Mary Ellen Murphy, RSM, ’50, Ph.D.

Honorary Degree Speech

Dr. Reid, Dr. Kalis, Gov. Malloy, Board members, Faculty and Staff, Class of 2012:

Thank you for this special honor today! I humbly accept it, knowing that it recognizes all who have helped me through the years to bring me to the 77th Commencement of St. Joseph College soon to become University of St. Joseph, my family, friends, Sisters of Mercy, and colleagues, especially Sr. Claire Markham who is here today. Let me congratulate you, the members of the Graduating Class of 2012 for your success! Some of you I met four years ago as timid first year students in your beginning chemistry class. Some of you, especially the Master’s degree candidates had family or work responsibilities that limited you study time, but today we celebrate all your effort as you receive your degree.

I would like to quote Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit, paleontologist, philosopher of the last century writing to two friends: “For you there is only one road that will lead to God and this is fidelity to remain constantly true to yourself, to what is highest in you. The road will go before you…..Let me recall some parts of the road I have traveled!

I was a commuter student, took the bus half way and walked from Farmington Ave. During rush hour it was easier to walk all the 2 ½ miles home. Like the 50th reunion class here today I have sat in the same seats as you in Room 213 McD for my first chemistry class, maybe not in as comfortable seats as you, fulfilled the requirements for the major, minor, general ed, completed senior research and comprehensive exams. Perhaps like some of you today, jobs were hard to find when I graduated. I wanted to be a chemist from seventh grade on, but was prepared to teach. There were only two chemistry positions open in the State of CT that year; both were filled by men.

Monday after Graduation I sent a brief letter to several companies where I had sent resumes updating my resume stating that at graduation I received Honors in Chemistry. In a week or so I received a telephone call from Naugatuck Chemical, division of Uniroyal asking for a resume. I explained that I had sent one to them; at any rate please send another, which I did quickly. With in the month I was happily working in the Analytical Control lab learning about polymer chemistry. After working there a month my original resume surfaced!

Point 1. Consider updating your resume...

My father always said it was hard to find a job when you did not have one and easy when you did have one! Through high school and college I had worked summers at Travelers in the Engineering department as a mail runner, hoping that someday I might go to the lab. Within my first year in Naugatuck I received a telephone call from the head chemical engineer asking me to consider coming to Travelers as a chemist!- and his next statement- name your salary! Eventually I moved there to a more responsible position doing water analysis, measuring lead paint on children’s toys, asbestos in air, and industrial hygiene concerns in its early days… Why do I mention this experience to you? My evaluation as a summer mail runner and clerical work was important; he offered the position to me without asking any chemistry questions!

Point 2 Where ever you work realize that you are evaluated on more than just knowledge. Other attributes are important: cooperation, honesty, respect for persons, initiative and team player, ethical practice, etc. Notice how the Mercy Core values come to mind here: compassion, academic excellence, Integrity, hospitality, respect and diversity. For some years prospective employers calling for
recommendations asked, “Are they honest?” The Governor is aware of this issue even here in CT. As Teilhard said, “remain true to yourself, your best self”.

“And the road did go before me” to UCSD research on the Orgueil meteorite that fell in France in the nineteenth century and had by weight of the stone 7% organic matter in it. Since meteorites come from beyond the Earth this type meteorite containing organic matter raises the question, “What about life in outer space?” President Kennedy had announced that we would go to the Moon in the decade. Scientists working on meteorites were invited to submit proposals for the Apollo rock analyses in 1965, four years before the astronauts returned the rocks from the Moon. The question to the team, “What kind of gloves did we want the astronauts to wear?” made me realize we might actually reach the Moon. At that same meeting on the beach in LaJolla Dr. Urey commented to a physicist there, “Gordon, I don’t know what your problem is; Sister Mary does not have a problem with life in outer space.” Incidentally Sr. Consilia suggested I not tell the archbishop what I was working on!

You might ask did I experience prejudice against women in science since only about 18% of the chemists then were women? In my experience being competent was more often the criterion.

Point 3. Being competent in your field is the best way to meet any prejudice. This applies to men as well.

Today science is done differently in two respects, remotely with larger teams enabled by computers. The Near Earth asteroid, Eros, 50,000 miles away is a rock 18 by 11 by 11 miles rotating every 5 hours! The scientist is down here on Earth behind a computer calculating the Al, Mg, Fe, O from the data sent down from the instruments on the spacecraft. Many scientists do similar analyses remotely. Today the surgeon operating on a heart patient, the precision machine operators are at the computer, a significant change in the way science is done today. For the Apollo team I was on had 8 members, the NEAR team 20, and on the 2012 Nobel physics prize the 3 winners (three maximum number possible) were from two teams, on 17 on the High Z Supernova team and 34 on the Supernova Cosmology Project team. Surely in the future you may need to continue your education, develop more skills, change jobs. As you know now you can send your weekly church collection on-line. I’m waiting for the dentist to be on-line.

Point 4: Be prepared to be a good team member/leader and adapt to newer methods.

As I graduated from SJC I was well prepared to enter professional life and so are you. May you have the confidence to meet any challenges that life may bring to you along your road.

In closing my message to you is to quote again Teilhard de Chardin, “For you there is only one road that will lead to God and this is fidelity to remain constantly true to yourself, to what is highest in you. The road will go before you.”

Thank you and again Congratulations, Class of 2012!