

You Can Take it With You

Excerpts of Commencement remarks by
Mel Bringle '75

When I was in graduate school, one of my suitemates was invited to attend a costume party. So she draped herself with duffel bags, totes, knapsacks and luggage tags, and went as Cultural Baggage.

We can all recognize ways in which the unquestioned values and assumptions of an era—its so-called “baggage”—help to give it definition. Part of our recently acquired “cultural baggage” has been an increased concern over “homeland security”—something we once naively took for granted. The last time I traveled by air, the ticket agent asked me, “Has anyone put anything into your baggage without your knowledge?”

I couldn't help scratching my head a bit as I responded, “If someone had put something into my baggage without my knowledge, how would I know about it?” The agent nodded soberly: “Yes ma'am,” he said, “that's exactly why we ask.”

I don't think that's exactly what he meant to say, but his point is well-taken. For our own security as well as that of the people around us, we need to pay attention to what has been put into our baggage—both personal and cultural. So, over the course of your Guilford education, what kinds of things have you been putting into your baggage to take with you for the rest of your life's journey?

In a book entitled *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*, the authors suggest that just as the decades of a person's 40s and 50s constitute a culturally acknowledged “midlife crisis,” so the decade of a person's 20s constitutes an equally significant “quarterlife crisis.” After all, the transition from college to the so-called Real World is filled with changes, from friends now scattered across the country to the Big Decisions (should I change jobs, move back home, move away from home, etc.?).

Many twentysomethings lament the fact their college experience did not equip them better for the life they faced on the “outside.” But during your time here, you've no doubt experienced countless situations that have caused you to question your own prior



A record 414 students graduated from Guilford in 2004-05, including more than 350 during May Commencement.

“..over the course of your Guilford education, what kinds of things have you been putting into your baggage to take with you for the rest of your life's journey?”

assumptions, unpack some earlier baggage, and perhaps even change your mind.

I read an article recently in which the author coined the term “cultural parachute” to refer to those values and assumptions from our surroundings that help carry us through rough times. Charles Plumb is a fighter pilot who was shot down during the Vietnam War. He ejected and parachuted to the ground, where he landed safely but was captured and spent the next six years in a POW camp before being released.

Back home several years later, he was in a restaurant and noticed that an unfamiliar man about two tables away kept looking at him. A few minutes into the meal, the man stood up and walked over to Plumb's table.

“You're Plumb,” the man said. “You were on the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You flew jet fighters in Vietnam and were shot down. You parachuted into enemy hands and spent

six years as a prisoner of war.”

Plumb asked the man, “How in the world did you know that?” He replied, “I packed your parachute.” The man shook Plumb's hand and said, “I guess it worked.”

While you may not have been jumping out of airplanes, the journey you have been on during your time here has been filled with its own type of thrills and challenges. If the turbulence of a “quarterlife crisis” should await you in the next phases of your journey, I hope you will remember that you are not alone—and that you are prepared, perhaps even better than you realize, to negotiate a safe landing.

Bringle is professor of philosophy and religion and chair of humanities at Brevard (N.C.) College. Read the full text of all of the speakers' remarks at Guilford's 168th Commencement at www.guilford.edu.