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## 81st Commencement Address

Frank McCourt

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Commencement Speech 1999  
Connecticut College

By Frank McCourt

The question is, should I talk about you or should I talk about me? If I talk about you, I might begin to sound like a commencement speaker. I might start exhorting you to "go forth." Commencement speakers like to say "go forth." You're going anyway. You are not going to sit in this sun for the rest of your life! And the main thing on your minds is to get your diploma and get out of the sun and go to lunch with your loved ones. You'll have a big lunch, and you will think of this day even 10 or 20 years from now as one of the turning points of your life. If I talk about you, I might start giving you some advice and I am very poor at giving advice. As Oscar Wilde said "The best thing to do with advice is to give it to someone else; you can't use it yourself." So I can't give you any advice because after 30 years of teaching high school English in New York City, I found that when I gave kids advice they may have taken it in, but they didn't always follow it. So I just learned to present something to them. And what I presented was what I knew, or what I thought I knew.

I could talk about myself, and then if I talk about myself, I am talking about you, because although I never had the experience that you are having, I did go to college, but I never went to high school. I skipped that. You could have done that too if you were wise. I did it, and if I can do it anyone can do it. And that's why I feel a little guilty standing here this morning. I feel nervous because I am in the presence of such accomplished people, such educated people. This class sitting before me, your minds are brimming with the knowledge you have gained in the last four years. You have gained facts and skills, and I hope that there is a strong underpinning of wisdom, and nudging the wisdom aside is a sense of adventure, which I hope you will have. Because it doesn't end here. You might go for a master's or you might go for a Ph.D., but even then it doesn't end.

I didn't know when I landed in New York at the age of 19 what was going to happen to me. I had no idea whatsoever. There was no one standing there inviting me to come to Connecticut College. As a matter of fact, I think if I had applied here they would have laughed and turned me away because I didn't have any credentials. I didn't know what I was going to do. I floundered awhile, like many immigrants. I am sure some of you had people in your family like that your parents, your grandparents, people who came to this country who floundered awhile and then found a place in American society.

I had a series of menial jobs, and then I was liberated from those menial jobs by China. China attacked Korea and America got nervous and turned to me and drafted me. But I wasn't sent to Korea because they didn't want the war to end too soon. They sent me to Germany — that was really the beginning of my teaching career. They had me training attack dogs, German Shepherds. I had to train them to be mean. We used Russian uniforms and hit the dogs on the noses with the Russian uniforms so that the dogs would hate Russians. So my first introduction to teaching was the teaching of hatred to German Shepherds.

When I was discharged from the army, I think the best thing that ever happened to me was the gift of the GI bill. I don't know if you are old enough to know anything about the GI bill, but at the end of the Second World War and the end of the Korean War, the government provided educational benefits for veterans. I didn't have a high school diploma, I had never been in a high school, so how could I go to college? I'll tell you how. I used to live in Greenwich Village, not far from my mama. I would go to a tavern called the White Horse where Dylan Thomas drank himself to death. I wasn't proposing to do that myself. I went into this bar one day when I was working on the docks, and I was a bit weary of the laboring life. I was having a beer and a knockwurst. And I did something that no young Irishman should ever do. I began to ask myself - what is the meaning of it all. And that is a dangerous thing to do when you are having a beer and a knockwurst. The most dangerous part of it, and the saddest part of it, was I got slightly depressed and got off my barstool. I walked away from my half-empty beer and my half-eaten knockwurst and walked to Washington Square, and there was New York University. Maybe it was because of the half beer I had, but I said to myself, I think I will go there. And I went to the admission office to get me a form. I filled out the form, and they said "What about the high school? You didn't fill out the high school part." I said "I never went to high school, but I think I am very intelligent." That was a very arrogant thing to say, but I was desperate to get into NYU, or to any college. There was a dean passing by, and she said, "Well, what is going on here?" And they said "Well, he claims he's very intelligent." I had told them that I had read a lot of books, and they wanted to know what books. I trotted out an impressive list of books, whether I had read them or not. I emphasized Voltaire very heavily. He's a big one. He said, "Cultivate your garden." That is one of my favorite sayings. So they let me in on probation for a year. I didn't sail in the way you sailed into Connecticut College. Not that I sailed out the way you are doing. I had to work during my years as a student. And along the way I decided to become a teacher because there wasn't anything else that appealed to me. I think the life of a writer appealed to me, but I didn't have the courage nor did I have the skill at the time. So I thought combining my love of books with my love of kids would become the perfect life for me, so I'll become a teacher.

In the 30 years that I was teaching in various high schools in New York, I started at one of the hardest in the city, a technical high school for the kids who were not interested in listening to me babble on about Silas Marner, which they call the dirty old man book. They would not listen. There were kids in auto mechanics and machine shop and all these different trades, and I had to hold their attention. That's the kind of skill you have to develop as a teacher and as an actor — finding a way to hold the attention of the audience the way I have you now — in the palm of my hands — by describing this journey. Nobody told me how to teach. Nobody can tell you how to teach. Actually nobody can tell you anything. You have to find it out for yourself. I know you have a college degree, or you will in a few minutes, as soon as I stop talking. In the long run, I have discovered, you have to struggle along as a teacher, or an actor, a writer, or anything else.

But I look back at the 30 years of teaching and know that was the best thing I ever did in my life I think. I had to deal with the young people of all economic levels, of all shades of intelligence. I had to struggle. I had to learn about the American teenager. I had to

learn about literature. In the long run what I was learning was something about myself, and above all, about the human heart. My experience as a teacher was the experience as a student. I became a teacher and I began my education in the classroom. I began to know something about myself. That's the main thing you have to know — thyself. "... presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is man." This is what I discovered, and I think the kids helped me. As soon as I opened my mouth they would ask "You Scotch or something?" and I had to admit that I was Irish. They regarded me as kind of an exotic and they wanted to know about my life. I told them. They wanted to know about my education, religion, sports and girls and everything else. You are told by other teachers, "Don't tell the students anything about your private life." But they wanted to know. And because I was telling them, stories were forming in my head. Students would say to me "Hey, Mr. McCourt, you should write a book." And I did. I do what I'm told. That was the main thing about teaching. I don't know how many of you are intending on becoming teachers. I used to ask the senior high school class every year, "How many of you intend to become teachers?" In 18 years, only two hands were raised. The possessors of the two hands were not a very likeable pair. One of them, I think, was a potential serial killer, and I don't know what the other one was, but I wouldn't have them in the classroom. Unfortunately, the teaching profession was not glamorous enough nor was it well paid enough. But for me, it was glamorous, for me it was well paid. I know you know that teachers salaries are very low compared with starlets on soap operas and jobs like that. I know you know that and maybe not too many of you are drawn to teaching, but I have to thank all those years in the classroom, I have to thank approximately 11,000 students that I had and 33,000 lessons that I taught. I learned; I learned over the years. But although I learned, I wondered if I knew anything in the long run. I've written a best seller and I have finished another book. Now I have to write another one. I don't know what — you get this itch and you don't know what to do with yourself so you have to write a best seller. Which is to be made into a major motion picture, with all — and I might even be surrounded by all — I might even meet Sharon Stone. How higher can you aspire to than that?

I stand on the stage with the graduates of Connecticut College and the distinguished members of the faculty and the recipients of honorary degrees and all I can tell you is that I am living the American dream, and you have contributed to it. Thank you very much.