

**Western College Address
Judy Scovel Robinson '63
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Thank you

Although I love England, it's great to be here in America – to see the American flags all over the place, and to say “tomato” without having to correct myself.

You know that it's a terrifying honor to be up here...it's very humbling to be asked in the first place, but absolutely terrifying nevertheless. What can I say to the likes of you? There have been so many stories this week -- beautiful stories of courage and strength, fed by the spirit of Western. The stories are different but the message is the same – the legacy of our college in our lives. I will share mine today. I hope that you will find a resonance in your own stories.

What Western taught me

I knew so little when I came to Western. I had just graduated from a boarding school 6000 feet up in the Himalayan Mountains, where everything, including the grand piano, had been carried up on the backs of men. A car could not drive to our school, there were perhaps 2 telephones in the area (one in the principal's office) and messages were carried once again by men who sat knitting for their families, until called into action.

So, when I came to Western as a 17 year old I was still figuring out how to use the phone and the coke machine which scared the life out of me, and I lost 75 cents the first time I tried to do my washing in the coin-operated machines.

But I did have ideas and plans for my life. By the age of 9 I knew I didn't really need to be President of the United States, so that was decided. Do you know that Americans are brought up very privileged? Not only because of this vast country rich in natural resources that other countries are literally dying for. But because from birth many of us have been brought up with the message that we can be anyone we really want to be. This surprises English people when I tell them that. I thought that it was a Worldwide Mother thing, but it isn't.

In my life I have made 5 vows NEVER to

- Work abroad while I was single
- Marry an Englishman
- Hand out tracts.
- Major in music
- Become a teacher

I've done them all.

The story of how I came to vow these nevers do not all pertain to my talk today. But of course you know the two I instantly broke when I was at Western: to major in music, (because I had seen too many snobs talking about the concert pianist's weak fourth finger at the intermission, and I didn't want to end up like them. I did.)

To become a teacher. The importance of learning, I think, was Western's whole ethos, which I really haven't seen so strong in any other educational institution I've been involved with, including the adult education colleges I managed. There was an almost *reverence* for learning, and respect for the learners: we had the honor system, we had great freedom the way we took exams. I remember Dean Phyllis Hoyt who told us to dress up formally when we took our exams. It would give us the right professional frame of mind for focus. I never did, but have always thought about it.

I didn't want to become a teacher because it looked so boring. How could I ever have been so far from the truth!!! Without teachers there is no other profession. The human being is a learning animal – without learning we are dying. And if you want to see a whole lot of dead living people, go to certain nursing homes and watch zombies staring at a blaring TV all day, it's heart-sickening.

But to hold the learning for another person, to believe in them until they are strong enough to believe in themselves, what greater, precious privilege could anyone be given on this earth!

So, I studied music education. Some of you may remember Dr. Julia Rothermel, head of Biology. She said to me once, "Miss Scovel, I understand that you are planning to be a teacher. You will make a good one." "Thank you," I replied, preening. But she went on: "teachers are 10% brain and 90% ham."

I remembered her words when I was a dead grasshopper on a second grade classroom floor and the supervising principal and a whole cloud of dignitaries floated into the room. "Carry on Miss Scovel," was all he said.

First teaching job

My first teaching assignment was in upstate New York, and it was absolutely perfect. I loved them. They loved me. It was so easy to be creative. The kids were in most respects well-behaved, aside from a few third graders indicted for grand larceny for stealing a car. But by the end of the second year, I started thinking: is this all there is to life? Is there any more? Shall I marry Bob from the Duffy-Mott canning factory and live this same teaching year over and over and over?

So I drove out to Lake Ontario and gave myself two choices – either to go ahead and drive into the lake, or write to the American Presbyterian mission (vow number 3) and see if they had any ideas.

You see, I know now what I didn't know then, and here comes my virtual powerpoint presentation. You will see immediately that it is a cross section of a tree. My husband John explained this one: The center of the tree is solid, growing very very slowly, or not at all. It holds the tree up. But the outside of the tree, right under the bark is all the life of the tree, right on the edge, right at the point of risk. I had moved too comfortably into the center of the tree.

Some of you may have heard of the cha-ord theory – a continuum from chaos to order. At one end there is total chaos where no creativity can exist. At the other end is order so controlling that – guess what – no creativity can exist. But the ideal

environment for life, energy and creativity to exist is where these two concepts come together. I had moved, in two years, to a controlled predictable future and the energy was starting to be drained from me.

Well, I don't *quite* advocate what happened to me as an Ideal life, but this one Lakeland decision in one evening in Upstate New York sent me into a life of living on the brink, and that's what I want to share with you today. These episodes are grouped according to experience and do not follow chronologically. You have my abbreviated bio for that.

Living on the brink of fear.

Fear has many forms. Some of them are real. We all have to learn to go on when we're very afraid. Sometimes I have been so scared that my knees were literally knocking together.

I won't tell you about the time our family was cursed, but about another time. It was when I was in the total darkness in a make-shift bomb shelter with Egyptian women, as the Israeli bombs, provided by my country, were being dropped on Alexandria during the Six Day War in Egypt. I was standing with what the USA termed our enemies, and the hospitality was warm and genuine. The situation brought back all the fear of a childhood incident when I was in Canton China, and the Nationalists were bombing the city. That time I had my parents to cling to, and it felt right that if we were to die, we'd all die together. Those of you who have lived through bombings know that there is a whistle as the bomb drops from the plane, and there is no way to tell how near, or how far it is from you until it lands. It's scary. I am grateful for each day I'm alive when I've had experiences like that. Since there have been times when I truly expected to die, I get a little uncomfortable with trite phrases like: "blueberry pie to die for." I would never die for blueberry pie, no matter how good.

There are lesser fears. I have never got over my fear of playing the piano in public. One encouragement is that at last musicians are acknowledging this fear. I tell my piano students that the only way to learn to play while you're scared is to play while you're scared.

And of course there are a million imagined fears under a variety of names: anxiety, worry, concern.

Fear is an emotion. We can't control our emotions, but we can control what we do about them. I remember phoning my California daughter once and saying, "I'm reading a book called Feel the fear and do it anyway". "Thanks, Mom," she said, "now I don't have to read it because the whole message is in the title."

The brink of incompetence.

First, there is *true incompetence*. I remember the first day I was in my school in Egypt, wandering in a daze around the concrete-floored boarding school, still trying to figure out who I was, and why I was here. Someone called to me, "Miss Scovel, today is choir practice. You are to go to the church and accompany the choir."

Now, who has taken piano lessons, even one teensy weensy lesson?: Well you know don't you that there are usually two lines of music, one for each hand (unless you're Rhonda our organist, and she has a line of music for her feet, too). And you know of course that, for example, a B in the right hand is on a different line from a B in the left hand...right? I have been playing the piano for 63 years now, and I still can't figure out how my brain makes it work.

So I showed up for choir practice, and they gave me the hymn book and told me the hymn number. Then they *showed* me the hymn number, because the numbers were in Arabic. My heart sank. Arabic writing you know goes from right to left, and guess what? So did the music. The G clef was on the right hand side of the page, so I was having to read music backwards. I stumbled through the first phrase of the song, when the director stopped us. "Oh dear," he said, "it's much too high. Transpose it down a tone." There is a new learning experience when you are the only one to do something, there is no one to turn to, who could do it better. In the 10 months I was in Egypt, I learned a lot about playing backwards.

Then there is *imagined incompetence*. Sometimes you live on the brink of imagined incompetence which is very debilitating because it sucks away all your energy of focus on the sparkling glimmers of possibility you can actually be working on to solve that imagined incompetence. My husband John calls this the Cop in the Head. Artists are used to this little voice saying, "don't be stupid, you're not a writer, or a poet, or a painter or a musician...you're no good. Why do you even think you can do it?" The worst bits are the *should haves* because you can't do anything about *should have*. Artists accept this as one of the privileges of being a real artist. Here's a quote from Bernard Cornwall, author of many novels: "And there is still the feeling that you are actually a complete fraud and one day you'll be found out. I think it's something that Robert Hughes said: 'self-confidence is the consolation prize given to the less talented.'"

I had to take someone to court recently – it was horrible – but he hadn't paid me for 3 years. Every day I worked on it was like Frodo Baggins getting nearer to Mordor. I had no idea what I was doing, but I set aside 20 minutes a day when I would work on it, even if it meant staring at a computer screen for the full 20 minutes. Every day I would start with: "when it's time to work on it I will know what to do." Sometimes it would mean re-sharpening the pencils, or just making notes on what needed doing. But it was *amazing* how I found people to help, and how helpful they really were! I found an online court which saved a lot of money. In the end I got paid, through the High Sheriff of the county. I didn't feel triumphant at the end, but at least I've been to Mordor, and come back!

Living on the brink of loss.

Well, there's physical loss. When I was evacuated from Egypt I lost a whole household of goods, not for the first time in my life. As a family in China we lost three households of goods – this was my fourth. Believe me, it is terrifying how rapidly you can re-accumulate stuff once again, to the point that there isn't the teeniest space in any cupboard or shelf. People are SO GENEROUS in giving you their left overs. Don't worry about losing *things*.

Then there's emotional loss. That's another thing. For two years I watched the community learning service I'd been building for twenty years be cut and cut and cut. Some of you have had the same experience, I'm sure. By this time I had become passionate about the vital importance of learning in everyone's life (thank you, Western!), that community is learning and learning is community.

Watching it being mutilated in front of me was like watching my child being tortured. This sounds extreme, but if you believe as I do that learning makes us human, that the more we learn the more we know about ourselves, and if we believe that we are made in the image of God, then anything that prevents us from learning is blasphemous.

There's a quote from Jesus in the Bible that says something like, "if anyone prevents any one of these my children from coming to me, it would be better for a millstone to be put around their neck and cast into the sea." Come to visit me in England and I'll show you the size of a millstone. For two years I tried to keep it going, protecting the tutors I'd nurtured, bullied, encouraged and praised into excellence.

Does this sound familiar? Haven't we all been dealing with the loss of our college this week end? And we do need to feel free to grieve long and hard. Grief is another emotion we cannot control. But we must distinguish between grief and self pity. During this week end I have never heard any of the Alumnae trustees speaking of self-pity but strong negotiations for good, with Miami University. Self-pity is inward looking and unproductive, a luxury we cannot afford, especially as women. Women are often called upon to be tough enough to bear great burdens.

Living on the brink of hysteria.

It was soon after the day we first arrived in Tehran – unfortunately on Eid-e-gorban, the day they were killing goats and sheep in the gutters as sacrifice – I was trying to cross the street outside the British Embassy. It is a 4 lane street with no green space in the middle. Cars were parked on either side of the road, and it was *still* a four lane street of cars. I had managed to get halfway across, and I was stuck. The oncoming traffic was whizzing by, a motorcycle was nuzzling the back flap of my coat, because it wanted to make a left turn. "This is the end," I said to myself. "I am *doomed*. Six months of marriage and my life is over. There is *no way* that I can ever cross this street." In this state of rigid terror, I suddenly heard a voice in my ear: "do you want to buy some oranges?" it said. I turned and beside me in the middle of the furiously raging traffic was a street seller with a cart of oranges. I didn't know enough Farsi to say, "Oranges? We have no *time* for oranges! We are *doomed*!" but all I could say in broken Farsi: "Oranges, no!" "They're only four toman a kilo," he said. "No no no" I said again, the hysteria rising. "Okay, then, for you only three toman."

Living on the brink of helplessness. Actually this was quite easy, once I realized that there was nothing I could do, except to look for what was good, interesting, and loving in the situation. In the Six Day War, some of us Americans were held together in a deserted school (it was summer, you may recall). In the scariness of the bombs, beautiful things happened. We got to know a group of people we'd never met before, thrown in together. One was a concert pianist who gave an impromptu concert. It was amazing what the gift of music did to bless us in these desperately

uncertain times. It was scary to be taken at 2 a.m. through the streets of Alexandria to be put on waiting cargo boats. It was humbling that to the Egyptian police we were the enemy, but they were actually protecting us, the enemy, with their own lives against their own people. ..We were met in Crete by the Red Cross, we were met in Rome with hot coffee, cognac, wash cloths and tooth brushes, by the Red Cross after we'd flown across the Alps in a paratrooper plane, and we were met in Munich by the Red Cross. Support the Red Cross, everyone! It's a great organization!

The brink of success.

I wanted to say something about living on the brink of success. There is the success that others put on you from the outside. Rosa Parks never started out in her life saying, "When I grow up I'm going to be popular". It just happened because she got fed up. Sometimes being successful gets in the way. Benjamin Britten said that all he wanted to do was compose, but had to spend much of his time dealing with the public.

Individual pride can come more easily – for me it was being able to send a JPEG, make marmalade, getting through those stupid automated check-out things without needing help from the supermarket staff.

Sometimes we don't mean to be held up as a paragon because of some little thing that makes us successful. This involves exposure...people find you interesting. One time in Iran John and I went on a picnic by a stream. We were observed by two friends, one on either side of the stream, who shouted to each other over our heads. "What are they eating now?" one would ask, "it looks like eggs, yes they are having boiled eggs," the other would say. The response was the Farsi equivalent of "well fancy that".

On the brink of being ignored.. It was surprising how rapidly *no one* wanted my opinion after I had been retired from being a Leader of a Consortium of Adult Education Colleges. I needed to do something entirely different because I'd seen too many retired people of past importance still trying to live their importance in a society that didn't care. Starting at the bottom, being a nobody, is good. I'm working on being a writer. Dealing with the failure and non-responsive editors provide rich new experiences and keeps me learning. I just got another rejection before I left. What do you do with it? One thing is to re-define the definition of *failure*. I decided that if I could send it off for consideration for publication, *that* was success, never mind what happened to it afterward.

Ending

I keep thinking that this talk should have some kind of conclusion, and perhaps we all have to decide which part of the tree we must live at, to be ourselves. But I do hope that it means continually finding out ways to be happy in our own skin, to find out who we truly are, to be continually open and curious. The Judeo-Christian faith believes that we are made in God's image. What if there is in each of us a facet of God that is *only* in us and no one else, not in the past, or in the future? It is up to us to find that uniqueness and develop it for all it's worth, to be shared with everyone. God's gift to the world is each of us.

To go on learning, decide now what our next-but-one career is going to be, make friends with people of all ages, whatever age we are now, might be the best way forward. Every day is new. What gives you life? Pursue it.

I'll end with some more words from John O'Donohue:

For a New Beginning

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the grey promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

John O'Donohue