

Terris McMahan Grimes
2016 Alumni Commencement Address

President Zingg, Provost Ward, all distinguished guests, and the class of 2016 from the College of Humanities and Fine Arts and the College of Business; thank you for giving me the honor of sharing some thoughts with you on behalf of alumni.

Things Have Changed

When I look around campus I can only marvel at how much things have changed, and how much they've remained the same.

For example:

In the olden days when I was a young coed here, dorms themselves were not coed. They were strictly segregated according to the only two genders recognized in those days.

Visiting Hours

We had closely monitored visiting hours during which we could entertain guests of the opposite sex in our rooms but only if we left our doors ajar a prescribed distance.

We had a **curfew**, and if you missed it they called your parents.

Those were the good ol' days.

Cowboy Boots

Also, I recall that during that era, cowboy boots were the height of fashion. May they rest in peace.

Some Things Remain the Same

Yes, things have changed, but fortunately, some things remain the same. Let me read a snippet from the Chico State website:

A hallmark of the Chico Experience is the dedication that faculty have to teaching and to their students... Countless alums attribute their success to the commitment faculty have to inspiring students.

You know what I call that? **Truth in advertising.**

My Story

Let me tell you my story. I was born in Tucker, Arkansas some 60 years ago. If you search Google Earth for Tucker

you'll find there's not much there besides vast fields of cotton, corn, and other farm crops, and a large state prison.

We lived in a little cabin dating all the way back to the era of forced labor.

We had no electricity, no running water, and no indoor toilet.

We had no light after sundown except from a lone coal oil lamp.

We Had Books

But, we had the essentials. We had books. Four of them to be exact. There was a bible, of course, and a Sears and Roebuck catalogue. We also had a sorely needed cookbook.

I'll leave that one alone.

Ghost Stories

But best of all, we had a book of ghost stories with fascinating pen and ink drawings.

As a four-year-old, I spent hours paging through that book, studying the drawings, and trying to make sense of them.

I would ask myself:

- What are those funny looking people doing?
- What are they thinking
- What are they saying?

Plot, Motivation, Dialogue

I realize now that I was dealing with plot, motivation, dialogue and character development even before I had learned to read. That book of pen and ink drawings laid the foundation for my career as a writer of fiction.

I am so **grateful** to my parents for those four books and that coal oil lamp.

What's the Point?

But what's the point of this somewhat self-indulgent story?

The first lady of song, Ella Fitzgerald said it best:

It isn't where you came from; it's where you're going that counts.

Quest for Education

My parents left Arkansas one night in 1952. They didn't know exactly where they were going. The one thing they knew for sure was they were going to find a place where I could go to school and be educated. Their quest led them to California, which ultimately led me to Chico State College where a faculty *dedicated to teaching and to their students* inspired me to follow my dream and become a writer.

It's Okay Not to Know Where You're Going

When you leave here, you might set off, like my parents, not knowing exactly where you're going. You might stumble and make mistakes. Welcome it all.

That's called **life**.

It's okay as long as you keep moving and learning. But be careful to avoid wandering off into the dark side.

Juggler

I have a friend who has a graduate degree in physics. But he makes his living perched atop a unicycle juggling fruits and

vegetables. It's okay. He's happy. The moral: You are not your major. Do what brings you joy—if, of course, you can make a living at it. Otherwise make it your hobby.

My Wish for You

My one wish for you is that you are endowed with the twin graces of kindness and compassion. And that they weld themselves to your conscience.

It is not a dog eat dog world unless you allow it to be. It doesn't take much to be kind. Kindness means not demonizing the poor and not electing people who do.

It means not begrudging those who are weak and need our protection, or those who are hungry or homeless, including immigrants and the dispossessed. Instead, do something, anything, even if you just sign a petition. Do something.

Remember this from Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

"Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not

have to be cruel to be tough."

Congratulations class of 2016