

Clarke School Graduation Speech
President Carol T. Christ
June 2007

I am excited to share this occasion with you. I am honored that you have asked me to speak. Congratulations to the graduates. It has taken much hard work to get to this point, and I admire you for it. Congratulations to your families and friends, who have supported you through your time at Clarke, with love and encouragement. Congratulations to your teachers, who have shown so much devotion, knowledge, and skill in educating you. And congratulations to Dennis Gjerdingen, who is completing twenty-six years as Clarke's President. You have given so much to the school, and you have been such a visionary and caring leader.



Smith College and the Clarke School have been closely connected throughout their histories. Indeed, you might say that Smith owes its existence to Clarke. The founder of Smith College was Sophia Smith, who willed her fortune to establish the college for women that bears her name. However, her first intention, as described in her first will, was to found a school for the deaf. She herself was very hard of hearing. In fact, you can see the ear trumpet that she used now on display in the town museum in Hatfield, where she lived. Because of her own experience, she had a great deal of compassion for deaf children and wanted to found a school for them. But John Clarke, a Northampton merchant, who was also very hard of hearing, beat her to it. A short time after the Massachusetts legislature appropriated funds for an oral school for the deaf, John Clarke offered \$50,000 if the school would locate in Northampton. That may not sound like much now, but it was a fortune then. The school moved from Chelmsford, Massachusetts, with its five students, to downtown Northampton, and moved up to Round Hill Road a few years later. There's a story that John Clarke tried to get Sophia Smith to match his donation of \$50,000 and that she refused, but nobody knows whether that's true. All we know is that she changed her will, and that's why I'm standing here today.

So, in Northampton, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, were two brave, new, fragile schools—Clarke and Smith. They were both revolutionary—an oral school for the deaf, whose mission was to teach deaf children to speak, and a college for women, at a time when most colleges were only for men.

As one might expect, their histories were frequently intertwined. Early presidents of Smith urged college alumnae to give money to Clarke—a custom that seems to have disappeared, although maybe incoming Clarke president Bill Corwin would like to revive it. Beginning with William Allen Neilson, Smith's third president, presidents have served as trustees. But the most important link has been the education program for teachers of the deaf. Initiated in 1889, it became a formal degree program of the college in 1962, forty-five years ago. It's a source of pride to the college—a jewel in its crown—and a source of pride to Clarke.

I tell this history because I think it's important to know to understand how we got where we are today. Now, I want to speak directly to the graduates about your leaving Clarke and about your journey ahead.

In giving you advice—for what would a graduation speech be without advice—I'd like to tell you a story. I came to Northampton, to be President of Smith, five years ago, from California. I had lived in California for thirty years, and certainly never had been president of a college, so it was a huge change for me, and one that made me a little apprehensive. A short time before I moved, I visited Minneapolis to meet some Smith alumnae. A woman I met there, Marilyn Carlson Nelson, gave me some advice I found very helpful, and I would like to share it with you. She said that whenever she was facing a big change in her life, she thought about her grandparents' journey when they emigrated from Sweden to the United States. This was in the nineteenth century, before airplanes, before telephones. They knew that they were leaving forever, and they could take only one small trunk. Marilyn Nelson still had that trunk, and she told me that she often looked at it, imagining her grandmother trying to decide what to take, knowing she could only take what would fit in that one small trunk.

Marilyn told me that whenever she was facing a big change in her life, she would imagine packing that trunk, choosing only those things most precious and most useful in the journey ahead.

Here's what I hope you take in your trunk from Clarke. You will take the power of hearing and the power of speech. To hear allows you to listen, to try to understand the ideas, the perspectives, and the experiences of others. It enlarges our own perspective and experience when we understand others, particularly those who are different from us. When you leave Clarke, most of you will go to larger and more diverse schools. Your ability to listen and to learn from the perspectives and experiences of others will teach you much.

Likewise, the power of speech gives you the opportunity to use your voice. I hope you take the confidence that you have gained at Clarke to state your opinions, your perspective. You will be bringing a special experience and perspective to the schools you will enter in the fall. I still remember vividly the first deaf student I taught; her name was Lila Farazian, and the class was a seminar in children's literature. I was at first reluctant to let her into the class because I didn't know how she could participate in discussion. How wrong I was. She was one of the leaders in the class, and one of its best students who taught us all so much from the uniqueness of her perspective and experience. I hope you take from Clarke confidence in yourself, in your abilities, and the many contributions you have to make.

I hope you take curiosity, the desire to learn, from books, from teachers, from the natural world around you, from other people. If you have curiosity, if you nurture your curiosity, you will never stop learning.

I hope you take discipline from Clarke. As I am sure each of you knows, things worth doing are not always easy. It takes a certain strength of character, a commitment to keep working at it, even when you are discouraged, to get good at many things, whether in sports, or in the arts, or in schoolwork.

Finally, I hope you take warm-heartedness. A few short weeks ago, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, came to speak at Smith. His message to us all was that the intellect is not enough, that it must be guided by the warm heart. I know from my visits to Clarke how warm-hearted a place this is, how much love there is here in this community. I hope you take that warm-heartedness with you to the next school you attend.

For all of the years that I have been attending Clarke's graduation, I've enjoyed hearing the graduates recite Robert Frost's wonderful poem, "The Road Not Taken." Your roads are now diverging, and you will take your separate paths. I wish you the best of luck on the next stage of your journey.