

Today was perfect, and it was an ordinary day

by Susan Hackley

I feel fortunate to be here with you all on our beautiful campus. It's especially wonderful to be here with my 50<sup>th</sup> reunion classmates. Thank you for the invitation to speak. I am very honored.

This morning I want to share my thoughts on how being at Western College changed my life, about how the Sixties were for me the best of times and the worst of times, and about how committed I am now to illuminating the effects of war on American children and families.

My parents drove me from Boston to Oxford, Ohio, freshman year. It was our first time in the Midwest. My father worried that I would fall in love with a boy from Ohio and never return home.... His worries were not ill-founded.

It was both fun and disorienting to be on my own at college. We had the freedom to go late at night to the dorm smoker and mingle with upperclassmen, smoke cigarettes, play bridge for hours, order out pizza, and pack on a few pounds. We could dress slovenly during the week, a great benefit of a women's college, then get dolled up for forays into our cute little college town on the weekend.

On one of those forays, I was drinking beer at the Purity with friends when a handsome boy walked by. It was Bill Foster, a Miami junior from Elyria, Ohio. We had a mutual friend who introduced us. Our first date was a study date in his apartment – I was reading *Anna Karenina*. Our second date was a Bob Dylan concert in Cincinnati. Bill was funny and smart and interesting. We became pretty inseparable.

Freshman year I was happy. My friends Gail Lewis, Toni Dul, and Laurie Knowles, all from Montclair, New Jersey, played guitar and sang. I loved listening to them. Late at night, they and our other friends, including Pam Murray and Rae Ellen Lee, would stay up late talking or maybe cutting each other's hair.

That summer Bill and I both worked on Cape Cod, and, in the fall, my sophomore year, we were back at school. We loved studying at the Lodge. Some friends hadn't returned to Western, and I missed them. I made new friends, including Prue Bradford, who remains a very dear friend. Bill and I went back to Cape Cod for another summer of work, then I headed into junior year.

Now everything felt different. More and more, we all talked about what was happening in our country, about the need for better schools for the underprivileged and about how we could help

fight for civil rights. As Western girls, we were acutely aware of the three brave young Freedom Summer activists who trained on our campus not long before we arrived and who were murdered in Mississippi.

For many of us, the Vietnam War became an overwhelming concern. Why should our boys have to go kill people in a place most of us couldn't find on a map? Brothers, friends, and boyfriends all had to wrestle with what to do about the draft. Get a deferment for graduate school or marriage? Look for a medical excuse? Go to war? Go to Canada?

Bill felt that if he got a deferment, someone else would have to go in his place, and that wouldn't be right. He seriously considered going to Canada, though he hated the thought of possibly never being able to return to our country. In the end, he allowed himself to be drafted. I learned that he would be joining the Army while I was spending the spring semester studying in Vienna, Austria.

For me, coming back to Western for senior year was dismal. After being in Europe, college life felt smaller. In December, I saw Bill off at the Cleveland airport as he headed to Vietnam. I wept. Why was this fine young man who believed in nonviolence going to war?

That winter the Tet Offensive in Vietnam showed vividly how difficult and gruesome the war had become.

I was an English major, and reading had always been a solace. Now it was challenging me. The novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller in particular changed my view of the world.

Harper Lee wrote that "*Catch-22* is the only war novel I've ever read that makes any sense." That's how I felt. Too many books about war, and I had read many, extolled the bravery of the soldiers without questioning those who started the war. The more I learned, the more I could see no reason for continuing the Vietnam war.

In April, unbelievably, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. What deep sadness we all felt. We'd lost President Kennedy to violence our senior year of high school. Now this horror.

Across America, students demonstrated against the war and for civil rights. With Jessica Lee, Pam Knowles, and other Western friends, I worked for anti-war presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy, a senator from Minnesota. We joined a "Get Clean for Gene" rally in Indianapolis and felt hopeful.

Graduation was somber. Several of my fellow English majors and I made long skirts out of our Indian print bedspreads. On the ride home to Boston with my parents and sister, I slept most of the way.

Just days after graduation, Senator Bobby Kennedy, also an anti-war presidential candidate, was gunned down in Los Angeles. Another brave man fighting for a better America was gone. What a mournful time.

Back home in Boston, I got a job in publishing. Remember those days, when college graduates knew they could get some kind of good job?

In August, I flew to Hawaii to see Bill, who had five days of R&R leave from Vietnam.

A few weeks later, I got word that Bill had died in a plane crash over the South China Sea.

I felt terrible grief and remorse and anger. After the funeral, I shut down, barely talking. I vowed to never believe other people without making up my own mind. I would no longer accept at face value what my parents or teachers or government said. I wouldn't even laugh at jokes that weren't funny. I became a fundamentally different person.

Months went by. I saved money, and the following spring I quit my job, bought a plane ticket to Vienna, and embarked with my friend Carol on a 14-month trip, hitchhiking across Europe, then working on an Israeli kibbutz, and finally coming home to the US. I worked at various jobs, eventually becoming a ski bum in Aspen, Colorado, where I met a new fellow, John. He and I drove a Jeep up the Al Can Highway to Alaska. I thought we'd stay a few weeks. We stayed 15 years, nine of them in a log cabin on the side of a mountain. No running water or electricity. John and I married. I worked as a magazine editor and had my own photography and writing business. We had two children, Zachary and Daphne. I loved Alaska, but John and I were in many ways ill-suited. We got divorced, and at age 40, I moved back to Boston with my two children.

The time when we went to college was life-altering for many of us. It certainly was for me. There were the assassinations, the political upheavals, the unnecessary war and the thousands of deaths of young American soldiers and Vietnamese. People started to question America's institutions, and many lost faith in our government. The Sixties turned that new lens of skepticism or disbelief on, well, everything. How women were treated by men and how women thought about themselves. How a country makes a decision to go to war.

We who graduated 50 years ago were the leading edge of the Baby Boomers, and with the Baby Boomers many things started to change. Remember when there was a women's jobs section and a separate men's job section in the newspaper? Remember when no one said anything personal at a wedding or a funeral?

My little boy Zac grew up, and a week before he was set to go to college, he told me he had decided to join the US Marine Corps. I was horrified. Why didn't he join the military after college? Or not at all!

It never occurred to me, back then in the year 2000, that our country would soon go to war. But 9/11 happened, and in 2002 Zac was among the first Marines fighting their way from Kuwait to Baghdad. Once again, someone I dearly loved was in a foreign war that in my view shouldn't have been started in the first place. As the mother of an active duty service member, I felt I could not comment publicly against the war, but I vowed that after the war, no matter what happened to my son, I would figure out how I could personally do something so that our country did not get into any more misguided wars.

I am profoundly grateful that Zac came home safely from Iraq. I started thinking about what I might do to encourage better, deeper discussions about war. By then I was working in the field of negotiation, having gone to graduate school and having discovered how negotiation skills can help people solve problems, build sustaining relationships, and manage conflict.

I decided to make a documentary film about the impact of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the children and families of America. Everyone can imagine the impact of war on Iraqi and Afghan children. What about our own children and grandchildren? Turns out that there are two million American children whose mom or dad has served in one of those wars. Those children go to bed at night wondering if their parent will come home safely. Is someone trying to kill Dad? Is Dad trying to kill someone? Many children have shared their thoughts with me.

I feel that the most profound questions about war are not being asked. Is it a just war? What are the costs of war and are they worth it? Is it all right to kill civilians as well as soldiers? What does it do to our soldiers to fight a war? Moral injury occurs when one acts in a way that goes against one's values and conscience. Soldiers are trained to kill. My son was trained to kill. We raise our children to not harm others, and then our country sends them out to kill.

Everyone knows someone who has gone to war – maybe a great-uncle, a brother, a neighbor, or a friend. And we all know how hard it can be to talk about war. How can someone who has never been to war talk to someone who has? How can a veteran talk to us about some of the awful things he saw in war.

Focusing on children here at home is my way to get people to pay attention to some of the invisible costs of war. Most Americans are far from the front lines. Our country's all-volunteer military represents less than one percent of the population. While many civilians want to know more, they lack ways to connect. We hope that viewers of our film will have a greater appreciation for the families who have a parent off at war, and we want viewers to think about the impact of war on their own families. For a child who is 17, we have been at war their whole life. What are their questions?

We did filming in Indiana and North Carolina and are now in the editing stage. We made a short film that was shown in five film festivals. You can see it on our website, [www.veteranchildren.com](http://www.veteranchildren.com).

I'm committed to finishing the film and will work on this cause for the rest of my life, but it has been hard. I started this project in my late 60's. I didn't know much about filmmaking and have had a steep learning curve.

Moreover, as we all know, sometimes life is what happens when you are making other plans.

About a year and a half ago, I learned that I have three serious diseases - ovarian cancer, a kind of leukemia, and a mysterious weakness in my right hand. To treat the cancer, I had several operations and months of chemotherapy. By last spring, I was getting stronger, and the cancer felt managed, though I was warned that there was a high likelihood of recurrence.

The leukemia, I was told, could be watched and might not need to be treated, but I still didn't know what was causing the weakness in my hand. One neurologist said I might need spinal surgery. Another thought it might get better in time. I liked that. However, a year ago, my husband Paul and I sat in shock as yet another neurologist said, "I think you have ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease."

It felt like I was in a medical chamber of horrors. I was told that we would have to monitor how my neurological symptoms progressed. In the meantime, one neurologist said that I should act as though I have two years to live.

I was terrified. What should I do at this crossroads? Should I quit my fulltime job as managing director of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, a job I loved? Should I travel more? Write a book? Should I get organized so that all would be in order when I die?

My therapist gave me good advice. She said, don't mourn prematurely. Live your life. Keep your job but work as little as possible. And finally, ask for what you want.

So I carried on and had a wonderful time last summer. My husband Paul and I made our yearly trip to Alaska, where my son now lives, working as a wilderness pilot for the Alaska State Troopers. We joined my daughter, her husband, and two little boys at the mountain cabin I lived in so many years ago. To my amazement, they love staying there, despite the bears, the outhouse, and the lack of amenities.

We went to Paul's family camp in the Adirondacks and to a wedding in the San Juan Islands. We went on a fall trip to London for my work.

So life goes on, beautifully. I feel happy most of the time. And I've learned a few things.

Back in my healthy days, no matter how deliberately I tried to live in the moment, I think in retrospect I failed, as perhaps most healthy people do.

Many people with serious illness say that in an unexpected way becoming ill was the best thing that ever happened to them. Their strength is forged. They discard what isn't meaningful in their lives. They do what they want, as much as they are able.

I learned that I can adapt, and I must. I don't pretend any more to be a healthy person with an open-ended future.

To be in the moment and not worry about the future, there is nothing better than being with children – my grown children and their little ones.

I do not yet have a definitive diagnosis for my neurological malady. Since there is no treatment for ALS, I am happy to stay in limbo as long as possible.

As my daughter Daphne said, "We will enjoy now while we have now."

I know how lucky I was to have reached 70 years of age in robust health and in a joyful marriage. Looking back over my life, I am grateful for the adventures I had, many of them in my beloved Alaska. I helped pioneer a log cabin community. I have gone dog mushing in deep winter snow in Denali National Park and whitewater rafting on the Kobuk River. I camped with my son a few years ago on the tundra in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 15 miles from the Arctic Ocean.

I think about Bill Foster, who died 50 years ago at the age of 25. The anguish I felt at his death separated me from others the way that my illness does now. A few years ago Bill's brother and sister sent me the folded flag from his funeral and other items relating to his military service. I've visited his grave in Elyria and the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, where I can run my hand over his carved name. I was 22 when he died.

His death was the worst thing to happen to me – and it made me a better person.

There's a saying at Memorial Church at Harvard, dedicated to those students who died at war.

“While a bright future beckoned, they freely gave their lives and fondest hopes for us and our allies, that we might learn from them courage in peace to spend our lives making a better world for others.”

I think of all those young men lost in war. While World War II seemed unavoidable and necessary, World War I, one hundred years ago, should never have happened. Petty alliances and European squabbles grew into a global conflagration that caused 37 million casualties.

I ask myself, what role do we all play? Are we silent? Are we indifferent? Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century found their voices, and Western College helped us find ours. I want to suggest that we find ways to speak out now more than ever, no matter what our age.

“It isn't enough to talk about peace,” Eleanor Roosevelt said. “One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

All those boys died young, because we or others like us sent them off to war. I am sure that they would agree with the sentiment I tell myself:

Today was perfect, and it was an ordinary day.

We should treasure our ordinary days. That's our duty to those who died young for our country. And we should speak out when we see injustice or a rush to violence. That's our duty, too.

Thank you very much.

Delivered at Kumler Chapel  
Western College for Women, Oxford, Ohio  
June 10, 2018

Western College Chapel Talk