

United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Office of Public Affairs
Washington, DC 20555
Phone 301-415-8200 Fax 301-415-2234
Internet:opa@nrc.gov

No. S-99-15

Blueprint in Hand:
A Pause at the Threshold

by

Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, Chairman
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Commencement Address
Hood College, Frederick, Maryland
May 22, 1999

Good morning, President Peterson, distinguished guests, graduates, family members, faculty, ladies and gentlemen. I am deeply honored and pleased to share in this celebration as your guest for the 1999 Hood College Commencement Exercises. For you, the Class of 1999, this is an unforgettable occasion--because your commencement also lies on the threshold of a new millennium--a millennium of the unknown, where the achievements of science and technology hold out great promise, but where the complexities of society, of human interrelations, may continue to defy our best efforts, especially when viewed through the lens of events as distantly separated geographically and culturally as Kosovo and Littleton, Colorado, and now Conyers, Georgia. In a sense, we all are standing at the precipice with you, and we all might be said to be members of the Class of 1999, educated by the lessons of the 20th Century, and drawn forward by the promise of what lies ahead.

These two dimensions of your future--its promise and its complexity, make this step across the threshold a momentous one, the point from which you will find yourself propelled forward at a dizzying pace. So, with pride and anticipation, I say to you, the graduates, "Begin your final countdown. Prepare for lift-off. This is where it all begins."

But, first a moment of reflection. Last July I had the extraordinary honor of being inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, in Seneca Falls, New York. I cannot tell you what a humbling experience that was, to be brought into the company of some of the greatest women in American history, women like Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth and Margaret Mead. The Hall of Fame also has a most unique feature called "The Wall of Fame," a special section in which anyone, for a particular contribution, can grant lasting recognition to an exceptional woman of their choice--a mother, friend, or colleague--in the form of a plaque and a letter describing their achievements. This Wall of Fame emphasizes the universality of achievement--and itself is a living, breathing testimonial built up stone by stone, scene by scene, from the lives of women and men everywhere who have fought for justice, created windows of opportunity for themselves and others, and provided strong shoulders on which those who followed could stand.

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and 300 other women and men crossed over a threshold in Seneca Falls, and held the first Women's Rights Convention, laying the groundwork for achievements to follow. In 1893, 8 faculty members and 83 students went across another threshold here in Frederick, Maryland, beginning the first semester of what was to become Hood College. On this day in May 1999, you stand at yet another threshold, ready to set your own stones into the mortar. And the thought that stayed with me last summer, and that I would like to emphasize today—is that the monument is not yet finished. We, and you, are a work in progress. This is true individually and collectively, whether the cause you seek to advance is social justice, raising a family or personal success. It will be true for each organization you work for, and it will be true for the communities you lead. We are working on a building we cannot see in its entirety because we cannot predict the future. On the other hand, we do have a blueprint. In fact, much of your time, here at Hood, has been spent in drawing and re-drawing your personal blueprints.

Given the privilege of speaking with you before your paths disperse for the last time into uncharted territory, I would like for you to pause for just a few more moments, to take a last look at the blueprint you hold. It is essential that you know the shape and dimensions of the building you seek to construct. Your personal blueprint must be clearly drawn, not only for you to achieve personal success, but to contribute to the success of the organizations and communities in which you will play a part.

How will you ensure a firm foundation? Do you have all the necessary tools? What will be the point of reference for your personal choices? What will be unique about your building—what makes it your own? What will define your identity? Your goals? Your priorities? When the construction becomes complex—when you are confronted with a difficult moral or ethical decision—how will you proceed? What are the measures that, for you, will define success?

Your parents, your teachers, your mentors, and your religious leaders all have tried to instill in you sound principles that will guide your future decision-making. These principles are meaningful only if you make them your own. You, of course, hold the responsibility for creating, developing, modifying, and applying your own blueprint, and the right to do so. Still, at a basic level, I offer each of you this:

Resolve to maintain a strong work ethic—it got you this far. Be an attentive listener. Appreciate divergent opinions. Always adhere to a strict ethical standard—it will keep you out of trouble. Do not be afraid to depend upon others, or to give someone else the opportunity to lead and to grow. Treat your bodies with respect. In the presence of fear or anger, remember to breathe deeply. Take time for meditation and introspection. Appreciate good humor. Esteem the wisdom and dignity of the elderly. Nurture the young. Be slow to accuse, and quick to forgive. Handle every challenge as an opportunity, and every failure as a lesson learned. Think outside the box. Remember where you came from, and be grateful for those who helped you along the way. Help someone else.

This is not, by any means, an exhaustive list of principles, nor am I demanding that you incorporate each of these maxims into your own blueprint—but these are the kinds of principles which, when put to use, I have found to be very helpful and which define, for me, success in its truest sense. Working from a blueprint does not imply inflexibility or an inability to adapt to new situations. On the contrary, it gives freedom, because it provides a frame of reference for decision-making that will serve you equally well in every setting—whether your “construction site”

turns out to be the corporate boardroom, the research laboratory, the classroom, or the halls of government. An internal frame of reference will give you an equilibrium and confidence that is not easily shaken, a natural equanimity toward which others gravitate.

How will your personal blueprint translate to the success of an organization? A healthy, successful organization also must have a clear operational vision, a set of guiding principles, and a sense of the “big picture” that lends coherence to all its functions. An illustration is provided by my own agency, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

Because the NRC is charged with the safety oversight of civilian uses of radioactive materials, it must make decisions that are as objective as possible, coherent, defensible, and open to public scrutiny. The NRC must operate from a blueprint with wide application. Therefore, the NRC foundation is its basic mission of protecting public health and safety, the environment, and the common defense and security of this country. A second guiding principle is the continuing effort to increase its effectiveness as a regulatory body—we are not perfect. And a third, fundamental, organizational principle is the anticipation and preparation for change.

These organizational principles also can be applied at a personal level. As you build on the strong foundation of your principles and basic career goals, you should remember that you can always enhance your effectiveness—professionally, and in your personal relationships. And by embracing change—learning to anticipate new situations and challenges, you will more easily turn them into stepping stones of opportunity.

Every commencement ceremony is, in some sense, a changing of the guard, a celebration of a new generation of leaders. In the years to come, some of you will assert your leadership in ways more visible than others, but each of you will be a leader in some way, as a teacher, a parent, a counselor, and a mentor—or a leader within your community. And your conduct that derives from your blueprint inevitably will affect not only your own success, but will affect the experiences and direction of others.

The Hood College motto enjoins you to work with your hands, minds, and hearts. The hands can be taken to symbolize diligence—a commitment to the value of hard work. The mind, in turn, symbolizes clear, creative thinking—the ability to understand a problem, to develop a plan of action, and to communicate it to others. And the heart symbolizes inspiration, the inner core of motivation that propels the individual forward in a courageous example that others will follow.

Each of these—the hands, the mind, and the heart—are essential characteristics for enlightened leadership, because they allow the enlightened leader to be the guardian not only of his or her own blueprint, but also of the operational vision and set of guiding principles that give direction to a community.

Just a few minutes from now you will receive your diplomas, signifying that you are entrusted with your own futures. Your diploma is an implicit, yet tangible symbol of that trust.

So I set forth this challenge to each of you. Will you build your monument on shifting sand or on solid rock? Will you be the haphazard builder, less concerned with a quality foundation than a fashionable facade? Or will you be the architect of purposeful destiny, contributing beauty and distinction to the age-old memorial that others have begun, guided by a clear and reliable blueprint? The threshold is before you. Your parents and teachers are standing by, full of pride

and eager to witness your success. With them, I wish for each of you a monument of enduring achievement. Congratulations to the Class of 1999!