

Taking CC With You

By Mark Fiore

Thank you President Celeste, faculty, parents, friends, and most of all, students, for asking me here to join you today. It's a huge honor for me to be here—mainly because twenty years ago, I was sitting right where you are now (more specifically, right there in the “Fs”). The main difference between then and now, however, is that the person speaking to you would not be a left-of-center political cartoonist who specializes in animation. The person speaking to you right now would be . . . Dick Cheney.

I don't particularly remember what *my* graduation speaker, Dick Cheney, said—but it was probably something like,

“Grr, hello class of 1991. Go forth and rule the world, er, something like that.”

That's right, when I graduated from CC in 1991, our commencement speaker was then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Now I'm not sure if that means, now that I've spoken to you here today, I'll go on to become secretary of defense, or become another comically evil vice president who is God's gift to political cartoonists everywhere—but I do know that if Cheney had spent more time playing Frisbee golf on this campus like me, the whole bogus run-up to war over nonexistent WMDs wouldn't have happened.

But I'm not here to talk about politicians.. My life path turned out very different from Cheney's in large part because of my experiences here at Colorado College. My four years here at CC were some of the most formative years of my life to date.

From this very podium, I can see Palmer Hall, where I learned about these mountains in geology classes. Palmer was also where I studied the differences between just and unjust wars in political science classes and studied poverty in sociology classes before heading down Tejon to a soup kitchen.

I can look over there to Slocum, where I met lifelong friends within a week of arriving at the dorm. I can look over to Cutler Quad . . . where I saw Phish play a show all afternoon as the sun glinted off Pike's Peak.

And over there, across the street from Shove Chapel, on the grass beside Jackson House, my first faculty advisor, Professor Jim Trissel, instructed his newly-arrived freshmen and women to “just have fun.” It was Liberal Arts in a nutshell, the fun exploration of life, ideas and learning.

It all came together for me here and started me on the path of an incredibly lucky life, and led me into one of the weirder jobs I could imagine—in huge part because of the intellectual creativity and Liberal Arts tradition of Colorado College.

But this isn't about *me* and the memories I have floating all around this place. It's about *you*, every one of you . . . and there's a chance, since I basically *am* one of you, that I may have some insight into what lies ahead for you.

Now, when I was sitting there where you are, over here in the "Fs," I had that feeling, that many of you are probably having right now, that feeling of, "I'M GRADUATING!" Feeling the excitement and sheer joy of it all. But I also had the feeling of "I'M GRADUATING??!" And since I'm a cartoonist, I would describe that as a mixture of deer-in-the-headlights eyes, frozen grin and little sweat panics coming from my head--that "Oh no, here comes the *Real World*" feeling.

But before we go there, take a minute to look around at your *accomplishments!* You made it!

Look at the friends you made all around you—many friends for life!

Look at these buildings and remember what happened on the other side of those windows—classrooms where you succeeded, and sometimes failed.

Or even better, the classes you took running around in these mountains!

Or these trees that shaded you when you studied on this quad.

Look at your family and friends who showed up today, who cared and loved and sacrificed for you—and showed up for this amazing day even though there may have been bumps along the way.

It all paid off, you're here! You did it. You're graduating!

Soak this all in, revel in it. Because when you look around here, you know what you're looking at? You're looking at the REAL WORLD!

That's the best part, there doesn't *have* to be a disconnect between the supposed "CC bubble" and the "Real World." The things you've learned here, the intellectual life, the friendships, the feeling of community, all the most wonderful things about Colorado College—you take those ALL with you!

Take CC with you.

Now, it took me a while to figure out you could take CC with you. (And I'm not talking about chipping pieces of stone from Palmer—Lyons formation sandstone, if I remember correctly.)

I'm talking about all the amazing tools you have now with a Liberal Arts education. I know what you're thinking, and I've heard the same thing for years. People scoff at that and say, "what are you going to do with *that?*" "English major? Good *luck!*"

But in my years after college, I finally realized, one of the most important skills we have as CC grads (or excruciatingly close-to-grads in your case) one of the most important skills we have, is *adaptability*.

And what better way to teach adaptability than learning an entire years-worth of material in three-and-a-half weeks?! Exploring a huge variety of interests and knowledge week after week.

As you already know, and I'm sure everyone has been telling you in case you've been under a rock and somehow didn't know . . . "the days of job stability and gold watches at retirement are gone." We're in the worst economy since the dinosaurs were wiped from the earth or the Great Depression or something like that.

Which means, it's a *perfect* time for creatures like us. We can adapt and change. We're the smaller little animals with fur, not dinosaurs. We think on our feet, thanks to our experiences here at CC!

So one of the most important things from CC to take with you is adaptability.

One thing that may be slightly harder to take with you is, sadly . . . Block Breaks. But don't worry, even that is possible. My weekly cartoon deadline has been on a Wednesday for nearly twenty years because the Wednesday start of Block Break had become so ingrained in my system. Nothing beats that Block Break feeling, except maybe what you're feeling right now (and I'm not talking about the hangover).

As far as adaptability, in my weird and lucky job I constantly have to adapt. I left CC trying to get a staff political cartooning job at a newspaper, which was an iffy thing in the best of times.

That didn't happen then, so I built up a self-syndicated political cartoon business, selling my work to papers around the country. Then, on the side, I experimented with animating my cartoons. But lo and behold, I got a staff job at a newspaper doing traditional print political cartoons. Turns out, it was a miserable job at a miserable time in journalism, so I went back to doing a weekly self-syndicated political animation.

Now, I don't want to give the false impression it was all an upward career trajectory of selling my brilliant Liberal Arts Purple Mountain Majesty-inspired cartoons to hungry clients.

In order to support my addictive cartooning habit, after CC, I had basic rent-paying jobs—from working in a hardware store, to my first job in the World of the "Media." That job was in a warehouse and involved moving palettes of magazines with titles like . . . "Better Homes & Gardens," "Penthouse," "Hustler," and other ones I better not mention here. Fortunately, I didn't stay at that job for long.

My next pay-the-rent job was making color copies in a copy store in Boulder, which was not always incredibly mentally stimulating—but it was after hours at this job that I first scanned my cartoons into a computer and heard of a new thing called the Internet.

You never know where the side paths will lead you on your journey, so don't be too quick to put yourself in a career box or try to figure your life out instantly.

Now, I know you've already heard all the quotes by brilliant authors, writing about roads and paths—but it really IS the journey that makes you who you are.

To give you an example from my world of cartooning, let's talk about the creative process for a second.

Everyone asks cartoonists “how do you get your ideas” or “how do you come *up* with that stuff?” People ask the same thing of novelists and other writers and creative types.

The best way to describe how I get my ideas is to describe how I definitely DON'T get my ideas.

(Sure, I start out with the journalism, research and historical perspective side of things, but I'm talking about the cartoon *concept*, the hook, the humor.)

A sure-fire way for my cartoon ideas to dry up and collapse into dust is to always stay chained to a desk doing *reading and research*.

(Great, they're thinking, first the Dick Cheney bit, now he's bashing reading and research.)

Don't worry, the majority of my time is still spent reading and researching—but it is the time doing the *different* things, the exploring in different ways, that *truly builds* ideas and provides the spark.

It might be a walk in the park down the street or a trip to Borneo that sparks creative energy. I might see something weird, or hear a turn of phrase, catch a fish, go surfing, notice a homeless person, trip over a curb—anything. It's living life and keeping your eyes open that builds ideas.

That's what works for me and my cartoons, but it's the same thing for novelists, physicists or CEOs.

Everything along the way, even though it may not seem like it at the time, is essential to finding your way.

And what is that “way?” Well, that's the fun part, figuring that out. It may seem a little nerve-wracking *now*, but it *will* happen. The more you live life and keep moving forward,

the more likely you are to find it. (Whether you're headed off to med school or up to ski and work as a lift op for a while, you're going to find it.)

Okay, now let's talk about death threats.

One of the best parts of my job is that I hear from a lot of people who see my cartoons on various online news sites. Sometimes, though, people are, shall we say, a little less-than-pleased with the messages in my cartoons. Like in this comment, I quote:

“For this stupid, childish cartoon demonizing the Tea Party protesters Mark Fiore needs to be killed, along with his family.

[and for good measure]

The only good socialist is a dead socialist.”

But not all the people who see my cartoons have woken up on the wrong side of the bed. Some make me truly grateful I've been able to cobble together such a weird new cartooning profession—and more importantly, make me truly grateful for the people who send me notes like this:

“Back in 2003 I was studying abroad in Denmark and was so inspired by one of your cartoons criticizing the US involvement in Iraq versus our lack of involvement in Sudan. I was so inspired that I focused my thesis on constructivism and humanitarian interventions. Seven years later, I have continued to be inspired by this cause and have spent years working with refugees. I am currently serving in West Africa in the Peace Corps and still love your cartoons.

Thanks for the inspiration! “

It is people like that who make realize you've got to ask yourself—who are you and what mark are you going to leave on this world?

How will they know you were here?

(Not to be morbid on such a happy day, but I like to think of it in terms of—after we're all dead and gone . . . how will they know we were here and what will they think of us?)

Did you leave the world:

A brilliant invention?

Or a loving family?

Or a wilderness preserved?

Or a great body of work?

Or a lifesaving medical breakthrough?

Or did you leave behind: oil spills, McMansions and mountaintop removal mining?

Okay, the choices won't always be that obvious, but *now* is the time to start *making* those choices and paying more attention to the direction you steer your life. *You're* in charge.

It's not about accumulating the most stuff, it's about leaving your mark and deciding what that mark is going to be!

"Leaving your mark," "making a difference," "making life matter," however you say it—it's never too early to think about what you want to leave behind.

And the best way to figure that out, the best tool kit you now have, is to Take CC With You.

You've got it all here in this *place*, Colorado College—but now you've got it all in your *head*, and in your *heart*.