

Living in “Interesting Times”

Christopher Benfey '77, the Mellon Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College, spoke to commencement May 8. Here are excerpts from his remarks:

It's a humbling thing to be asked to give a commencement speech, and kind of scary. You know you've got to come up with a big message, a big piece of advice – one of those “To thine own self be true” lines. This spring I kept waiting for that big thing to come to me. The sky opens, there's a peal of thunder, and a voice says, “Tell the Guilford graduates to floss their teeth.” Well, the sky never opened for me. So, I did the next best thing. I asked my English Department assistant, who graduated from Mount Holyoke last year. ... Abby didn't hesitate for a second. “That's easy,” she said, “Tell them not to panic.”

Then I asked my mother-in-law, who is dying of emphysema in Virginia. It is good to spend time with the terminally ill; they live in a place we will all visit sooner or later, and they have perspective. This is something I learned in a wonderful course I took at Guilford called “Death and the Imagination,” taught by Jerry Godard and Mel Keiser. “What should I tell the Guilford graduates?” I asked my mother-in-law. Sheilah didn't hesitate any more than Abby did. “Tell them not to worry too much about the headlines,” she said. “There's much more to life than that. Tell them not to get discouraged.” So, that's my second piece of advice: “Don't get discouraged.”

There is said to be a Chinese curse that goes like this: “May you live in interesting times.” ... Well, my friends – Chinese curse or not: Welcome to interesting times. The challenge for you – and it's a huge challenge – is to learn to live in a dif-



Rachel '48 and Ted Benfey visit with their son, Christopher '77, who was keynote speaker for the college's 167th commencement.

“The challenge of the real world out there is that it isn't real until you make it so, by living it.”

ferent world from the one your parents lived in and brought you up to live in. ... Here are four things to pack for your journey through interesting times.

Art. As the wise old Romans said, art is long but life is short. ... You should seek out art the way you seek out clean air and good food. Guilford has focused on the arts this year and with good reason. We can't do without them.

Silence. James Joyce said that the modern artist needs “silence, exile and cunning.” I'll settle for number one, silence. ... The Quakers are right about silence. If I stop talking for 10 seconds, it's amazing what good things might fly into your head and what bad things might fly out of it.

Remember your dreams, both your day-dreams and your night dreams. Freud and Jung were right about dreams: Your dreams tell you who you are. The world is full of people who don't remember their dreams. Don't be one of them.

Embrace this time and this place. ... The world makes more sense if you don't put the United States, or New York or Iraq in the middle.

And that brings me back to my Chinese curse. Nineteenth-century Americans who visited Japan thought everything was upside down, topsyturvy. Japanese wrote letters from right to left; they blackened their teeth to make them more beautiful. Well, maybe we got the curse backwards, too. Maybe the most important word in the curse is *live*. “May you *live* in interesting times.” ... Guilford grads, don't forget to live. No one else can do it for you. The challenge of the real world out there is that it isn't real until you make it so, by living it.

The full text of Benfey's remarks, along with those of President Chabotar and student speakers, is available online at www.guilford.edu.