

## WESTERN COLLEGE REUNION 2015

Chapel Talk – June 14, 2015

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Ah! Western! It is so good to be here and to be with you!

We have all, each one of us, come for a number of reasons:

- To honor our past
- To celebrate friendships and memories of this college as it was ... is it really – for my class - 50 years ago!?
- To continue to serve as witnesses to each other's lives
- To congratulate each other and wish each other well
- And to tap into a familiar Western spirit – a sweet gift of renewed vision and vigor that I refer to as the fabric of Western.

I am honored to have been asked to speak with you this morning, about that spirit, that energy, the Western experience ... as it became part of me and as I became part of it. I have been asked to talk about how being part of Western impacts my life, and to focus on the international aspects of Western and my involvement in civil rights. Now that means I must talk about myself far more than is comfortable. I am trusting that each of you will travel with me along the thought lines of **my** reminiscences and projections with your **own** personal experiences here.

When I try to understand how my life has evolved and where it may lead, I find that the concept of “enduring threads of meaning” is singularly useful. Enduring threads of meaning --- What aspects of my life, what continuing themes, over time elicit a sense of comfort and of joy ... of knowing. How do I recognize my **“self”** in things that I do and favor? Those are the threads. They trace the patterns of my soul.

Some threads I can trace to my early childhood – a love of, and an awe and curiosity about nature, a passion for music, an interest in farming, the importance of education, of being an active participant in the life of a community, being fair and appreciating the value of friendships with children from a range of backgrounds. I grew up in a small New England coastal town that was home to a thriving maritime industry, several tool-and-dye manufacturing companies, supporting local financial institutions and a substantial professional community. We lived, worked and played together – we all pretty much knew each other. The population was a good mix.

Other threads arose a little later ... the value of hard work and persistence in working towards a goal, learning to feel confident in the face of adversity, a sense of equality, of ethical behavior, and a growing need to engage in the world beyond my neighborhood. When my family moved to Georgia in the mid 1950's when I was in my pre and early teens, the sense of equality and ethics crystallized into a commitment to civic and political action.

Those threads are the primary elements that define me. They could be enhanced or minimized, depending upon the nature of the circumstances of stages of my life. I think we respond and flourish when thoughtful, caring attention is offered by others who are significant in our lives. As a young child I felt supported and encouraged, and I flourished. But in my high school environment I was stalled.

I found, upon examining my experience at Western College for Women that well-considered supportive attentiveness and action predominated, and I thrived! I am so grateful and I have benefitted immensely.

Looking back, the Western fabric provided an all-pervasive intentional pursuit of creating the best possible learning environment, helping us all grow as individuals in the ways best suited for ourselves.

When you think of why you went to Western, what reasons come to mind? For me, four aspects were prominent in my decision:

1. I felt I could get an excellent liberal arts education. I wanted to major in chemistry and the new science building demonstrated a commitment to train women in the sciences.
2. The international emphasis was unique and compelling and a good balance to the scientific exposure I was seeking.
3. My mother **and** my aunt attended Western, and
4. I was offered several scholarships and grants in aid.

When it came to making the final decision, it was the international emphasis that set Western apart from all other colleges I was considering. Well, I should also say that the student that guided me and my family on our visit to the campus was Donna Shalala, a dynamo even then. She painted such an interesting, vibrant picture of Western, that it was hard to think of going elsewhere.

As I discovered it was not just the international aspect of the college that was remarkable. I believe that the administration and faculty did their best to open up possibilities for learning and growth in as many ways as possible. When I was selecting quotes for this chapel service, I was struck, time and time again with how closely my recollections of life at Western fit the ways in which “good education” or “good teaching” was described ... leading out, helping students find capacity within, providing conditions for learning, and serving as bridges. *(Note: quotes are in the order of service and included in an additional page at the end of this text.)*

As I remember, I felt deeply engaged in and out of the classroom, with each “thread” supported and each dream made more accessible by an offering up or drawing out of possibilities for next steps. I was able to find caring, knowledgeable professors **and** administrators who helped me grow and thrive... they helped me feed my soul, and bring myself closer to attaining the dreams. They gave me room to strengthen my abilities and to nourish my gutsier side.

For me, the three most significant aspects of the Western fabric from which I benefited were the international program, my academic instruction, and the opportunities for leadership development.

#### International Program

When I accepted the invitation to attend Western College for Women I had no idea of the richness of the international emphasis. We all know it was far more than the typical year or semester abroad programs that were popping up in many colleges at that time. Western had that option, too, but the deep value of the program for me was in the day-to-day experiences on campus with fellow students and with the visiting faculty from other countries, and of course, the summer seminars.

Roughly one of five students was from outside the United States. We lived elbow-to-elbow, sharing what it was like growing up where we lived, discussing political and ethical issues, learning what was “beautiful” or “funny” or “in bad taste” in other cultures. There is nothing quite like brushing your teeth, standing next to Sarah El Mahdi, a member of the royal family of Sudan and talking about dating, or learning about training for traditional Thai dance from Val Salipabanleg, the daughter of the headmaster of the Thai National Dance School, or talking about family and culture with Shirin Kassan, or learning about tensions between Taiwan and China from Ada Tang and Nora Chan, or getting up to the minute interpretations about political shifts in Kenya from Esta Bezurha, or learning about life in Delhi from Neena Kapur, the only other chemistry major in the class of '65. What's more, we became friends. We laughed and giggled together, shared loss and sadness, bounced ideas off one another. We got to know and appreciate each other deeply.

Remember the summer seminars? Each year there was a different geographic focus on campus, based on the up-coming summer seminar .... Near East, Far East, Africa, South America. Visiting professors from countries within the geographic focus of the next seminar were on campus during the year, teaching courses relating to their area of the world and always available for conversation. Special events ... speakers and performing artists from the next seminar destination... were also offered throughout the academic year.

The seminars themselves were life changing / paradigm shifting. New worlds were opened up to us. We traveled with the President of the college, faculty and alumnae, as well as with fellow students. In addition to visiting typical tourist spots, we were treated to special in-depth explorations of educational, manufacturing, cultural arts, culinary, economic and political institutions, guided by the top management, many of them whose daughters had attended Western.

What I carry with me as a result of the Western College model for international emphasis is the understanding that this approach of respect, inquiry, open listening and communication, and appreciation served as a universal learning and relationship-building method for me. That Western fabric removed barriers,

minimized misunderstanding, and made room for creative, positive interaction. What a gift!

The stereotypes and stigmatization, the over-simplification of complex issues that we see and hear in the news media or from online sources or down the street do not fit that Western tradition and do not serve to build a better world community.

I am certain that my experience at Western enhanced my interest and comfort in participating in the International Ash Working Group, a technology research group comprised of the top experts in seven countries that dealt with the management of residue from municipal waste combustion; and the EPA sponsored international exchange in brownfields technology.

The Western fabric also helped expand my appreciation of and ultimate training in core cultural healing methods, and in my joining a redevelopment firm owned, run and financed by people of the orthodox and Hasidic Jewish tradition. Had I not been so comfortable with cultural differences, I would have missed the opportunity to work with the most visionary developer I had come into contact with in my professional career in brownfields redevelopment. It was thrilling working with him and the rest of the team he had assembled.

#### Academic Strengths

But I was Chemistry major! And I also needed to hone my writing and analytical skills and become more knowledgeable in other disciplines typically a part of a strong liberal arts education.

I credit Dr. Josephine Schaffer for setting the stage for my sharpening my literary analytical skills and writing capabilities – I worked so hard in that Freshman English class – squeezing the meaning out of every word of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. I'm sure that had a direct connection later on in graduate school to my ability to write a book review about a topic I wasn't deeply familiar with, and get the first draft published in a highly regarded professional journal!

My special academic mentor – my mentor before I knew the definition of the term - was Dr. Alice Presnel, my organic chemistry professor. She came in from Cincinnati 3, sometimes 4 days a week to teach organic chemistry courses. I did not fully appreciate what she gave me until long after I graduated from Western.

She and I shared a double passion for organic chemistry and for baking. She did all she could to encourage me, inspire me and open doors. Classes were small, 6 or fewer of us. And with us – or at least with me - she made the subject come alive. I loved organic chemistry! Not many can say that. And even though I did not make that my profession, I learned well and enough so that I could read and understand the technical material pertaining to municipal waste combustion and later to brownfields redevelopment and methods for cleaning up contamination.

She gave me room to intellectually explore and problem solve in course work so that I felt confident later in my professional work in challenging and changing regulatory approaches to clean up scenarios so that redevelopment projects that revived and renewed communities could succeed. Rather than have good projects fail in the mire of archaic technology and unreasonable regulations, I was able to help create conditions in which redevelopment could move ahead, yet attain the same level of protection and environmental stewardship.

Dr. Presnel whetted my appetite for more than learning. She recognized that I was likely to get drowsy during classes that were scheduled right after lunch. Her solution for me was to have a fresh pot of coffee brewing – and a delicious coffee cake or lovely dessert waiting. I continue to mix good food with good work and am mindful that she is one of the reasons I enjoy that.

She also sponsored me for membership in the Cincinnati chapter of the Honor Society for Women in Chemistry and nominated me for other professional awards and opportunities. I know that she would have continued to encourage my professional growth had I stayed in the area. But I was off to Boston after graduation. I remain indebted to her.

#### Leadership Development

Now here's the sleeper... the gem that is not in the college brochure, that is as much a part of the Western fabric as the international emphasis or the educational excellence ... leadership development.

I was beginning to hit my stride toward the end of my sophomore year and got up the nerve (thank you, Peggy Gaebler-Morscheck, my roommate that year, for your encouraging kicks and nudges) to run for the office of Junior Chairman. With a lot of support I won the election.

In that position, I had the remarkable fortune of being under the tutelage of Phyllis Hoyt, Dean of Students. The responsibilities of the office of Junior Chairman included being “mother hen” to the entering Freshman Class, until they elected their officers later on in the year, and to serve as the organizational point person for the Sophomore Counselors, who were assigned to assist groups of freshman. During that year I learned a great deal about campus life and the responsibilities of the institution in protecting and enabling the students. That was the year of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I was in Dean Hoyt's office when the campus was made aware of the event, and I watched how the administration responded. So many lessons.

The Junior Chairman also served on the Judicial Council. I gathered experience with fellow student representatives and faculty and administration serving on that body ... learning better how to weigh information, trying to understand circumstances

and participating in debate to achieve consensus on critical issues, both personal and institutional. I also learned how to reach deep for the spiritual energy to help our college community in healing from the loss of one of that class ... dear Jeannie D'Orio, for whom that window is dedicated. I believe that the first time I stood in this pulpit was during the memorial service that was held for her on campus.

Serving as head of the college Parliament my senior year as vice president of the college government, brought me face to face with Roberts Rules of Order and put me on the hot seat enough times to make me feel at ease (relatively) serving on various committees, commissions, and boards of directors throughout my professional career and in my service with voluntary organizations. At Western I was able to try out these roles, learn what they demanded and all the time being encouraged by caring educators and administrators. This is empowerment.

I remember sharing impressions at a much earlier reunion with Gwen Dixon and Hazel Williams – Gwen being a class before me, Hazel, one behind me. Each of us, almost in unison, said that Western had made us feel that “we could do anything “! Fabulous!!

#### Civil Rights

My final example of how the Western fabric enriched core threads of my life is the furthering of my civil rights activism. Ever since I can remember, my parents provided by example, how to live life according to ones values. They believed, as I do, that all people should be treated with respect and enjoy equal rights under the law. They spoke out and joined forces with others to move their community and the nation closer to that goal.

Both were active in the civil rights movement. My father was a Unitarian minister, who at the time we were in Atlanta, served as District Executive for the Southeast and Southwest of the Unitarian Universalist denomination (A Unitarian/Universalist District Executive is similar to an archbishop). My mother was a biologist, a director of religious education, and a long-time member of the League of Women Voters, serving on the Georgia state board of the League for many years.

My Dad was involved in many aspects of the civil rights movement, consulting with, sometimes travelling with Martin Luther King, Jr, serving on President Kennedy's Committee on Religion and Civil Rights, giving the eulogy for Rev. James Reeb who was killed in the second attempt to cross the bridge in Selma, Alabama. My mother was chair of the Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations, which directed that city's desegregation strategy. Atlanta was the only large southern city that complied with the desegregation order without violence. Serving on that council were all the prominent civil rights leaders in Atlanta ... including Julian Bond, Hosea Williams, Whitney Young.

Although our family was threatened numerous times - our lives, our home - both my parents seemed to take it in stride. We always talked about what was happening, and we all knew there were risks involved. It made us careful, but did not diminish our commitment. They lived true to their beliefs, as simple as that.

Western was a wonderful place in which to examine one's beliefs - a small liberal arts college with a remarkably diverse student body and a committed faculty and administration. There were many opportunities for formal and informal discussion, for getting to know fellow students and faculty.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the civil rights movement began to focus on the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama it became a hot topic on campus. A small group of us organized a fund-raising effort on campus to raise money to pay travel expenses for representatives from Western to participate in the march. We gave speeches and collected funds to cover travel costs for students who would represent Western in the march. I was fortunate to have been one of those that were selected to participate.

We travelled from Cincinnati to Atlanta, joining my father and the delegation from the Unitarian-Universalist denomination driving from Atlanta to the rallying point at a church on the outskirts of Montgomery. The experience was like no other. Thousands of marchers, arm-in-arm in tight lines, tense, solemn and singing. Thousands of people lining the road - some shouting vile, cruel threatening words, some cheering us on - hundreds perhaps thousands of police, the state and local police mostly grimacing, taunting, and the federal troops stone-faced and protective - I can still see the little elementary school children smiling and clapping and an old gentleman sitting on a chair on the sidewalk, wiping tears from his eyes.

We drove back to Atlanta that evening, both exalted and shaken by what we had seen, heard, experienced. And we traveled back to Western to share our impressions with our college family.

It was not until I was thinking about this reunion that it occurred to me that a lot must have been going on behind the scenes among Dean Hoyt, Dean Abbott and President Young to help make this happen well. They facilitated the use of lecture halls, quietly supported our collecting money and helped us think through the process by which we selected our representatives. There was never a sense of holding back on their part, even though there must surely have been concern for our safety and welfare, and for the college's liability. They worked with us, never limiting our goals, nor trying to take over any aspect of the project. This was leadership training in action. It was the college administration finding an opportunity to help us grow.

How different that was in comparison to the reaction of the administrations of Boston College, Tufts and Brandeis University when as graduate students, a number of us attending those institutions collaborated to protest the war in Vietnam. We

met solid resistance upon the part of the university administrations and so we ended up in a much less creative circumstance ... we shut the graduate schools down for a spell.

Time and again I witnessed and benefitted from the studied intentional emphasis on opening up new worlds, encouraging exploration, and nurturing competence and leadership potential on the part of Dean Hoyt, President Young, and faculty.

I think that our experience – the Western fabric - is quite unique. I know that I was shown a model for learning and living... a good and powerful model.

In my better moments I emulate that model and try to generate that fabric in the worlds that I touch. I ask myself– am I living intentionally? Am I continuing to grow? Do I lead out what is there in the soul of a colleague, a friend? Do I help set up conditions for learning? Do I serve as a bridge for additional creativity in others, in myself? And I know that must be true of you as well.

It is wonderful being with you all, being here again.

Before I leave you with my closing remarks, I would like to ask that we offer a minute of reflection in appreciation of our classmates that are not with us today. Scroll through your mental list of dear Western friends and compatriots and give them a loving nod. Mention their names if you wish.

Amen.

I leave you with a challenge, a challenge to all of us, to me, to you .... to identify those precious personal dreams and connecting threads that began to take shape, expand and flourish while we were at Western. Threads of our souls that were embellished, nurtured, and supported while we were here; dreams that were encouraged and made to feel possible by having steps to their manifestation illustrated, one connecting the next – a stitch at a time... these threads and dreams that enhance the meaning of our existence. Identify and trace them to the present and as you leave, commit yourself to honoring them, honoring yourself, and drive them forward in your own lives.

Thank you.



## READINGS

### First Reading

#### African Proverb

"Return to old watering holes for more than water; friends and dreams are there to meet you."

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### Second Readings

#### Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

"The word "education" comes from the root e from ex, out, and duco, I lead. It means leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul."

#### Galileo Galilei

"You cannot teach a person anything, you can only help them find it within themselves."

#### Albert Einstein

"I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn."

#### Nikos Kazantzakis

"True teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross; then, having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create their own."