

**Commencement Address to the Class of 2000**  
**Pamela Daniels '59**

“ACHIEVING A LIFE”

Here we are. I have taken down from the door of my office the millennial cartoon in which a young woman asks, “Is it the future yet?” to which an older woman replies, “No, it is still the present.” For today the future has arrived. It has become the present. It is irresistible. And it is beautiful. I am looking at it. It is you, Class of 2000. It is you.

Good morning to you all. Good morning, President Walsh – Diana. Trustees. Faculty. And everyone in Student Life who is here today to acknowledge and applaud the women in the Class of 2000.

Good morning – and welcome – to the extended families and significant others, the grandparents, and especially the parents, of the Class of 2000 – you who have loved and encouraged these seniors-about-to-be-graduates before we even knew them. Thank you for the gift of your daughters these past four years. Thank you for trusting us with the responsibility for their education, their wellbeing and their transformation into the company of educated women you see before you. Thank you for coming here today, from all over the country and the world, to celebrate with them, and with us, this day of culmination and commencement.

And finally, good morning, dear Seniors – radiant in the awareness of what you have learned, what you have contended with, what you have overcome and what you have accomplished these past four years. Each of your diplomas is the emblem of that learning, that struggle, and that accomplishment.

I want especially to acknowledge the twenty-four Davis Scholars who are receiving their Wellesley degrees today. Interrupting or radically revising ongoing lives in order to earn your degrees, you are exemplars of resolve. Moreover, you have brought a salutary earthiness and life wisdom to the intellectual enterprise of this community. We are in your debt.

Thank you all – including those of you who would have preferred a ‘famous person’ to be your Commencement speaker – for giving me the opportunity, as your Dean, to share your day with you, in this way. This was an unconventional and brave thing to do. I am honored by your faith in me.

\* \* \*

Graduation from college is no ordinary leave-taking, but a moment of irreversible transition. As one of you put it, “Life is about to be really, really different.” At such a moment, we who are further along in our lives search for some wisdom, some safeguarding words, that will, like an amulet, protect you from life’s dangers, soften the vicissitudes of circumstance and guarantee your safe passage through the years ahead. But, of course, there is no amulet except the power within each of you to imagine and claim for herself a meaningful life. And, as every parent knows, there are no guarantees. There are only our hopes for you. And our stories.

The story I want to tell you this morning is a story from my own Commencement in 1959. But first I want to say that there are more than a few of us from the Class of 1959 here today – wishing you well and cheering you on. One of us is the mother of one of you. Two of us are here on the stage too in their capacity as Trustees of the College. And one of us, Bonnie Leonard, is Wellesley’s Dean of Continuing Education, the mainstay of the Davis Scholar community.

In the 1950’s, it was Wellesley’s custom to invite the parent of a graduating senior, someone in public life, to give the Commencement address. Our Commencement speaker was a man (this much I remember) – Neil McElroy, Eisenhower’s Secretary of Defense. The Archives record that Secretary McElroy concluded his speech to us with

the assurance that “no Company of soldiers, sailors or airmen had inspired him with more confidence – more hope – for the security of America” than we did. I have no memory whatsoever of what he said.

What I do remember from the emotional whirl and blur of my Commencement is the senior who sat next to me. In every line-up, in every procession, in the sea of seats on Commencement day, there we were, the two of us, alphabetically side by side in the middle of the class. My name began with KOE, hers with KOR. Similarly fulfilling our fathers’ expectations of us, we were both political science majors. We both revered the same professor, Edward Gulick of the History Department. We shared a best friend. And like a great many of our classmates in that pre-feminist era – when “the ring by spring,” not the high-tech job offer, was thought to secure the future – we were both engaged to be married soon after graduation, the giddy joy of that romantic prospect obscuring, even from ourselves, our youth, our vulnerability – and our ambition.

In the years after our graduation from Wellesley, we took different paths. She began her new life on Long Island; I began mine in Calcutta. She had her children first, then went to graduate school; I went to graduate school first, then had my children. For both of us (as will be true for many of you, too) motherhood was transforming – our children daring us, by their very existence, to be truer, deeper, more. Both of us were galvanized by our motherhood experience to do some serious thinking about the shape and future substance of our lives – thinking that resulted in a change of course. Both of us were encouraged, challenged and inspired in the new work we undertook by discerning and caring mentors. Both of us have known failure and loss – and, in our middle years, unanticipated sorrow – character-defining moments that do not appear on our resumes. And finally, each of us has come into her own in a lifework that gives full play to who she is and to her convictions about what matters.

Five years ago, when she was Wellesley’s Commencement speaker, Madeleine and I spent some time together and compared notes about our work – the pleasure and sense of privilege we both felt to be doing what we do – the amazing fit each of us had found. “Who would have imagined?” we said. For it was not by any prescribed path – and not until our middle years – that each of us had claimed her “dream job”: I had become a Class Dean at Wellesley. And she was soon to become the Secretary of State.

\* \* \*

The point of the story of Madeleine and me is not what became of us. The point is what **you** may and can and will become – what experiences, commitments, crises and relationships will define **your** lives. Each of you has the mystery of her own being to discover – however long it takes – and her whole lifetime in which to come to know and honor and express that being in work and in love and in service.

I speak to you as a developmentalist when I say, first, you just do not know how your lives will unfold – any more than we did, sitting there in the middle row, in the sunshine, in June 1959. How could we? How can you, at 21, 22? A liberal arts education is preparation, empowerment, exhortation. It is not a crystal ball. Nor should it be. Still, by confirming your intelligence and your pluck, by recognizing the deepening authority of your voices, by fostering the solidarity of your sisterhood, Wellesley has given you an edge. And a resource to use in defining your questions – so that you may, in Rilke’s phrase, “live them.”

Second, as the Davis Scholars well know, it takes time. Time to understand the puzzle of the self. Time to figure out what one’s unique lifework – one’s “dream job” – might be. Time to develop the discipline and the practice of sustained commitment.

There are false starts and missed opportunities and setbacks. There are interruptions and changes of plans. High-striving women seem to live with a tremendous pressure to have it all, do it all – now. Resist this if you can. Take the long view. Give yourselves time. No one achieves her dreams and desires all at once, even if she can name them at the outset. Don’t confuse your resume with your life. Over time, life itself is the achievement.

And third, as your class T-shirt says, “Each of you is an original.” Don’t ever forget it. You come to us as first-year students in all your superb variousness – bringing with you an extraordinary diversity of background, talent, sensibility and aspiration. I worry that somehow, by the time you are seniors, in our efforts to encourage you to strive and excel and succeed, we end up restricting your sense of what is useful and worthwhile to do in the world – giving you a tunnel vision of your possibilities. The established professions and careers matter, and many of you will find meaningful, innovative lifework there. Yet, there are so many things to do in this world. So many ways to make a difference. So many ways to be of use.

So many ways to realize Wellesley’s motto, *non ministrari sed ministrare*. Not to be served, but to serve. In all its elegant brevity – just four words – the motto, like a Thematic Apperception Test, invites any one of us to do her own riff on it. Here is mine: Though couched in the language of an earlier millennium, the motto, I think, is as contemporary as you are. It is, indeed, a call to service and to philanthropy – as Isabel Stewart reminded us all on Wednesday, a call to “give back.” But I find in the motto a wider, deeper meaning – a call to activism in any sphere: Not to be acted upon, but to act. Not dependence, but fierce will and a passionate attitude. Not self-absorption, but generativity.

Generativity, in Erik Erikson’s conception of the human life cycle, refers to everything we do on behalf of the next generation. It has to do with all that we generate, create and produce. Generativity is about parenthood. It is about the tasks of caring for the children we bear and raise. It is also about the ideas and dreams we nurture to fruition in our lifework, about the service we render, the communities we create and sustain, the institutions we establish, reform and renew. Generativity is not about making a fortune, although if you do manage to make one, you can surely dedicate it to generative purposes – as Wellesley alumnae have done, again and again.

Generativity, ultimately, is about putting our intelligence, imagination and vitality to the service of an ideal or enterprise about which we care passionately. Whenever and wherever you do this – in professional commitments, in public service or in your private lives – whenever you express your identity and ideals in this activist, generative sense, you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

Whether you work on developing a cure for breast cancer, or take care of a loved one who is suffering from it; whether you discover a planet, or work to conserve the diminishing wilderness of our own, whether you write poetry or teach it; whether you nurture a child, or work to devise just social policy that makes it possible for all women to nurture their children, you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

When you designate your Senior Gift to fund internships for the next generation of Wellesley students, you sustain the sisterhood and create a legacy – and you realize the Wellesley motto. When you wear a sandwich board to promote the Senior Gift Campaign, and your bluff cannot be called, you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

Should you venture into e-commerce, create an Internet start-up, call it *sedministrare.com* and prove that this is not an oxymoron, you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

When you know your heart, live your conscience and speak your mind, when you challenge the status quo, repudiate the demeaning stereotype, protest injustice or become an advocate for human rights – knowing that none of us is truly liberated so long as anyone is oppressed by the mean constraints of poverty, racism, or homophobia – you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

When you care for a sick child, or truly listen to a troubled, angry, questioning child – whether you are her physician or her teacher or her therapist or her mother – you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

When, in your public or private lives, you use your strength to resist family violence in any of its soul-destroying forms, when you refuse to live a lie or participate in an ugly secret, when with vigilance and courage you can protect and fortify those in your care, you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

When you teach your sons to respect and cherish their sisters (and the women who will come after them in their lives) and your daughters truly to respect and cherish themselves, you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

Whenever you look into the face of a young person – your children, students, patients, younger co-workers – and can say, with conviction, “You can do that,” “Let’s figure out a way to make this work,” “You are not alone,” “I will go this hard way with you,” “I will help you,” you are realizing the Wellesley motto.

Finally, each of you must take seriously the needs and yearnings of her own inner life, for this is your essential, bedrock resource. You must nourish and care for it as if your life depended on it – for it does. When you can look into the mirror – into your own face – and acknowledge and accept your own unique truth and beauty and power – when you can know that whatever your vulnerability or flaw or wound, your gifts are stronger – when you can include yourself in all that you are willing to fight for, believe in and affirm, not only are you realizing the Wellesley motto, **you are realizing yourselves.**

So, go for it. Go out there and lead ardent, articulate and activist lives. Keep your eyes and minds and hearts open. I hope you will learn to be patient with your own imperfections and develop a generosity of spirit toward the imperfections of others. I hope that, sooner than later, you **will** be doing work that you love. Work that does not insult your intelligence or your conscience. Work that expresses your difference, your individuality, your idiosyncrasy, your grain. Generative work that will make a difference in whatever world, whatever endeavor, large or small, you choose to commit yourself to. And I hope too that you will know the joys and challenges of lifelong friendships and long-lived loves – that you will insist on honorable human relationships, relationships that do not abuse or betray your trust, your playfulness or your integrity as a woman. Live your life in your own way if you can – and by your own timetable. Honor what you yearn for. Keep coming back to what matters to you. And you will find your way.

\* \* \*

It is time now to click our ruby slippers and say good-bye. One of you wrote to me this past week, “I don’t know how you can love us so much if what we mostly bring to you are our crises.” That is just how. You have let me be of use to you. You have let me into your lives. By trusting me with your doubts and defeats and crises as well as with your dreams and your successes, you have let me know you with my heart. You have let me believe in you. An inestimable gift, for which I will always be grateful.

Congratulations on the degrees you are about to receive. We who have taught you and learned from you these past four years, struggled with you and loved you, we celebrate the extraordinary women you are becoming. And we send you out into the world believing that it will be a more brilliant, more just and more caring place because you are in it.

Wellesley College  
May 26, 2000