

Commencement Address
Marietta College
May 5, 2019
Barbara Perry Fitzgerald, '73

President Ruud, Chair Fenton, Provost Bland, Dr. Danford, trustees, faculty, staff, friends and family of the class of 2019 and, most importantly, graduates:

I must begin my remarks today by thanking the faculty and trustees for this honorary degree. I am humbled and truly grateful for this recognition and appreciate its' significance. But to ease everyone's mind, I promise to only use the Dr. designation when making a dinner reservation.

My being here to receive this honor and to address this gathering had a rather inauspicious start. While responding to a voicemail from my dentist, I realized that Dr. Ruud had telephoned me quite a few days before and left a message to call him. Fortunately, he overlooked my tardiness and here I am.

I admit to being struck speechless when asked to make this address. Unfortunately for those of you hoping to move the proceedings along, I overcame that feeling. I promise to make this brief—for the golfers in the audience this should be about as long as it takes to play a par 5.

The first thing you think of when faced with making an important address such as this is, of course, what do I wear? Tradition dictated gowns would be appropriate and the college took care of that. Next comes accessories and what is cooler than these caps and insignia stole—am I right? So that was also handled. All that remained was what to say.

When I referred to the program from my graduation I discovered there was no commencement address. Hopefully after today that won't be reinstated. I decided to

spend this time sharing a few stories about my career, my travels and my Marietta College experience. It comes with a little friendly advice and lessons I've learned along the way. Hopefully graduates you will find some of that interesting at the least and helpful at best.

Before we begin there is something I must confess. I admit to being an unashamed and unapologetic quodophile. Despite it being an excellent spelling bee word, even liberal arts graduates may not know what that is. It means someone who collects quotes, and while I have been so afflicted for many years, I just realized it had a name thanks to Google. So, you are going to hear a few of my favorites. Those I have found of use professionally and personally.

Upon graduation, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to become a management trainee at what was then the world's number one retailer, with sales of \$12.3 billion and 3,600 stores—Sears, Roebuck and Co. It was a time of increasing opportunity for women and our trainee class had a number of us ready to learn retailing 101 from this 87-year-old company—working in every department and area of the store, from unloading trucks to taking care of customers and everything in between. In addition, we trainees were the extra staff and “gofers” stores as big as Sears needed to get extra work done and keep costs down. During one of these “experience assignments” trainees were assigned to the hardware department for a major merchandise reset. Since frugal Sears never threw anything away, that involved cleaning shelving as it was relocated. Another trainee and I were given this dubious honor and were on our hands and knees scrubbing away when a woman and her daughter happened by.

They stopped to watch us for a minute and then the mother said, loud enough for us to hear, “That’s why I want you to go to college. So, you don’t end up with a job

like these girls”. Her comment put any thoughts that my college degree was enough for success right out of my head and made a quote by self-help author Napoleon Hill very real —“Some people dream of success while others wake up and work hard at it.” But what that woman would never appreciate, is that everything you are asked to do in a job is a learning opportunity and needs to be embraced. It is the only way to truly expand the knowledge you bring to your first job, and every one thereafter, as you deal with real life experiences.

For the next 24 years, I made a number of career moves in the company and held a dozen different positions in the stores and home office. Those moves involved half a dozen physical relocations. This may be the hardest part of “work hard at it” and you must realize advancement requires a lot of support, encouragement and sacrifices from those who make the journey with you. Gratefully my husband Paul made every step of our journey easier for me.

These assignments involved much more than just learning something new or fitting in with my co-workers. What I learned in every job I held were two things. First, it always teaches you something. And second, every person involved brings value to any endeavor—regardless of their job title or position in the company. That is the most important lesson I ever learned. That what I did may not have been as critical as what the people I worked with, and those that worked for me, did. Their importance and how much they matter. People who showed up every day and did their job, often without recognition, but who ended up teaching me all I ever needed to know about a business, working with others and ultimately leadership. They selflessly shared their knowledge and experience and enabled me to grow and advance. Without their help, much of what I have accomplished would never have happened. As Indira Gandhi said, “There are two kinds of people, those who do the

work and those who take credit for it. Try to be in the first group, there is less competition there.”

Lesson learned here is that the higher you go in an organization, the less important you may be in getting actual work done and showing appreciation for what others do is a key attribute any leader must have.

My final role at Sears was Vice President/General Manager for Sears Freestanding Hardware Stores—a job I loved. But some things are not meant to last indefinitely and I was faced with a decision to leave the company I thought I would be with forever— not an unusual notion at the time. Without going into the gory details, suffice it to say my talents weren't quite as valued as they had been and my job and team were given to another. My advice here is be prepared for change and things not always working out the way you planned or even hoped. Often it means more opportunity to grow, build your base of knowledge and find success.

My next two work stops were Toys “R” Us and Harmon AutoGlass. A short aside about Harmon. While it was an exciting and interesting diversion from my retail path the lesson, I learned is that not everything you know is transferable and a different industry may not be the best fit. Early on I realized you can't drive the business in windshield repair by building a more enticing endcap or putting something on sale. Windshields seem to crack at their own pace and their replacement is dictated more by your insurance than any marketing influence. So, think hard about making a detour from the career path you are on. Oh, and if your windshield has even a tiny crack, get it replaced. Trust me on that.

While learning about the glass business I received a call from an old friend who was the President of PetSmart. He and I had been trainees together at Sears and colleagues at Toys “R” Us. He asked me to come to Phoenix to interview for the

position of Senior Vice President of Store Operations. Quickly deciding that winters in Arizona beat those of Minnesota, where Harmon was based, I went. Now for the first time in my career I had a pretty big advantage over anyone else who might apply. After all, if the President wants you to be the candidate and ultimately get the job, what could go wrong?

When I arrived for the interview I first met with the SVP of Human Resources. She and I were having a very pleasant conversation when she asked about my pets. Our basset hound had passed away a few years earlier and with job changes and moves we had not replaced her. She asked what brand of dog food I had fed our basset. Now you need to know that pet specialty chains put a great deal of emphasis on premium foods—at the time those not available in non-specialty stores. I replied that her food was grocery store Kibbles & Bits, whereupon the person who would undoubtedly have some influence on whether or not I was hired responded—“you killed your dog”!

My advice here is that no matter what question or interview comment you think you are prepared for think again. And do your homework about the company. Perhaps a little more due diligence on my part about the industry I was looking to join might have given me the foundation for a better response than I undoubtedly gave.

Despite that setback, I did land the job. Thus, I found myself leading a field and store support organization that would grow to 30,000. PetSmart faced somewhat dire circumstances at the time however and a turnaround was critically needed to survive. That led to a customer-focused initiative called PetSmart Unleashed which embraced every area and associate in the company. To reinforce the positive behaviors that were needed to improve our service to the customer (both external and internal) we designed reward cards given out when we observed

associates embracing those behaviors. The cards could be dropped into jars for a monthly prize drawing. What we discovered was very few cards were put into the jars. Instead associates held onto them, proud of the fact that someone recognized their good work and took the time to acknowledge it. My advice here is you can never, ever spend too much time or energy recognizing those who work for you and that a simple Thank You or Great Job can mean more than you realize.

And never underestimate the value of a handwritten note to acknowledge or thank someone. People will be moved by your thoughtfulness and touched that you took time to think about them. Every great boss or terrific leader I have encountered writes personal notes. Interestingly, a recent Manpower report stated that the demand for social and emotional skills is growing by 26% in all industries. That means making a personal connection must be an important part of your leadership tool box.

Which leads me to a quote by Maya Angelou: “ I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Especially keep that in mind when you are trying to improve someone’s performance. Making people feel good about what they are doing, usually for you, is the most valuable trait you can have. If that is in your DNA already, good for you. If not, cultivate it and nurture it. It really, really matters.

So, after you’ve worked hard, had some success and made others feel good about working with you what’s left? In my case, retirement. After nearly 35 years in retailing I had been given many opportunities for professional growth and learning but my husband and I had put off a lot of travel due to work demands. My advice here is you (and your partner) will make sacrifices along the way and when given the chance and ability to regain some of what you gave up don’t hesitate to do so.

I have two travel quotes that I will share. The first is by Antoine de St. Exupery, “He who would travel happily must travel light.” Before traveling extensively, I thought that meant packing what you can easily carry—a skill I am still trying to master. What I’ve come to believe it means is that you benefit more from discarding your preconceived notions of people, places and cultures and entering each new environment with an open mind and curiosity. Learn to look and listen to everything around you—the sights, sounds and smells that make where you are unique. We all carry the means via our smartphones to record everything around us and I encourage you to do so. Capture the memory as it happens. But do yourself this favor. Every now and then put down the phone (especially if it is attached to a selfie-stick) and take in what is happening around you. Yes, pictures and video are great to share with others but travel is personal and impressions made will last forever if you take the time to fill your mind and your heart with what surrounds you.

I have been able to visit 49 states and 64 countries and my advice is to take advantage of every chance you get to travel. A quote that may or may not be by the Dalai Lama is “Once a year go someplace you haven’t been before.” Whether you get there with a driver’s license or a passport isn’t important, but open yourself up to the world and grab those new experiences where and when you can.

I’ve covered work and travel and in closing I’d like to spend a minute on my Marietta College experience. After my time on the board of trustees I know a little something about student life these days. As a student, I doubt I worked as hard as all of you did these last four years. And I’m certain there are many of you with significantly greater academic achievements than I had. But I do share a sense of this place and the people who make it special. The faculty and staff who are accessible and interested and care deeply about you. The administration and

trustees who work really hard to make the best decisions to enhance the academic, athletic and living environment for everyone. And the ability of Marietta College to bring students together in a community of friendship and support.

I arrived on this campus 50 years ago this August. Sometime during that first week I met someone who has been my best friend ever since—Beth Thompson Miller. Through college and all the years since then, and despite living apart, we have shared our lives more closely than if we were sisters. Speaking of sisterhood, our friendship survived and thrived despite her beating me for sorority President. Almost 50 years and not over it yet!

We have shared all that life has presented to us. Together we have traveled the world. Including Borneo, where we learned that two women our age are able to move remarkably fast when being pursued by a food-focused orangutan who happened to be able to open the gate standing between him and us.

We have been there for each other and that is real, as Beth travelled from Connecticut to be with me here today. That not only says a lot about her, but it says everything about our friendship. An anonymous quote I discovered captures my feelings: “Everyone has a friend during each stage of life. But only lucky ones have the same friend in all stages of life.” For our friendship, I am certainly lucky and forever grateful I made the decision to attend Marietta College. Hopefully your college experience included friendships such as ours, and you remember this thought from writer Billy Chapata, “Honor the friendships that allow you to pick up from where you last left off , regardless of how long it’s been since you connected. The friendships that survive hiatuses, silences and space. Those are the connections that never die.”

Graduates, in a few minutes you will make the short walk across this stage and

join the Long Blue Line. That walk recognizes all you have experienced and accomplished and sets you on the path to the long journey of what lies ahead. What I wish for you is a professional life that is meaningful, interesting and focused on whatever you are most passionate about, a personal life that includes family, friends and hopefully a partner who love, support, inspire and encourage you and the opportunity to find yourself in places around the world that enrich your life, fuel your curiosity and satisfy the wanderlust I hope lies within each of you.

And someday down that road of life, when the President of Marietta College phones I hope you answer the call. You never know what it might mean for you.

Thank you.