

# 180TH COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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Welcome graduates, family and friends, Hollins faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees. Graduates—I am so honored and humbled that you asked me here to speak with you today. Thirty-six years ago, I was sitting in what very well could have been the exact same seat that one of you is sitting in right now.

And I don't mean that metaphorically—but quite literally. We keep a tight budget at Hollins, so a 36-year-old chair is not out of the question! I remember that day so clearly: the ceremony's *gravity*, everyone invoking all sorts of quotes, scripture, and history, talking about how this time would never come again, and how it's not an ending, but a COMMENCEment, a new beginning, a monumental moment.

Yes, there is definitely gravitas to this moment. But there is also tremendous *joy*. Graduates, you did it. You did something really, really hard. You began at Hollins, and then, right in the middle of it all, COVID-19 cracked the world open. And our old-world kind of fell apart. But with the help of our incredible leader, President Mary Dana Hinton, together with the entire campus, you built a new Hollins community—this extraordinary “Culture of Care” for which this wonderful class of 2022 will forever be known. You did all that during a time of racial reckoning,

of political upheaval, of cancel culture, despite fear of illness and even death while still being students, artists, athletes, workers, and friends. You did not give up.

Congratulations!!

So yes, 36 years ago in that seat, I was ready to bolt and start to live my “grown-up” life. Please don’t get me wrong, I loved my time at Hollins, or at least most of it, but let’s be real—college is about learning and growing and evolving—and that can be painful at times—at least it was for me. And while I loved my friends, MOST of my classes, and professors, I wanted to start living my adult life—because I knew exactly what it was going to look like. I was going to take New York by storm and have a brilliant publishing career.

So, I arrived in NYC with my best friend from Hollins and money I’d saved from summer jobs, and thankfully, found an apartment. All I needed now was my dream job. Easy! I knew it might not be, for other people. But I was so sure that my winning personality, my great education, my can-do attitude, and willingness to put in long hours would make things happen for me right away.

Well, “right away” became months. And my confidence edged closer to panic. I could not find a job in my chosen field. It was almost as if my field didn’t know that I had chosen it.

I wasn't being picky. I was ready for entry-level work, but what I didn't know was that in those days, entry-level work in a publishing house or magazine required one critical skill, and it wasn't love of books, the ability to write beautifully, or have fantastic grades. It was how many words a minute could you type. And I was a terrible typist. Every interview first required taking a typing test. I cannot convey to you the number of typos I made or how slowly I typed. I didn't even make *errors* quickly. And these were for jobs earning \$12,000 a year.

I went on dozens of interviews. Failed every test. No job offers. My money was running out. Luckily, a recruiter took the time to meet with me and told me about something called corporate communications. It was a lot like publishing but for a company, and it paid more—and best of all, no typing tests were required. So fast-forward, I got a job as a communications assistant at a long-distance telephone company that paid me \$18,000 a year. It certainly wasn't as glamorous as working for *Vogue*, and the only interest I had in the long-distance business was talking to friends on the phone. But it was my first step on a non-linear path of a career in communications that would last 35 years, take me all over the world, but more important would lead me to do work that would have an impact on the lives of the people we served, on the lives of the people I got to work with—and would help shape me into the person I would become.

**The reason that I share this story with you is this—the first lesson that I wish I had known when I was in your seat decades ago: At the start of your post-Hollins journey, PICK ONE THING.** That's it. Pick the thing that is most important to you and go for it. For me, bigger than my publishing career was my life-long dream of living in New York. So I got there. I didn't get a job in my chosen field, I wasn't working for a company I particularly cared about at first, and I really wasn't the best assistant—but I was living life in NYC.

For you, have your dream, your plan—where you want to live, which field you want to be in, which company, organization, or institution you want to be part of, which job you want—but start with the most important thing. Now if I stopped there, I would be committing commencement speaker malpractice, because I have to add one crucial fact—**your most important thing will change over time.** You still need to figure out what that one most important thing is for you **RIGHT NOW**, but be prepared for forks in the road as you move forward.

The second lesson from that story is **ASK FOR HELP.** Asking for help connected me to the reality of the problem. This kind recruiter helped me to trade my map in for a compass. Sometimes you need a map, true, but at that point, I needed a compass. My map, it turned out, was a fantasy. Asking for help gave me the reality check I needed and helped me make a critical pivot.

Asking for help doesn't mean that you are weak or that you don't know what you are doing. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Asking for help is a sign of strength and courage. And one of the best parts of Hollins is that Hollins graduates are always there to help each other. Pick up the phone, reach out on LinkedIn, send an email or a text—but ask! There is nothing that makes me happier than to hear from a Hollins student or graduate. And the secret is that being asked for help does something amazing for the other person. For me—and maybe it is because I can be bossy—it lifts me up, makes me feel needed, and gives me such joy to help others avoid some of the many mistakes I have made and mud puddles that I have slogged through. We can tend to think of asking as embarrassing for us and a burden on the other person. But when we reach beyond that barrier—that impossible goal of always being perfect and strong—we step into a shared space and realize that we are human together.

Every single one of you can and should be that for each other. That's what brought me to Hollins as a student. It is what brought me back to Hollins as a member of the Alumnae Board, then the Board of Trustees, and for the last four years, as board chair. Let me tell you—it is all about help. And lifting each other up. I have Hollins friends of all generations I go to for advice, for venting, for expertise. And in turn, I have found doctors for people, I have been a matchmaker of marriages and friendships, and when I got senior enough, I was able to create space for 20

Hollins interns at The Estée Lauder Companies which now has three—soon to be four—recent Hollins graduates (I am looking at you Rosie Wong!) who are knocking it out of the park. And you are now part of that mosaic of Hollins graduates helping to lift each other up. But you cannot just be on the asking end. You must answer, too, and bring up others with you.

So, back to New York, I didn't stay an assistant forever nor did I stay in the long-distance business which thanks to technology, doesn't even exist anymore. My next stop was financial services. Now please remember that I was an English and French major who had never taken economics or finance—so what was I doing working for Citibank? Well, I kind of fell in love with corporate communications. And it turns out, there is a lot of publishing in corporate communications, so it was a win-win.

At Citi, I learned another valuable skill—**I raised my hand for everything**—including tasks I knew nothing about. When you bolt, and when you find yourself heading in the direction of your dreams, even if you're not on the actual doorstep just yet—**raise your hand for everything**. Working on those projects with other departments, stepping in when a teammate was out, and volunteering for things no one else wanted to do helped me learn more about the organization, build my skills, and experience new areas.

And it built trust. You will find that accountability matters at all levels of an organization, personally and professionally. I could trust myself to follow through. My teammates could trust me to show up. And that's co-creating a culture that thrives.

**Aside from raising my hand for everything—another lesson that emerged out of my experience was that it wasn't just that I was willing to do the work but that I was a team player, someone who (most) people enjoyed working with.**

**And believe me, when it's your fourth night in a row of working past midnight, being with people you like is really important.** Some might think that I was doing menial work—and sometimes it felt that way—but on the other hand, I was in a room with colleagues who were three or four levels more senior than I was, where I got to hear all of their thinking going into the deal at hand, call my colleagues by name, and they called me by mine. And you know what happened next?

Organically, I began to build a network, that meant more complex and important projects, more meaning for me, and more and more responsibility. I was there for 12 years and left as a vice president and the youngest member of the firm's leadership team.

Stories can often sound linear. This wasn't linear. The only line was the one I'd drawn from Roanoke to New York. Otherwise, mine was a crooked path. It's only linear in retrospect when I see that each of my experiences was a prerequisite for

what came next. And that's the beauty, and the burden. In life, we don't get to decide what comes next. But we can decide how we are going to show up in whatever comes next. And that brings me to the most important lesson I've learned, that is to ask: **What do you need from me?**

In the course of my career, with plenty of scraped knees, embarrassments, and tears, I can tell you that the worst year of my life came later after I landed my dream job. I was asked to lead Global Communications for the world's leading prestige beauty company. I LOVED the work. I LOVED my team. I LOVED the brands and products. And my first year was horrible. It was a time of massive transition for the company, I was in a new industry, and I had a very painful, public failure. My epic mistake was not to let the Chairman Emeritus—the one with his name on the company's front door—know that a potential crisis was brewing. Of course, I shared that information with my two bosses named on my org chart but that wasn't enough.

Now mistakes are fine. I encourage them. We want to make mistakes of judgment, not integrity. Mine in that first year was a mistake of judgment and it was extremely painful to own. But I did own it and I moved forward. Believe me—I considered quitting. But I kept on. Then it FINALLY occurred to me—wait a minute. I ask a lot of questions, that's how I learn, but what I never asked my “true boss” was—**What do you need from me?** So I gathered my courage, went in to his



office, and after apologizing profusely, I asked him: “What do you need from me?” And he told me, down to the last detail and in that moment, my question changed everything.

Please save yourself time, and pain, and if you remember one thing on this joyful day, remember to ask the people that you work with: **What do you need from me?** What does it look like? What does success look like for you? How do you want to be communicated with, how often? What keeps you up at night? Because it may not be in the job description. And it OFTEN isn’t the org chart. It is important to ask the question frequently because the answers will change.

I think “What do you need from me?” is something we should also ask ourselves. Be brave enough to ask yourself “what do I need in this moment?” To cry? To wait a beat? (And please do, before you hit send). Maybe when things are so bad, you just need to sleep on it and see how things are in the morning. And things may be worse in the morning! But you’ll be more prepared to deal with them.

And graduates, this is how change happens. Every single time you expand your thinking to include even one more person, rather than just reacting and retreating—you can change the culture, and the future, for the better. You have increased the chances for more communication, more honesty, more success, and better outcomes for EVERYONE involved.

Yes, you are going into a world with a lot of problems. Problems that we have not experienced before as a culture, or frankly as a species. Climate change is an existential threat. The global refugee crisis is exponentially worse with the Ukraine invasion. Democracy and human rights seem to be dissolving under our feet. That is the reality of our world today.

But this is where I'm going to follow in the tradition of 36 years ago and share a quote. It is one that means a lot to me, and it's one that brought me back after every stumble, and it brought me back to Hollins. The quote is from the Talmud and reads: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

When we say, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it," we are really asking the world, "What do you need from me?"

When we make intentional choices true to our calling, when we raise our hand, and raise each other up, when we take a moment and ask ourselves and the world,

"What do you need from me right now?" we take a step closer to becoming the person we want to be, in the world we say we want to live in. But it takes all of us.

And that is a relief, because that is what Hollins is. It's all of us. So, class of 2022, cherish that feeling of wanting to bolt—you are ready.

Thank you.