

Afterword

Three Wishes

William D. Phillips '70

(1997 Nobel Laureate in Physics)

President Kepple, Chairman Cramer, honored guests, faculty, family, friends, and graduating students; my fellow Juniataians: I am deeply touched to be honored here at my Alma Mater, and I am pleased to be able to congratulate the Juniata College Class of 1999 and all of those who have helped to bring you to this commencement.

When President Kepple asked me to accept an honorary degree today, I accepted enthusiastically. When he asked me to give the commencement address, I was less enthusiastic. Speaking to a class graduating from my own college, the college from which my father and mother, my aunt, my sister and my brother graduated, a college that has had such a profound influence on my professional and personal life is daunting.

Kristen Over, the daughter of John and Peggy Over, dear friends from our days at Juniata, is graduating with you today. Somehow, this makes me feel rather old and far away from my student days; but at the same time it makes me feel connected in an important way to you and your Juniata experience, in spite of all the time that has passed and all the changes that have taken place since I graduated almost 30 years ago.

What should I tell you today? I have heard a lot of commence-

Commencement Address, May 9, 1999

ment addresses and remember little of any of them. I am fairly confident that you would forget any gems of wisdom or sage advice I might offer, as I have forgotten all the earnest commencement speeches I have heard. (And besides, the “Sunscreen” speech gives some pretty good advice and you can download it from the web, or get it on CD whenever you want.)

So, instead of giving advice, I am going to tell you a few stories, remind you of some things you already know, and wish you three wishes.

The first story comes from a time just a few weeks after I came to Juniata as a freshman. My roommate, Clark Lantz, and I had walked into town on a bright Saturday afternoon and were returning along Mifflin Street when we encountered two young boys five and six years old darting from tree to bush to porch, playing at hiding and adventure. As Clark and I approached them we heard one cry excitedly to the other “Look out, here come two men!” Clark turned to me and said “Did you hear that, Bill? We’re men!”

Well, in the Fall of 1966, 17 years old, we didn’t feel much like men. By May of 1970, we did. Not that I believe that Juniata had made me a man — four years of living will do a pretty good job of that on a 17 year old boy almost anywhere. Rather, Juniata had made me a “*mensch*,” a human being in the spiritual, and not just the biological, sense. I came to Juniata as an arrogant, self-centered, smart-assed boy, and when I graduated, I was making a good start at being a *mensch*.

Probably many of you have experienced something similar. You came to Juniata as boys and girls of various degrees of maturity and you are leaving with a sense of having grown more than just four-years-older. For you, as for everyone who goes to college, this has happened in a lot of ways, large and small. Through classes and professors who opened new areas of knowledge for you, through friendships that deepened your appreciation for the value of relationships and gave a gift that will last a lifetime, through late-night dorm-room discussions exploring the problems of society, the mysteries of the universe, or the joys of romance, through successes and disappointments, loves and infatuations, confusions and conclusion.

But the difference between what *you* experienced and what *most* college students experience is that *you* enjoyed and suffered these

events of life in a community that deeply values its members, that has at its core an ethos valuing education over training, inner substance over outer appearance, caring for others over concern for self, faith along with knowledge. Juniata College is an excellent academic institution, but many schools can make the same claim. Very few have the spiritual strength to match the intellectual strength.

You have been privileged to come of age in a very special environment. Like most Juniatians, you will not realize *how* special it has been until you grow up a little more. But that understanding will come independently of anything I am telling you today. Your Juniata experience is now an integral part of your being whether you realize it now or not.

Now, let me wish you my three wishes. With each wish comes another story. One from before I came to Juniata, one from long after, and one last story from my time here.

While in high school, I spent a summer working in a university research lab. The graduate student who mentored me shared this insight: physicists are people who get paid for working at their hobby. For me, that has been a joyous truth. Physicists don't get paid much, but we sure have a lot of fun. And so, my first wish for you is that, whatever you do, you will work at something you love.

After the announcement of the 1997 Nobel prizes, my wife Jane and I were showered with letters and other messages from family, friends, and colleagues, some of whom we hadn't seen in years. Among the sweetest things about the Nobel Prize is how it has reconnected us with old friends. One of the letters, however, came from a stranger, and it was written not to Jane and me, but to our daughters. The writer described how in 1950, as a girl of 18, she, like one of our daughters, had been away at school when the news came that her father had been awarded the Nobel Prize. And, as I had been, her father was far from home at a conference. Transatlantic telephone calls were quite extraordinary in 1950, so she cabled her congratulations to her father. The reply came back "I'm prouder of you, my darling, than of any prize." My second wish for you is that you will live in the company of friends and family whom you love and care for, and who love and care for you, for they are life's greatest treasures.

My last story comes again from my freshman year. I had become

friends with my physics lab instructor, John Long, a physics major just a year ahead of me, who came from that Church of the Brethren tradition that has so effectively nourished the core of Juniata College. Once a week one of the eateries in bustling downtown Huntingdon offered an all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinner for \$0.99. This was a good price even back then, and John and I would sometimes seek a change from cafeteria food by walking into town for this feast.

One evening, as we made our way downtown, we were approached by an old, seedy-looking man who asked if we could spare some change. I told the panhandler that I had nothing to spare. What I said exactly was that I only had enough for myself. (It's interesting how that kind of a statement is almost always true and at the same time almost always a lie.) In any case, John dug into his pocket and gave the man a few coins. As we continued on our way, I reproached him for his well-meaning but foolish gesture. I assured him that his contribution would just go toward cheap wine and the further degradation of the bum's life. John admitted that maybe I was right, and we walked on to the restaurant, paid our \$0.99, and started filling up on spaghetti. After we had been at it awhile, the old man walked in. He had finally scraped together \$0.99 and had come for spaghetti.

It didn't happen all at once, but that experience changed me. Not everyone gets to work and live in love. My third wish for you is that, when the opportunity arises, you will be able to care for those who are less fortunate.

Three wishes — the stuff of fairy tales. But life is not a fairy tale, and whether my wishes for you come true is largely a matter for *you* to choose. May you do what you love; surround yourself with love; spread the love around. Not everyone can choose to make wishes come true.

You are Juniatians.

You can!