. There are great things in store for you. Every event of your life, every experience good, bad and otherwise has been moving you to the moment in time when you would be set to discover and fulfill your *raison d'être*, your reason for being. You are on your way somewhere!

**Women who are going places live on purpose!** The way one discovers his or her purpose is through listening to the stirrings of one's heart. It is getting in touch with your passion. Passion is a gift of God. Passion is the first step to achievement. Your desire determines your destiny. Passion is a fire set inside of you that will not let you be still. It will not let you be complacent or passive, settling for less than the best, failing to achieve your best! Passion propels you into greatness.

Think of the people who have achieved much and you will be struck by their passion:

Martin Luther King had a passion for peace and justice

Mother Teresa for the poor

Randy Flory for psychology

Annie Dillard for writing

Obama for change

Ann Compton for journalism and

Nancy Gray for education

Women who are going places either start at Hollins or end up here! Persons who have move beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary are people who live with a sense of passion.

**Women who are going places live on purpose and with passion.**

**Women who are going places dare to dream.**

Discovering your purpose is also daring to dream of what is possible in your life! When I talk about dreaming, I'm not referring to the series of nocturnal thoughts, images or emotions occurring during sleep. I'm talking about those strongly desired goals to be achieved, those distinctive hopes and images dancing in your imagination, exciting you, stirring up your passions, setting your soul on fire and unleashing energy within you that is not easily contained.

Every one of us has the ability to dream. To dream is to see a vision for your life and watch it come to pass. Dreams reveal to us the reason we were created in the first place. Each of us has at least one dream to live out; a vision for our lives that allows us to make our mark in the world.

Great, awesome and wonderful things happen when one dares to dream. Norman Vincent Peale says,

**“To achieve anything significant, everyone needs a little imagination and a big dream.”**

Once you discover your purpose in life, you need a plan. Women who are going places need a plan. We can't just fly be the seat of our pants wasting precious time. If you don't know where you are going, you could end up anywhere. You need a plan! A plan includes goals to help you focus on getting to your destination. A goal is a dream with a deadline!

Achieving your purpose or assignment in life requires pursuing it at all costs. **You will never possess what you will not pursue.**

There are lots of people in the world who, though they have wonderful dreams and visions of where they want to go in life, are living beneath their privilege and potential. They have never achieved all they could because they are not willing to do the hard work of pursuing their purpose; always giving excuses why they can't do it.

When God called Jeremiah, the first thing out of his mouth was an excuse. His excuse was he was only a child. Jeremiah wasn't a child. The word used for child in this passage is actually a word that talks about a range in age from childhood to young adulthood. Jeremiah was about 20 years old. He was young, but he was no longer a child. Jeremiah was reluctant to move into his destiny because he thought he was too young. Just like my excuse was I'm only a woman.

When Jeremiah thought about what He was being called to do, he was no doubt overwhelmed; he was being called to be a prophet to the nations. This was no small task!

Be clear, we are not called to insignificant assignments. Every assignment is major with far reaching implications. You may be called to serve in a specific location, at a specific time, and for a specific people, but the effects of our efforts are far reaching and never to be underestimated.

You may never know how many people will be touched through teaching one child or how many lives will be saved through your scientific research. You can never imagine how many homes will be changed by helping one sister or brother understand his or her dignity and worth through the non-profit you will establish.

The world will be a better place because of your advocacy as an attorney, your counseling as a psychiatrist or therapist, your healing touch as a medical professional, your technical support as a computer specialist, your support and assistance as an administrator and your prowess as an entrepreneur.

You are positioned to set the world on fire and release the potential in others who will be inspired by your singing, your dancing, your artistry and creativity, the living out of your dreams.

We never know the far-reaching affects of what we are destined to be and to do. Never underestimate who you are and your assignment.

I never would have imagined that I would be speaking to you this afternoon 36 years ago in the very place that I first heard about my call and then came up with the flimsy excuse, I am only a woman. Hollins was where it all started for me.

It was at Hollins that I not only heard the call, I discovered my purpose, got in touch with my passion and gained the courage to pursue it!

As some of you prepare to graduate from one of the leading universities in the nation, you have everything you need to succeed in the world. The knowledge that you have been given over the last four years has infused you with the ability to enter any arena and master it. Wonderfully gifted and committed professors have challenged you to be analytical, creative and to lead. The discipline, the determination, the perseverance that has been pressed into you has prepared you to achieve beyond your wildest imagination.

You are set to change the world. Hollins has not only prepared you for personal success and achievement, you have been prepared for service to society as well.

Our nation and world are in trouble. We are a planet in peril given the presence of two wars, the housing crisis, the economic recession and skyrocketing unemployment. People are hurting and hungry, many afraid; no one is sure what is going to happen next. I know that there is perhaps some anxiety on the campus. You might even be afraid, wondering what you can possibly do to make a difference.

Too many of us as women are quick to doubt ourselves and question our ability, even when we have everything we need.

We allow the opinions of others, our past and present failures to cause us to be afraid to even try to fulfill our assignment. Some of you are even afraid to discover your purpose because you are already convinced that you couldn't possibly fulfill it.

What are you afraid of: success or failure; nothing beats a failure but a try. Contrary to popular belief, success is not a given. Success in life requires hard work, perseverance and the willingness to try and keep on trying. If at first you don't succeed, try again.

The reason we have to keep on trying is that another crucial part of becoming a success is learning what to do with failure. We have to change our perspective of failing. Failure is a part of life. Instead of being afraid of it, we must learn to embrace it. Rather than be intimidated by it, we must use it to our advantage. All of us make mistakes. Some of us make mistakes everyday.

If you are ever going to succeed, you are going to make some mistakes. Mistakes are actually good for us. We can learn from our mistakes. When you make a mistake, you discover what not to do the next time. What are you afraid of? It takes courage to walk in your destiny. It takes courage to face the challenges ahead. Some folks think that courage is the absence of fear, but courage is not the absence of fear, courage is the ability to press on in spite of fear, pain, or discomfort. We will get through this!

I know that it is a bit overwhelming to think that you could possibly make a difference at a time like this. President Obama said in his address to Congress:

**“The answers to our problems don’t lie beyond our reach. They exist in our laboratories and universities; in our fields and our factories; in the imaginations of our entrepreneurs and the pride of the hardest-working people of Earth.”**

God said, **“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.”**

This refers to God’s sovereign and intentional choice of you and me. The Hebrew word “to know” is yada, which refers to intimate knowledge of another. God knows us intimately. He knows everything there is to know about us. God has this wonderful knowledge about us because as the Psalmist poetically says, “He knit us together in our mother’s womb.” God knows our strengths and weaknesses, fears and insecurities.

When God made you, God knew exactly what you would need to be the person you are; to fulfill the purpose for which you were created.

**You were made with divine intentionality. You have been shaped for significance!** You have the personality in line with your purpose. You are intellectually equal to the task. You are gifted beyond measure.

You are a masterpiece, intricately designed for your destiny; you have been given everything you need to serve this present age. It will not be easy; times are tough, but whenever you need anything, I don’t care what it is. Remember one more thing we learned at Hollins: **Lift up your eyes to the hills from whence comes your help. Our Help comes from the Lord!**

