

**PRESIDENT'S CONVOCATION
BOBBY FONG
23 AUGUST 2009
BUTLER UNIVERSITY**

On behalf of Butler, and in particular on behalf of those seated behind me, who are representatives of the faculty responsible for the teaching and learning that is at the heart of university education, I welcome you, the parents, guardians, friends, and especially the students of the Class of 2013.

Students, today is a special day of your lives. It is a day of leave-taking, when your parents will be giving you in trust to the teachers and other members of the Butler community whose responsibility it is to foster you in your journey to adulthood. It is also a day of initiation, when you will be formally received into the academy by these professors, who at the end of this convocation will form a double line between which you will exit to begin symbolically your lives as Butler students.

Let me introduce the academic leaders of the faculty, whom I ask to stand and remain standing as a group to receive the recognition of the assembly: Dr. Jamie Comstock is Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs; reporting to her are Dean Peter Alexander of the Jordan College of Fine Arts, Dean Mary Andritz of the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Dean Judi Morrel of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Dean Ena Shelley of the College of Education, and Dean Chuck Williams of the College of Business. Let us give them a hand. The Provost and Deans are the sponsors of the reception following this convocation. At the reception, you will have an opportunity to meet both

these administrators and faculty representatives of the academic programs at the University. Parents, I urge you to make the entrusting of your children a personal gesture by introducing them to an appropriate professor in their areas of intended study.

After eight years as Butler's president, I had the opportunity this summer to take a three-month sabbatical. Most of it was spent working on the first draft of a book, *Going to College: A Primer for Parents*, designed to assist families in guiding their children through the college admissions process. Since I'm speaking today to an audience of those who have successfully gained admission to Butler, I have no words for you on this topic beyond "Congratulations, you don't need my book!" But seriously, in successfully negotiating the college search process, "Thank you for choosing to pursue your education at this University."

My wife Suzanne and I also undertook a special challenge. To celebrate our 35th wedding anniversary, we decided to walk across England.

The Coast-to-Coast trail begins on the west coast of England and stretches across the waist of the island to end 192 miles later on the east coast. We walked from the Irish Sea to the North Sea through three national parks: the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales (home of *All Creatures Great and Small*), and the Yorkshire Moors. These are the lands of the Romantic poets, James Herriot, and the Brontes. Our interest, however, was less in a literary tour than in experiencing the landscapes that informed their work.

We arranged for accommodations at farmhouses and B&B's over the seventeen days of the hike, which ranged from eight- to fifteen-mile legs. A transport service picked up our luggage each morning and transported it to the coming night's lodging; we traveled with day packs and the anticipation of a shower and bed each night. We navigated via guide books, a topographical map, and a compass (and got lost); negotiated seaside cliffs and mountainsides on narrow trails with four-hundred foot drops; forded (and fell into) streams; crossed pastures with sheep, cows, the occasional bull, and all the muck that animals leave behind; encountered temperatures from 40 to 80 degrees, weather from hot sun to sleet; were sweaty and sore at the end of each day but woke up full of anticipation for the adventures of the next. We had a wonderful time!

I'd like to share some insights from our trip to encourage you students as you embark on your journey in higher education.

First, learn that the most important competition in which you'll engage is with yourself. Sue and I encountered hikers who walked faster and climbed higher than we did. By the same token, we also learned of hikers who didn't complete the trail because of heat exhaustion, a broken ankle, falls, even an ulcer. But it really didn't matter what others did: we wanted a walk that was right for us, one that rewarded steadiness rather than speed, that permitted time for sightseeing and bird watching as well as rocky scrambles and summits.

College is a time for you to discover *your* gifts, what *you're* good at. Two-thirds of you will change your major before you graduate. You will find out what gives you joy, from your studies to your co-curricular activities to the friends you

will make for life. You will find ways in which your gifts and your sources of joy can be harnessed in service to a world in need. Butler University aims to educate each graduate not simply to make a living but to make a life of purpose, in which individual flourishing is intertwined with the welfare of others.

All this, however, is premised on *your* knowing who *you* are and what *you're* about. College is a time when you will sift through values and perspectives bequeathed you by your family, your community, and your university so that you can choose which to claim as your own. At Butler, we hope to add to the stock of those whom you admire and respect, after whom you can model parts of yourself. But ultimately, your own best self is one you fashion by your choices and commitments. It's not a matter of striving after the best grades, although that's laudable, or making the first-string on a team, for which we will cheer you. It's a matter of forming and living up to the highest expectations you set for yourself.

Second, respect knowledge, but don't presume that any one source can be exhaustive. Guidebooks go out of date, and even maps can be misleading. One afternoon, our topographical map indicated a public footpath that led straight to our destination for the evening. But in England, "public footpath" only means that the public has a right of way, not that there's an actual trail. We bushwhacked across the edges of fields, getting progressively muddier, before falling into two streams that were hidden by the underbrush! Over the course of the walk, we learned to consult guidebooks and the map when our route was

uncertain, but we also had to develop confidence in our own sense of navigation and dead reckoning.

College is not simply a matter of mastering a fixed body of knowledge. As teachers, we are pledged to assist you in learning the structures and methods of our disciplines. The way knowledge is validated in the sciences is different from the humanities. Moreover, what we know and how we know it in a given field is modified over time by experiment, discovery, and original insight. The landscape of knowledge changes, and the academic roadmaps--textbooks, lab manuals, even the lecture notes of your professors--can become dated. We will teach you the questions that a discipline is attempting to address, and the current answers we have to those questions, but the answers often will be contingent.

In college, you should learn to think for yourself. You should be able to engage in dispassionate analysis. You should test the assumptions of your field and your instructors. Critical thinking enables you to be a free agent, to make your own way in the world, to forge new paths. One-third of you will eventually work in jobs that don't yet exist. Road maps are only guides, and sometimes they don't agree: you must be the judge of how to use them to take you where you want to go.

Third, don't hesitate to ask for help. Hikers on the Coast-to Coast consulted one another on directions when lost, shared water and food, dispensed first aid, and gave encouragement to one another. We were a traveling community.

Butler in turn is your community. The faculty are your master guides. That's why it's so important that your professors know you by name and face. And they're interested not only in mentoring you in their subjects, but in helping you assume adult responsibilities. But beyond teachers, sources of help include roommates, a classmate or teammate, a fellow student encountered in a club or service project, a staff member who says or does a kindness. You are not alone on this journey. Learn to study together. Engage in service projects with Bulldogs in the Streets, Ambassadors for Change, with your club, fraternity, sorority, or athletic team. Look for internships and experiential education opportunities that create relationships with alumni and friends in Indianapolis. Don't hesitate to avail yourself of the resources of our Health Services and Residential Assistants. If you think I can help, send me an email or come by during one of my weekly open hours at Starbucks.

Finally, make memories that will sustain you throughout your life. On our walk, Sue and I kept a daily journal and took pictures. More important, we captured in our memories the mountains and brooks, the heather and the skylarks, the sights and sounds of nature through which we sojourned. Nineteenth-century British poets believed that treasured memories became repositories of strength and consolation in subsequent life, respites amid the workaday world. William Butler Yeats wrote:

. . . for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (ll. 9-12)

And William Wordsworth, whose home and grave we visited this summer in Grasmere, wrote:

The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction . . .
 Those shadowy recollections . . .
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;
 Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
 To perish never . . .
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!

“Ode: Intimations of Immortality” (lls. 134-35, 150, 152-57, 160-61)

College is a time for making sustaining memories. Drink deeply from the opportunities afforded you, and may your experiences open your eyes and hearts to the immense possibilities and joys of life. Conduct your relationships with love and integrity. Last year, I attended my 35th Harvard class reunion, and my two freshman year roommates and I shared a suite for four days. We have remained in contact since we first met, and they are two friends who would come if I had need, and for whom I would go.

Be grateful for this opportunity to attend college. Don't take it for granted. The following trope, originated in 1990 by Dartmouth professor Donella Meadows

and elaborated since by various individuals and organizations, has helped drive the point home for successive classes of Butler students:

If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all the existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look something like the following. There would be:

- 60 Asians
- 14 Africans
- 14 from the Western hemisphere, both north and south
- 12 Europeans
- 50 would be female
- 50 would be male
- 67 would be non-Christian
- 33 would be Christian
- 5 people would possess 32% of the entire world's wealth, and all 5 would be from the United States
- 80 would live in substandard housing
- 50 would suffer from malnutrition
- 1 would be near death
- 1 would be newborn
- and 1 (yes, only 1) would have a college education*

You have been afforded an opportunity to come to Butler by your ability, but many others of comparable ability have been denied the opportunity for college because of the happenstance of being raised in poverty or lacking a loving home

which stressed the value of higher education. You have an opportunity denied 99% of the world. I say to you, make the most of your time here.

We welcome you and the parents, guardians, and friends of the Class of 2013 to the Butler family. God bless you, and thank you for joining us.

* Statistics based on a “State of the Village Report,” the original version of which was composed in 1990 by Donella Meadows, and modified in subsequent years by various authors and agencies, most recently ODT (www.odt.org/pop.htm) in 2005, which has made its statistics available for public use without copyright. Also cf. “History and sources of the ‘State of the Village Report’” at www.odt.org/popvillagesources.htm.