**15836, Susan Smith**

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentleman,

The great comedienne Carol Burnett said, “We don’t stop going to school when we graduate.” Today is not so much an ending as it is a new beginning. That’s why it’s called a commencement exercise. As a professor in the School of Education here at Piedmont College, I have the pleasure of addressing this graduating class. I was given this privilege as a perk of receiving the Vulcan Award of Excellence in Teaching. I want to congratulate the 300 graduates we have here today. Piedmont College is a fine school that offers a wide range of degree programs, which are represented here today that includes education, nursing, business, mass communications, among others.

Today you will close the door on one season of your lives and open the door on a new season in your lives. Up to this point your lives have been ordered and directed by your parents and your educators. Going forward from today you will be required to make those decisions yourself. You will still be under the authority of someone else, but you will decide who and what organization that will be, and you will have to live with the results of the decisions you make. Choose wisely.
You have spent the last four years in college filling your mind with knowledge. But, I hope you have also learned some important life skills, such as becoming an inquirer of life. Learn to seek answers, ask questions, determine what needs fixed and seek solution. It is my desire that you have learned to think critically about theory and method. It is my hope that you will continue to keep current in your chosen discipline by attending conferences, keeping journals as you study and taking more classes to enhance what you have thus far learned. For, you see, the truly learned individual is a lifelong learner. They are hungry for knowledge, in their chosen field and in other subjects as well, for they thirst for useful knowledge.

One habit that I believe is important for all educated people to develop is reflection. Since you will seek knowledge in your daily life, you will also seek application of that knowledge. You will want to spend time reflecting on what you have learned and how you can use that knowledge. You will then base your daily decisions on this in depth reflection, which you will do frequently and honestly. As part of your reflection, you will consider many possibilities for problem solutions and you will stay open to constructive criticism, learning even from that.

One important character trait that I believe you should have developed in your time here in school is to be proactive. That means that you anticipates problems in management, you anticipate problems and difficulties in instruction, and you address pertinent issues of school and the community to support student learning. A proactive attitude encourages students’ character traits of critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to develop. It plans for important student learning, it fosters visionary thinking and action, and it promotes mindful leadership to improve schools.

A leadership trait that I believe is important for you to learn, if you haven’t already learned it, is to be democratic. I’m not talking about a political party, but a life skill. This means that you will learn to be a skilled facilitator who views others as capable to deal with problems and are able to make decisions. You should promote equitable treatment for all students and have high expectations for all students, just as we had high expectations for you. Even if you do not become formal educators, you will be teaching those who come after you in one way or another. You should always seek the best interest of the students you serve. I would encourage you to be open-minded and be able to view others’ perspectives and accommodate individual differences. We live in such a multicultural society today that you will need to be culturally sensitive in areas of communications, learning, assessment, and cultural norms. Good leaders seek to develop a wide range of leadership skills and to collaborate well with others while they work for the good of the community.

Regardless of your position in your career field there are some traits that will be required. It is essential that you are responsible. But, I believe you have all proven that trait as you’ve completed your education thus far. You will most certainly have to exercise patience and express a professional temperament. It is understood that you will aim to be the best that you can be in your chosen field. That means having a good work ethic, being punctual, and recognizing when your own dispositions may need to be adjusted and develop plans to make those adjustments.

Obviously, you will live out these goals and ideals in different ways depending on your chosen career field. You will accomplish varying degrees of success based upon your individual skills, talents and personalities. But, I believe that you each have a desire to go out into the world and succeed. As Tom Brokaw said, “You are educated. Your certification is in your degree. You may think of it as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative. Think of it as your ticket to change the world.”

 Regardless of your chosen field, I encourage you to do as Tom Brokaw suggested. Use your education to change the world in some way and make it a better place because you were a part of it. Don’t just go about your daily responsibilities. Think about what you can do that is unique. Think about what you can do that will make a difference. Then, go after that unique contribution with all you have within you. Don’t just go through life following the rules, dotting the I’s and crossing the t’s. Look at each day of your life as a new challenge, and chase after that challenge with the singular goal of winning the challenge and making a difference in the lives of those around you.

Good luck to you all.