

Get Lost!

Judy Katz

Convocation Address August 25, 2008

President Kepple, Provost Lakso, platform party, Juniata College faculty and staff, parents and friends—and most of all—to the Juniata College class of 2012—Get Lost!

Now that's a strange thing for me to say after all the hard work you've done to get here, and all the hard work we've done to get you here.

Get lost!

What I like about this title are the multiple meanings of it, and the paradox of it—it's seeming to ask you to scram, to go away, at the same time that we're welcoming you here. And that's what I'd like to talk about—the contradictions, the confusion, the uncertainties, the bewildering possibilities, and the paradoxes that college offers you. Yes, offers you—invites you to immerse yourselves in, and sometimes just pushes you into. Dive into it, swim in it, maybe sink in it—even if you think you don't know how to swim in these waters, even if you think you could drown.

I'm glad to be here welcoming you to Juniata at the beginning of your college life, this new life. What an exciting time, full of so many possibilities and directions. But as excited as you are, I imagine that many of you are also feeling lost and trying not to feel it, trying not to show it—putting on a brave face—but feeling lost.

Some of you—most of you, I hope—don't know what you want to do with your lives, what you want to major in, and you're feeling lost. Even some of you who've known since second grade or seventh grade exactly what you want to do with your lives—even some of you may be feeling lost. I hope you are.

Fairy tales tell us that being lost—especially in the woods—is dangerous; look at what happened to little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel. The wolf looked friendly enough at first, and so too the house made of candy—the ultimate Halloween treat—with a real witch. So the message is to stay home and play video games and don't talk to strangers. Go ahead and watch *Lost* on TV—but don't actually get lost (even though being lost, for Jack, Locke, Sawyer, Hurley and the others, was a radical improvement).

Juniata doesn't look too threatening, doesn't look like the dangerous woods in fairy tales. In fact, Juniata may already be starting to look or feel like home; you've brought your creature comforts with

you—TV, microwave, MP3 players, laptops, cell phones—and some of you may be texting at this very moment (I certainly hope not!). And your video games—yeah, video games. Some students have told me they spend more time playing video games and IM-ing, or connecting on Facebook, than they do going to class and studying—combined. So your first week at college may look like and feel like a fairy tale beginning—not very dangerous and not very threatening; but looks can be deceiving. The woods await you!

In a book called *Six Walks in the Narrative Woods*—I love this title, because reading is my all-time favorite adventure and I’m always happy to be lost in those woods—the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco writes about different ways to navigate the unknown in literature, an experience he likens to being in unfamiliar woods. Some people, in encountering a story they’re reading for the first time, just want to get to the end as quickly as possible and get out of the woods. They don’t want to be lost in this new place. When faced with something they don’t understand, they become scared and anxious. They just want to get back to a place where the stories are familiar, where life is soothing, where nothing is going to challenge the status quo, and where even the excitement is predictable.

So you can try to get out of those woods as quickly as possible—or you can hang around in them, and get to know them, and not be afraid of getting lost, because we’re all here with you, inviting you to discover this astonishing place, even if it is strange and bewildering—actually, because it is strange and bewildering. Lose yourselves; immerse yourselves in all kinds of challenging, bewildering, enlightening, surprising, occasionally scary, always demanding experiences.

So why subject yourself to this? Why am I inviting you to get lost?

The writer Lillian Smith says it powerfully, when she explains the importance of immersing oneself in bewilderment and uncertainty. She says, “a metamorphosis takes place: something happens within: a new chaos, and then slowly, a new being.” A new chaos—and then—slowly—a new being.

Through this “new chaos,” through bewilderment and confusion and uncertainty, we find ourselves. We discover abilities and resources and talents and dreams we didn’t know we had.

You learn to walk by crawling first, then hoisting yourself up, then stumbling and falling. You don’t learn to walk by hanging out in your crib!

When you’re out there, in the world and in the woods, stumbling and falling at first, and then walking and running, and then leaping and soaring, then you’re discovering who you are and how alive you are—and how truly amazing you are.

Juniata is a small school—but it offers a big world. It offers a big world through literature and the arts, through history and philosophy, through the social sciences and the natural sciences,

- through the novels of Virginia Woolf and of Leo Tolstoy and the plays of William Shakespeare and the poetry of Langston Hughes,
- through the study of African American art—and African politics,

- through the study of the American Revolution—and the study of organic evolution,
- through yoga studies—and modes of clay,
- through world literatures and world civilizations and world religions and world languages,
- through the history of the English language and the history of food and the history of God,
- through the study of death and dying—and through the study of death and destruction by nature,
- through the study of gender and conflict—and the study of comics and culture,
- through learning to sing, to paint, to tell stories, to write poetry, to speak another language, to use sign language, to blow glass, to act, to play a sport, to dance, to make a difference to other people, to help build homes, to teach children to read. . . .

One of my favorite books is *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, a memoir about several generations of women in a Chinese-American family. Kingston identifies with the legendary heroine, Fa Mu Lan, and, assuming her persona, Kingston says, “I learned to make my mind large as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.”

Up to now, you’ve been rewarded for coming up with right answers, and perhaps not rewarded for taking risks and considering complexities. But life isn’t either/or--this or that; life, everywhere, is this *and* that. If we don’t make our minds large enough so that there is room for paradoxes, we end up living in a small space where things are only this or that, never this and that.

So lose yourself in what’s new. In ideas. In ideas that are hard to understand. Ideas that challenge a lot of what you believe. Ideas that don’t offer nice neat answers to the questions they pose. Ideas that rock the boat you’ve been riding in, ideas that make you kind of seasick, ideas that make you want to empty your head. The poet Adrienne Rich urges us not to “fall for shallow and easy solutions.” So lose yourself in thought. Start writing, keep a journal, start talking, invite other people to consider what’s confusing and disturbing and challenging. Talk to your professors, ask questions in class and out of class, and when you’re struggling and scared and feeling lost—ask for help.

Lose yourself in new people, your peers, the faculty and staff here, the people in the Huntingdon community—some of whom don’t look like you or think like you or talk like you or dress like you—and some who do. But what if I don’t like them. What if they don’t like me. You may think you’re the only one who’s self conscious and shy and uncomfortable, but you’re not.

Lose yourself in a new activity. But I don’t think I’ll like that. Maybe I won’t be able to do that. Maybe I’ll make a fool of myself. Maybe. So many maybes that you end up in your crib—playing video games. Learn how to dance. Spend a semester at the field station observing the natural world. Sign up to write for the *Juniatian*. Volunteer to be a big brother or big sister. Are you a couch potato? Take up hiking or swimming or bicycling.

Lose yourself in creating what never existed before—in making art, in making music, in making poetry, in acting and dancing, in growing a garden, in nurturing your own powerful talents and gifts.

Or don't lose yourself. Stay in the crib. Keep on crawling.

But the most amazing things happen when you let yourself be lost. You get to discover a new world, and yourself in the world. You get to have adventures you've never had before, you get to meet strangers who become friends, you get to see and think things you've never seen or thought before. You get to know yourself in a way you haven't known yourself before. Out of this "new chaos"—out of this "new chaos"—you are creating and becoming—"a new being."

So here you are, maybe already a bit lost in the woods. You're lucky because Juniata is a wonderful place in which to be lost.

Here, in these woods, in this little community, Juniata College offers you a wilderness and a world as large as the universe is large—and we invite you to get lost here—and then—to find yourselves.