

Twenty-First Annual Fall Convocation
State University of New York at New Paltz

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Convocation Address: OVERCOMING THAT “SINK”-ING FEELING

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I am honored, although also a little intimidated, to be speaking with you at today's Convocation. I've never given an address like this before and as many of you are probably pretty aware right about now, new undertakings can be threatening, if not downright scary. Of course, in my case they're also a bit embarrassing. As if standing in front of so many people to give an address isn't daunting enough, note that they make you do it while wearing a frilly gown and a funny hat. So much for looking suave or cool.

Then again, I've never really been the suave or cool type, though I've certainly made good faith efforts in the past. I'm thinking back to when I was starting my first semester at college, just like many of you are today. It was the 1980s, so come to think of it, I wasn't a whole lot better dressed then than I am now in this funny cap and gown. I'd never lived away from home before and I was both excited and terrified all at once. I didn't know what to expect, but—being young and quite self-conscious about how others perceived me—I didn't want to advertise too much that I was fairly anxious about the uncertainties that inevitably accompany starting college.

Of course, there was a lot to be anxious about—things like meeting new people, dealing with roommates, registering for classes, anticipating lots of homework, keeping

up with all the reading, making sure I made a good impression on my professors. The list goes on. And I was justifiably nervous about all these things. But what I was most nervous about was something else entirely, something a lot more embarrassing to tell you about, if you want to know the truth. The thing I was most nervous about was, well, using the dorm bathroom. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I'd never shared a bathroom with 200 other people before and that scared me. I mean, come on! You never knew who you might run into in there. It could be awkward, even dangerous. People might be naked or picking their pimples or God only-knows what else.

So on my first day at college, I made a plan that when I needed to go into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face before bed, I would dart in, use the first sink I saw, and then get out of there as fast as I could. And this plan worked out pretty well because—lucky for me—when I went into the bathroom that first night, there was a large, deep, old-fashioned looking sink immediately inside the doorway. This was extremely ubiquitous because it meant I didn't have to wander further into the bathroom, a rather long and narrow room which, though I didn't have any intention of exploring it, seemed to stretch onward into the distance for an eternity. But I wasn't concerned with that. Instead, I quickly brushed, washed, and got the hell out of there in a flash. I didn't see any naked people and nobody saw me in my PJs or with toothpaste dripping out of my mouth, which was a big relief. Having stumbled into an effective sink-strategy, I kept it up for the next several days. It wasn't that hard because the big sink happened to be right outside the shower stall closest to the exit, which also happened to be right next to the toilet stall closest to the exit. So I lucked out, able to limit myself to these three

facilities right next to the door. This guaranteed that my bathroom time would be kept to a minimum and no embarrassing or awkward moments would occur.

And this seemed to work perfectly for the first few days, though I did have a number of questions and concerns that began to weigh on my mind. For one thing, I could not understand why, with the kind of tuition I was paying, the college couldn't afford to have a mirror above the sink. I mean, was that too much to ask? Also, why was there only one sink? After all, there were probably 200 college kids in this dorm. Just one sink? What the heck was that about? Finally, why was the sink so large and what was up with the mop that was stored right next to it all the time? It just seemed like the oddest design to me and I couldn't quite wrap my head around it.

Well, I got the answers to these penetrating questions all at once when my worst nightmare came true—someone came into the bathroom while I was in there using the sink. There I was, in the middle of my personal hygiene ritual when suddenly I heard an unfamiliar voice.

“Hey, you. What are you doing?” the voice said.

Startled, my heart racing, I turned around—my toothbrush dangling precariously from my mouth—to see a cleaning lady who worked for the college. She had a puzzled expression on her face, as if she'd never seen anyone brushing his teeth before. She paused, looked at me with a great deal of pity, and posed what just might have been the most important Socratic question of my entire four-year college career. “Excuse me,” she asked, “but why are you using the custodial sink?” Then, pointing towards the other end of the bathroom, she added, “The regular sinks are over there.”

Now I've done some pretty boneheaded things in my life, but never was I more embarrassed than at that moment. Here I was—a college freshman at a highly selective institution of higher learning—who had been obliviously using the custodial sink for the better part of a week. No wonder there was a smelly-looking mop there instead of a mirror! How could I have been so stupid? What on earth was wrong with me? Looking back, what was wrong with me was that my fear of straying from my comfort zone got the best of me. As I handed the cleaning lady her mop and moved away from the custodial sink, I saw for the first time that there was a whole, wide, wonderful bathroom in front of me—with four or five regular size sinks, each with its own mirror and shelf for toiletries. Because I'd been so scared of running into anyone or being seen in an embarrassing pose, I'd cut myself off from this plumbing wonder. In the end, the embarrassment I felt when confronted by the cleaning lady was far worse than anything I had been worrying about. Only by opening my eyes to explore the bathroom in front of me did I gain a wider world view. My fear had kept me from realizing my full bathroom potential!

Now indulge me for just a minute longer and let me try to amplify the moral of my story and, at the same time, hopefully raise the level of this talk out of the gutter (or, custodial sink, as the case may be). The renowned humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow came up with a name to describe the experience of undervaluing one's potential and giving into one's fears of success. He called it the Jonah Complex. He named it after Jonah, the biblical character who preferred to hide out in the belly of a whale rather than take up the challenges God put to him. It seems Jonah feared failure and so he set his sights low in order to avoid it. It didn't help matters any that Jonah thought his friends

and family would be threatened, jealous, and generally angry with him if he was too successful, so he kept himself whale-bound.

My Jonah Complex played out in the bathroom that first week of college. Yours may play out in different, hopefully less potty-driven, ways:

- Maybe you're afraid to speak up in class because you don't want your friends to think you're more interested in course material than in who just got voted off "So You Think You Can Dance." After all, nobody likes a smarty-pants, especially in a culture that all-too-often equates coolness with being apathetic and unexceptional.
- Maybe you don't want to study too much because it might challenge things you were raised to believe, which will only annoy your family who is paying for you to come here in the first place. Everyone knows mom and dad don't like it when you spout all that college crappolla and you definitely don't want to get too big for your britches.
- Maybe you don't want your professors to have expectations of you that are too high because you're not sure you can live up to them. And so maybe it's just easier to plug in your iPod and pretend you're not interested in anything other than the latest Avril Lavigne song than to dive into your studies and overcome your fear of growing too worldly, educated, or accomplished.

What I'm suggesting is that even though there may be some truth to these worries, you should endeavor to grow beyond your current horizons anyway. And why should you listen to me? After all, not only am I wearing a funny hat, but I also just spent the better

part of my speech regaling you with my college adventures in the bathroom. But I'd maintain that I began learning perhaps one of the most important lessons of my college-career in that bathroom that fine 1980s fall semester. I began learning that the Jonah Complex can be overcome. I started to realize that college is all about letting go of one's fear-driven doubts and presumptions in order to entertain new possibilities. It's about asserting your will to be the best you can, no matter how hard or intimidating it can sometimes prove to be.

If you avail yourself of all the phenomenal things that SUNY New Paltz has to offer, both in and out of the classroom, then you will suspend many of your long-held assumptions and open yourself up to new experiences and new points of view. You won't let your fear—which always accompanies novelty and uncertainty—lock you into a narrow and unreflective worldview. Yes, be skeptical when need be, but do so with a willingness to have your viewpoint influenced. Realize that your view is one view, not the only view, and that reasonable people can disagree. Be cautious, but open. Be confident, but not self-righteous. Be ambitious, but not arrogant.

College can be a terrific time in one's life. Take advantage of it. Be a sponge. Absorb everything you can from this place. Learn, grow, and forge lifelong memories. But most important of all, don't let yourself get stuck using the custodial sink.

Thank you very much and have a great academic year!