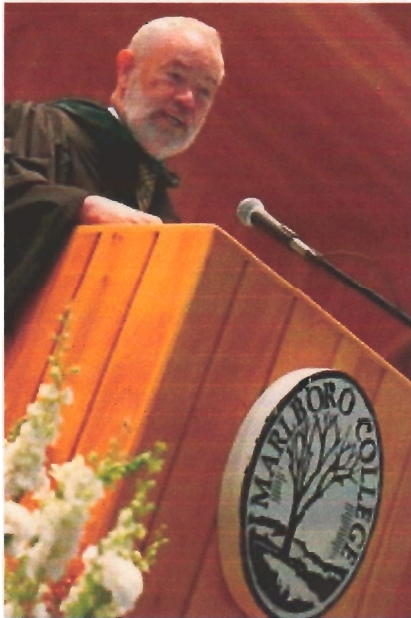


# 2008 Commencement – Marlboro College

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This is the one place I've done this where I feel like there's not that much left to say, after hearing President Ellen McCulloch-Lovell's speech and Aimee Davidson's senior address. And you know what's interesting? When they got done, Ellen said "Thank you Aimee," and as Aimee walked back she turned around and said, "Thank you, Ellen." I can tell you this, at the graduation at the University of Vermont today, the graduating senior will not refer to the president by the first name. I just think that's marvelous, as is the fact that Ellen could mention the faculty and staff that are leaving. That could never happen at a big school, and that's the fundamental message I'll be giving you today: that small is beautiful, and the future indeed is in being small, and decent, and humane, and democratic. That progress doesn't mean getting bigger; it means getting smaller.

Driving down here this morning from the northern part of the state, I was reminded of Daniel Webster's famous closing remark in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1818, when he argued the Dartmouth College case. He argued that case for an hour and 30 minutes, without notes—brilliant. And when he was done, he looked up at the justices and said, "As I have said before, sirs, and I repeat now: It is a small college, Dartmouth College, but there are those of us that love it." And I was thinking about Marlboro: this is a college that one could easily love.

I did not know about the Robert Frost connection at Marlboro before I prepared for my talk here, and that's the truth. And again, I've been preempted: All I hear about this morning is Robert Frost, and I wanted to begin with one of his poems. I really loved the comment in one of your

publications that the college founder went to Robert Frost and said, "Hey Bob, I want to start a college." To me, that is success, when you can go to someone like Robert Frost and say, "Hey Bob." The poem I'd like to start with of course led his book *North of Boston*. It's called "The Pasture Spring." And in it he says: "I'm going out to clean the pasture spring/I'll only stop to rake the leaves away/(And wait to watch the water clear, I May)/ I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too."

And in that little half poem is my message today. One thing is that he's not going to see a great mountain or huge waterfall. He's going up to see a pasture spring. Work needs to be done. Smallness. The second thesis is democracy. You notice he's not going alone. He wants somebody to come with him. And that's pure Aristotelian democracy, that human beings alone can never be human beings. We have to join collectively to establish our humanity. And that leads to politics, which leads to democracy.

This view that small is beautiful comes from my own career, in a sense. I noticed that 33 percent of your incoming students are in the top tenth of their graduating class. I must tell you, however, and I'm not bragging, that I was not only in the top tenth, I was in the top ten students of my graduating class. In fact I came in third. That's not hard to do when there's only seven in the class. When I got my doctorate at the University of Connecticut, I was so eager to get home to Vermont that I put my robe and new colors somewhere and lost them. Whenever I went to a commencement at UVM or anywhere else, I didn't have colors. So I went and bought some at the UVM store. I promise you this, whenever I appear again in this context, and I certainly will at UVM as a professor, I shall wear the Marlboro colors. These really mean something to me.

Democracy, as you know, was feared by the founders. So it was replaced with something called representative democracy. Representative democracy is an oxymoron. I'm sure you all know oxymorons are terms that by their own definition are contradictory. I love them: "jumbo shrimp"; "serious fun"; "working vacation"; "military intelligence." My wife's favorite is "Microsoft Works." She's funnier than I am. I like "wild game management." But as you all know political science is probably the nation's great oxymoron.

The democracy practiced by the ancient Greeks and performed around the world now in many contexts that we don't know anything about, because they're all too small, is real democracy. Everything else is a substitute. Real democracy entails face-to-face decision-making. That's about it, but that's huge. Democracy must be face-to-face in a small community, and it requires a decision. Lots of political scientists are writing about "deliberation," referring to deliberation in Congress. Now there's an oxymoron, Congressional deliberation. In the Vermont town meeting, decision does follow deliberation, and that's key. Democracy is like sex. Sex without completion is unsatisfying: it tends to discourage participation. And if you can remember that when you think about democracy, I've earned my position here today. By the way, town meetings usually make, on average and over time, better decisions than representative democracies. There's no doubt about that, it's just that nobody bothered to study it empirically before.

But democracies require community. Your student body here is almost the perfect size for face-to-face community decision making in a town meeting format. I've investigated 1435 town meetings, and the optimal size is between 200 and 1200. You can get away with it with up to

5000, but after 5000 you have to think about other forms of democracy. In a small community, democracy has two values. One is the inherent value it has for citizens: It requires some standards that in the aggregate create civility. Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, ranks Vermont first among the 50 states on civility. There's a reason for that. Town meeting, face-to-face democracy, inspires tolerance and forbearance. Eye-to-eye contact brings out the humanity in you, mainly because it creates empathy, which is the most important word in politics today. Empathy. Walk a mile in someone else's shoes and see how you come out. I learned that when my mother, who was one of two Democrats in a town of 1500 Republicans, made me carry a Stevenson sign in the 1956 election. I made a promise to God, get me back to the schoolyard in one piece and I'll become a Republican.

The second value of democracy is very important to you students and this college because you are cosmopolitan: you come from everywhere and you're going to go everywhere. As de Tocqueville said, as Jefferson said, as the 20th Century urbanologist Louis Mumford said and as Vermont's philosopher John Dewey also said, the real value of town meeting-like democracies is that, to extend the Robert Frost metaphor, they are like springs in the high hills of our democratic nation. And from these springs flow the waters of citizenship. And this nation is parched and thirsty for real citizens that don't get their politics from television, but get their politics from humane local interaction. These kinds of citizens can make judgments at the national level. No nation state can survive unless the people are citizens first and voters second. As Benjamin Barber of Rutgers University says, just voting is the thinnest and the least qualitatively important part of politics, especially if you you're not trained in the humane politics of civic interaction.

How can we produce the small communities that are the homeland of democracy? The prevailing paradigm in academe, and certainly in the media, is that history is linear and everything is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger and politics is going to become more and more and more central. In this scenario local people never make meaningful decisions and are therefore unhappy, unsatisfied and reluctant to participate. That paradigm for the future is unquestioned except for a cadre of perhaps 10 or 15 percent of social scientists who I believe are on the right track. They say that the prevailing technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, which is electronic technology, the computer age, the electronic highway, is decentralist in tone. Most writers today still think that computer technology is dehumanizing and that it will continue to centralize politics and life. That's simply not the case.



The most important invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the automobile. That created Los Angeles. Now you graduating seniors are entering a world where we have another technology that will have as profound or more profound implications. I can build cars in Detroit with holographic television and robots from my little place in Starksboro, Vermont. The data shows that more and more people are working where they live. That's the great promise of computer electronic technology. Right now it's embryonic: You are driving down the electronic highway in a Model A Ford. We had a Model A Ford on Charlie's farm where I grew up, just for hauling hay. The first people that drove that truck could never have imagined automobiles as they are today, where a little voice would come out and say "turn right." Likewise, you can't imagine the technologies that computers are going to give us in the next 150 years. But I want you to try. And I think if you try, you see it leads to democracy. Not because we can vote apart from one another, but because we can live together in a place.

So my final recommendation to any graduate of a college today is to replace the organizing principle for human life from the urban industrial revolution, which was career: You've got to get a job, and if someone said you've got to go to Phoenix and run that plant out there, well you'd be off. Now some scholars are saying, and I agree with them, that we need to replace the concept of career with the concept of "place" when it comes to organizing one's life. You stay in one place, no matter where it is. If it's a big city, decentralize the city. If that isn't small enough, decentralize further and create a neighborhood council. But whatever it takes, stay put. As the poet Wendell Berry says, there's no way you can protect the environment unless you work with the environment on a daily basis. My message to you is, make your career fit your place, and the technology of the next century will help you do that in ways that you simply can't imagine.

And as I began with a poet, let me end with a poet, Sir Walter Scott, and his wonderful poem, "The Lay of the Last Minstrel." He writes: "Breathes there a man, with soul so dead/Who never to himself has said/This is my own, my native land!/Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd/As home his footsteps he hath turn'd." Your happiness depends upon your place, not your careers. Go forth, as Aimee said, and be responsible to politics and government, but start that responsibility among your neighbors first. Thank you.