

# Fairfield University undergraduate commencement address

## May 23, 2010

*Delivered by Fairfield alumnus Dr. Katherine N. Lapp, '78, executive vice president of Harvard University, where she oversees all financial, administrative, human resources, and capital planning functions as well as the administrative aspects of information technology for the university.*

President Von Arx, distinguished guests, parents, friends and most importantly all of you the Class of 2010 – I am honored to be here today to celebrate this important time in your life – graduation day.

I have often heard friends who have returned to their alma maters after decades away saying something to the effect of, “I feel as though I stepped into a time machine.” Well, having spent the last day or so wandering around this once familiar campus and now looking out at you — the class of 2010 — I finally understand what they were talking about. But my time machine has not transported me to the past, it’s taken me back to the future – and brought me to a time and place virtually unrecognizable when I think about my class of 1978.

While my generation of college graduates was largely homogeneous, yours is wonderfully diverse -- racially, culturally, and intellectually. When my generation talked about a social network, we were referring to the members of our extended families, the neighbors you could holler to from your front porch, and a few friends you kept in touch with from high school. When you talk about social networks, you’re referring to your 1200 Facebook friends, half of whom you may be g-chatting with as I speak! We thought “Tweets” were what birds did and “texts” were what we read for class, not what we wrote after class. “Google” and “Skype” weren’t in our vocabulary, or even in our dictionary.

In the immediate aftermath of Watergate and the revelations of illegal government eavesdropping and spying, we were obsessed with our right to privacy, while you’re more likely to tell your Facebook friends, and their friends’ friends, where you’re going to dinner, who you are dating and what your roommate did last night. When I was sitting where you sit today, there was only one type of reality show – it was called the evening news. And I could go on and on – the world of me and other “baby boomers” like me -- including many of you parents out there -- differs a great deal from your generation, which has been labeled the “Millennials,” and you differ, too.

According to recent polls, Millennials are the most educated generation in history and history’s first “always connected” generation. And despite the dawn of the Great Recession, you are upbeat about your economic futures and about the future of the state of the nation. Those are the unique traits and perspectives that you bring with you as you enter the world today.

The world you are inheriting is not without challenge, but in that challenge lays endless opportunities—and a call to action. Despite how dissimilar your world as students—and as college graduates—is from mine when I was your age many years ago, it is also true that the world you are about to take over and the one you knew in Middle School are even more radically different. In just the past decade, you experienced the horrors of 9/11, witnessed two wars unfold, watched as the threat of climate change became increasingly real, saw a major American city literally disappear under water, and just as you and your parents were struggling to pay for your first rate college education, you saw the world’s economy take its greatest plunge since the Great Depression. Consider for a moment, that litany of shocks to the collective system that you – that all of us – have endured in just a 10 year period. And yet, in spite of all of that, you have maintained your optimism.

At this point I could do the usual graduation address thing, talk about challenges of adversity and maybe quote someone like William Penn, who wrote “No pain, no palm, no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory, no cross, no crown.” But I won’t do that.

Instead I ask you to see this as your time to change the trajectory of this nation, this world. I do not see you, as a generation, heading off to Wall Street; I see you heading off for Teach for America and the Peace Corps; I see you working to save the environment, joining the World Health Organization, figuring out how to truly

reform our health care system, or entering public service. To put it as directly as I can - the world needs you; the problems facing us are too complex and too persistent to not have as many smart and talented minds as possible tackling them.

Not too long ago you helped elect our nation's first African American President on a message of hope and change – it is in the spirit of that message, I ask you to bring hope and change to the world. It may be that when you first stepped foot on this campus four years ago, you had expectations for a career in a certain field, which because of the Great Recession, is no longer viable. Instead of being disappointed, see this as an opportunity—your permission slip, as it were—to chart a new course. Embrace it, run with it, give it all you've got.

I'm often reminded of a chat I had on the eve of my Fairfield graduation with Father James Murphy -- the then Chair of History which was my field of study. While I knew I was going to law school the following fall, I wasn't sure what life had in store for me after that. Father Murphy promised -- somewhat to my surprise -- that I would have a wonderful and varied career but with that promise he challenged me to avoid the temptation to revert to the comfortable, the easy, the familiar. "Never shrink from the unknown, the untried," – he said - "take it on and incredible things will happen". He also encouraged me to always keep my ears open along the way, saying "You never know what possibilities will reveal themselves or answers you will find in the most curious of places if you just listen." Father Murphy passed on a few years later but I never forgot that conversation.

If I hadn't consciously resisted the easy route, the familiar, I can honestly say that I would never have imagined working in New York City Hall serving two mayors; or in the wake of 9/11 being responsible for the New York transportation system; nor would I have pulled up my decades old East Coast roots to work at the University of California. I have a suspicion that every time I was on the verge of shying away from something new, something different, Father Murphy had a hand in gently guiding me so I did not miss those remarkable experiences.

And, let me share with you a quick story about Father Murphy's advice about the "art of listening". Several years back, when I was running the MTA in New York, we were struggling with the need to increase the subway and bus fares to balance the budget. While we knew the increase was inevitable, we wanted to implement it with the least impact possible. After spending hours pouring over these issues with my budget staff, I did what I always do when I'm stressed out and searching for answers – I went shopping! So there I was in Filene's Basement looking for that perfect black dress when I overheard two store clerks talking about the impending fare increase and what it meant to their every day lives. They shared with each other how a 25 cent fare increase could cause them to find jobs closer to home at reduced pay. Returning to the office, I gathered my staff and relayed what I learned. The result? We fashioned a proposal allowing for dramatic fare discounts for those who purchased weekly or monthly passes.

I pass Father Murphy's words onto all of you -- a new generation of Fairfield graduates. Be open to possibilities -- keep your ears open -- and while you should always go out and get what you want, always be open to the things that actually come your way.

I've used up most of my time talking about the differences between the world you're entering and the one I entered 30 years ago. But before I conclude, I will take a moment to remind you of something important that we have in common—we have all been blessed to receive a Jesuit education. As the years pass, you will appreciate it more and more. For one thing, you have been taught to think. You have been taught to take a 360 degree view of every problem. You have been taught not to accept simple solutions to questions and challenges, or comfortable solutions, but always see the right solution. You know that God is in the details. You know that it is possible to simultaneously do well and do good. You have been taught, in fact, that to do well you must do good. And for that reason, if no other, I know that the world will be a better place for what you will accomplish over the course of your lives.

It is in that spirit that I congratulate each and every one of you for getting to this point and for all the great things you will all achieve – we, and Father Murphy, will all be watching and cheering you on.

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