5-27-2016

2016 Valedictory Address: Emily R. Conn '16

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Recommended Citation
Conn, Emily R., "2016 Valedictory Address: Emily R. Conn '16" (2016). Valedictory Addresses. 3.
https://crossworks.holycross.edu/valedictory/3
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Friday, May 27, 2016

Ambassador Thomas, Bishop McManus, President Boroughs, Senior Vice President Vellaccio, Dean Freije, Dean Gago-Jover (Dean Paco), Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Faculty and Staff, Parents, Relatives and Friends, Fellow Members of the Class of 2016.

You will have to excuse me, but after spending four years as an English major, I cannot help but see life as a series of narratives. Every person, place, and time has a story to tell. As we respond to our experiences we create a series of stories that blend together into one comprehensive portrait of who we are. These stories reveal our passions and our values. They define our present and they shape our future. As members of the Class of 2016, we have each written a story during our four years on the hill, a story that will live on both on campus and in us. These stories are filled with Kimball dinners, Cool Beans coffees, and Campion cookies. They were written at SPUD sites, in Organic Chemistry classes, and in the stacks of Dinand. They began on August 25, 2012 in Hanselman, Mulledy, and Wheeler. Each story is profoundly different. Yet, they all have one very important detail in common: they were written in the place that we have called home for the last four years.

Holy Cross is a truly special place. It is a place where one student will stand outside of Stein and hold open the door for everyone who is heading to class. That person will not only be thanked by all who pass, but will be publicly acknowledged for his kindness. It is a place where the custodian who worked in your first year residence hall will not only remember you three years later, but will take the time to ask how you are whenever he sees you. It is a place where a chaplain will spend his entire Thursday morning sitting in Cool Beans so that he might get to know each of us just a little bit better. Holy Cross is a place where a truly supportive and loving community encourages its students to recognize the way in which our stories are all connected.

I recently had a conversation with my roommate from my first year. As we were reminiscing about our year living together, I asked her about some of the most formative moments from her Holy Cross story. One memory immediately came to mind: saying goodbye to her parents on move in day. She had expected it to be an emotional moment, but was shocked and touched when her father began to cry. Suddenly she knew that her decision to attend Holy Cross was just as important to her family as it was to her. She realized that her story was inextricably linked to the people she loved. From then on, she endeavored to make her parents proud, and with the help of the Holy Cross community, she has. She has made the most of every opportunity she has been given and has challenged herself in ways she had never imagined.

A wise professor once told me that these moments of enlightenment are at the core of a Holy Cross education. Every student deserves to have at least one moment that challenges her perspective, one conversation that causes him to think a little bit deeper about his choices and values, one experience that alters the way they both see themselves and their places in the world. I believe that Holy Cross has allowed us to do this every day. This place has asked us to consider who we are, who we will become, and who we will be for others. Professors, mentors and friends have encouraged us to step outside of our experiences and to see life through the eyes of another. We have been given countless opportunities and learned innumerable lessons. And we have come to discover that being a Holy Cross student is about so much more than academics and extracurricular activities. It is about critically and compassionately engaging with the world around us in order to discover who we hope to be.

I first came to this conclusion on Spring Break Immersion in Ivanhoe, VA, where a few words of wisdom from a passionate woman changed my perspective forever. One night, our site coordinator, Phyllis advised us to never enter into a service experience thinking we were going to help somebody, but rather to think that we were going to meet somebody. Phyllis recognized that the essence of service is found in the caring and compassionate listeners who seek to understand. Through the simple act of listening to others, we can learn about their joys and triumphs, their pain and suffering, their needs and desires. We can gain understanding, and we can create lasting bonds. We are called to be men and women for and with others. Phyllis realized that to truly achieve this standard, we need to take a genuine interest in each other’s stories. Not only will we come to better understand and serve the people around us, but we will gain a better sense of ourselves.

Phyllis’s approach to service, like my roommate’s approach to college, is grounded in love. It asks us to love others and to let them love us. In many ways, this is exactly what our time at Holy Cross has taught us to do. It has challenged us to look lovingly at the world so that we may each write a story that celebrates the beauty of the people, places, and experiences that surround us. Our world is not perfect, but by engaging with it lovingly, we have the opportunity to influence change. We have the ability to create narratives that will not only reflect our lives, but will impact the lives of others.

We are each writing a story; and a formative part of that story is coming to a close. Even now, many of us may feel uncertain. We face the unknown and we have more questions than we could possibly imagine. The answers are often complicated or even nonexistent. But these unanswerable questions are perhaps the most important ones to ask. They get us out of bed in the morning and lull us to sleep at night. They push us to do more and to be more. We all struggle with these questions, but we struggle with them together. And slowly, but surely we become more comfortable with their uncertainty and ambiguity because we recognize that we do not know the answers, but we are not alone. We will always have each other; we will always have our home on the hill; and we will always have the stories that we have written there together. They extend far beyond the gates of Linden Lane. They extend to this moment, in this place, and will continue on to wherever life takes us.