

Hamilton College Convocation 2008
Nancy Thompson, Dean of Students

Good afternoon and Happy New Year!

I want to start by acknowledging that it is through the efforts of many, many people that we arrive at this occasion every year ready to roll, with a new crop of students, oriented and registered, buildings and grounds that are not only ready, but breathtakingly beautiful, and everything in place to launch a new academic year. Let's just say thank you, with a round of applause, to all those many people who make it happen.

So every year I have a chance to stand before you on this occasion and talk about anything I want. This year, I have decided to spend a few minutes on the topic of kindness.

I found my topic this year on a conference trip to Atlanta in March. The conference itself was excellent and I learned a lot from speakers like Nikki Giovanni and Carol Gilligan, but my true sources of inspiration came in the form of interactions with people I met along the way.

I knew the trip was off to a good start when my luggage – always too abundant – appeared on the baggage claim conveyor. That always seems somehow miraculous to me. Choosing to spend \$3.00 as opposed to \$33.00 to get from the airport to my downtown hotel, I soon boarded the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority train – MARTA – with my overly abundant luggage and a vague idea of where I was going.

I found myself standing in a location where I could neither see a subway map nor hear the loud speaker, beside a fellow who appeared to value imbibing over bathing. I attempted to make sense of the folded subway map in my hand, while trying to keep my wits and my stuff about me, but at a certain point I realized I had no idea where I was or where I should be. My confusion and distress must have been evident to the fellow beside me who asked where I was trying to go. I told him and he patiently and precisely explained what I needed to do to, given that I had missed my stop. As I got off the train, he smiled, continuing to point me in the right direction.

My new friend had provided excellent directions that involved going down a long set of stairs, under the track, back up an equally long set of stairs to the other platform – all with my abundant luggage. Thinking that I had to purchase a new ticket in order to reboard the train, in a wild moment I slipped a \$20 bill in the ticket machine. A word of advice – don't do this. It was like hitting the jackpot on an old fashioned one armed bandit. The machine spit out my ticket and \$18.50 in dollar coins and quarters. Anxiously looking around the deserted

platform, I scooped up the coins and threw them in my bag, hoping that the next train would appear soon. It did and I finally made it to my hotel.

I had a free afternoon while I was there and decided that I would put my public transportation skills to the test again and take a trip to the Atlanta IKEA. Knowing that I was taking this trip and having checked in advance for an Atlanta IKEA, my daughter had texted me a list of household items she needed for her apartment. Although it meant braving the mysterious MARTA train and schlepping stuff yet again, if you have ever shopped at an IKEA, you know that it is an experience worth working for.

A lovely, helpful MARTA person told me how to get there, explaining that I would take a bus to IKEA from the MARTA stop, and sure enough, this time finding the right stop, it was all as she had described. As I boarded the bus, I confirmed with the driver that the bus went to IKEA. He said it did and I headed for the back. But before I could sit down, a young woman sitting in the back whispered to me, "If you go up one more flight of stairs, out the front door and look to the left, you will see a free shuttle that will drop you right at the front door of IKEA. It's a much better option than this." I thanked this kind stranger and headed out of the bus and up the stairs, out the door, to my left and onto the free shuttle that was bound for the front door of IKEA. It was remarkably easy. I was beginning to feel I could manage this Atlanta thing.

I boarded the shuttle and took a seat behind the driver, who was conversing with a young woman seated to my right who was holding a white cane and appeared to be visually impaired.

"Where are you headed, Bev?" the driver asked the woman.

"The Publix" replied Bev. The driver, whose face was visible to me in the rearview mirror, seemed concerned.

"They changed the route on me this morning, Bev, because of construction. I'm going to have to drop you on a different corner."

Before Bev had a chance to reply, the driver called back to the other passengers, "Anybody going to the Publix that could escort my friend here?"

Three people immediately replied, sure, they could walk with Bev.

The driver chose one and all was arranged.

I travelled the next few blocks with tears in my eyes, touched by the kindness of the driver and passengers, and amazed by the seamlessness of it all. There was nothing awkward or forced about it. Bev needs a hand. Hands were offered and accepted. Done.

Sure enough, the shuttle drove me to the IKEA where I spent three glorious hours and, with two enormous bags in hand I boarded the shuttle, then the train and returned to my hotel feeling victorious and very grown up.

On my last day, I was heading back to my hotel from the conference and a man on the street asked me if I could spare some change. My usual reaction to such a request would be to keep my eyes forward and keep walking, but given the several acts of kindness that I had experienced in the last couple of days – not to mention my coin windfall on the MARTA platform - I paused, said yes, and reached in my bag and scooped up a bunch of coins and placed them in his hand. He looked down at his hand and up into my eyes and said, “Thank you. God bless you.” I looked back, into his eyes, and again, with tears in mine said, “You’re welcome.”

As I continued walking, I thought about my ill-kempt friend on the train the first day; the woman who took it upon herself to make sure I knew about the shuttle; the shuttle-driver and his passengers who had reached out to Bev. Being the recipient of and witness to these acts of kindness felt really good. They created connections between human-beings that made the world feel like a warmer, safer, more hospitable place. If you’ve seen the film **Pay It Forward**, it was that kind of thing. These random, but intentional, acts of kindness created a sort of culture. They made me want to be kind. It was that simple.

You are probably thinking to yourself right now “Why is she telling us this? Is she really spending all of this time trying to tell us to be nice to each other?”

I am. It’s true. But let me tell you why. I think we should look for ways to be kind to each other, in general, but **especially** in this community, not because I think we should avoid conflict or gloss over issues or imperfections. In fact, it’s the exact opposite. The work that we do together on this Hill is difficult. To learn well from each other we have to be willing and able to speak our thoughts, our ideas, our questions, knowing that the thoughts, ideas, and questions of others may in direct opposition to ours. But to learn, we must listen carefully, be open to different points of view and examine them from all angles, accept them, reject them, push back, challenge, recalibrate

This is not for the feint of heart. It takes courage and faith that when you speak your ideas, they will be heard, and while others may disagree, your right to speak your thoughts and ideas will be respected, just as you respect the rights of others to speak. This is, in my opinion, the only way that this education can happen at its best.

With all of this challenge and debate going on, I would argue that a culture rich in intentional acts of kindness doesn't just make us feel better, it helps us learn better. It helps to build the foundation of respect that gives us the courage to participate fully in this educational endeavor.

So, as we start this new year, let us commit ourselves to actively engage with one another in the process of learning, even as we look for opportunities to be intentionally kind. I think that the kindness can make all the difference.

Thank you. Happy New Year!