2014 Winter Commencement

Distinguished Teacher Address

By Jennifer Johnson and Gary Huey

Gary:

We want to thank our colleagues and our students for honoring us with the Distinguished Teacher Award, which affords us the opportunity to speak to you today. Jennifer and I are approaching the commencement address a little differently by doing it together. We are doing so because our offices are only a few doors apart and being hallway buddies we supported each other throughout the selection process. When we found out that we both won, we decided that since we had shared the process, we should also share the speech.

Now I must confess that it didn’t start out this way. At first my competitive nature got the better of me and I started a rumor that Jennifer’s amazing performance was due to her use of teaching enhancing drugs, or TEDs. I demanded a drug test, but the committee saw through my scheme. Not long after this another rumor spread that the only reason I made the finalist list was my rugged good looks and my animal magnetism. I must confess that I started that rumor as well. But that rumor was true. Soon, though, my better angels triumphed and we became each other’s strongest supporter. So now a drug free Jennifer.

Jennifer:

As Gary and I prepared for today, we started to reflect on the idea of becoming. It seems that we spend a lot of our childhood talking about what we hope to become someday. We want to be firemen, superheroes, teachers, ninjas. We want to be old enough to drive, old enough to vote, old enough to drink.

The truth is, when you really think about it, that our lives are entirely about the process of becoming. And so Gary and I have decided to share a bit about our own journeys of becoming.

The number of things that I’ve become in my life so far boggles my mind. I became a drum major who led a marching band in the Kentucky Derby parade. I became a college student of geography and mathematics, surprisingly enough, without any real sense of what I would actually be when I graduated. Sure enough I became old enough to drink, which was entertaining until I became really sick all over my roommate’s dresser trying to climb down from an upper bunk. I became a student ambassador and a campus tour guide at Carthage College, where I also found myself in the role of unofficial swim team cheer leader (there was a cute boy named John who just happened to be on it). I also became a student of Bill Miller’s. It was Bill who happened to observe a class where I presented one day and pulled me into his office soon after. He looked at me point blank and said, “Jennifer, you are meant to teach.” By this point I’d already decided to go to graduate school in geography, but I knew the one thing I didn’t plan to become was a teacher. The truth was that those men and women who led me down the path to education were so high in my sight that I didn’t think there was any way I’d
ever be able to do what they did. I’d never know enough. Then I accepted an offer at Arizona State University that paid for my master’s degree, but I had to accept a teaching assistantship. And so I became a teacher. Or rather, I discovered what I’d been in the process of becoming all along.

Along the way, I became other things as well. I became John’s wife (all those swim meets on the hard bench paid off). I became a mother to Melanie and Hope, and in so doing learned to love more fiercely than I ever thought possible. I became a birthday cake decorator, a Girl Scout leader, and a woman who can sense a fever with a kiss to the forehead.

Sometimes in life, though, we become things that we don’t intend, and that we’d never want to be if given the choice.

Gary:

Jennifer is absolutely right. My family and I are perfect examples. I always wanted to be like my father, a K-12 teacher and a coach. And it looked like I would, as I landed a job teaching history at my old high school. It was my dream job, but due to health issues I had to turn it down. Needless to say, I was very upset, but when I started to feel better, I decided to go to grad school and pick up a few classes. There, I met a brilliant, professor, LeRoy Ashby, who inspired me to get my PhD and become a university professor. And even more importantly, I met a wonderful woman in grad school and became a husband and a father of five amazing children. Eventually, I found my way to Ferris and what turned out to be my dream job.

My children have also experienced round about paths to becoming. My oldest son always loved writing, so he ended up going to Hollywood to become a screen--writer. He has become just about everything but a screen-writer. He stumbled into acting, then he became an on—screen music critic for VH1, hosted Yacht Rock which was voted one of the top 10 funniest web series of all time, and finally he is working in television editing. He is still writing and still hoping to become a successful screen—writer.

My oldest daughter has a less than straight path as well. She got a master’s degree in Forensic Psychology, moved to Hollywood and became a Threat Assessment Professional. She thought it was her dream job, but after seven years she decided it was not. She returned to Ferris to take some additional classes and now has become an employee of a sales and marketing company. Sometimes we achieve exactly what we set out to do, and then find we really need something else.

My youngest daughter was a creative writing major who wanted to write children’s books. She went through college knowing next to nothing about computers, but when she hit the job market she had to learn fast. Now she works for an international furniture maker, and her job puts her in front of a computer all day as a web marketer. Her path to what she has become is not only crooked but totally unexpected. Sometimes the opportunities that fall into our laps aren’t the ones we’re hoping for but we can make more out of them than we realize.

Growing up, my middle son was very shy, the quietest of a very fairly quiet bunch. In his senior year in high school he was even voted the shyest person in his class. Today, he works for a food
marketing company where one of his main duties is to make presentations to large groups. No longer the shy young man.

My youngest son has also gone in an unexpected direction. While he graduated in the top 15 of his class, he absolutely hated reading and writing. In his first year of college he confessed that he didn’t realize that you actually had to read the material if you wanted to get a good grade. A revelation. Today he has his master’s degree and is working on his PhD in history at MSU. Who would have thought it?

So we never know where life is going to take us. My children are no different than those of you graduating today. Like my children you have made plans and like my kids, you will face challenges and be offered unexpected opportunities. Like them, you will adapt and you will become amazing whatever you do.

Jennifer:

And yet perhaps the most wonderful part of life is that no matter how hard things become or how many mistakes we make, we are never done becoming.

On the day I came to Ferris, I officially became a professor. After 22.5 years of continuous education and a few years of teaching part-time, it had finally happened. On that day, I also became the future member of a dozen committees, an advisor to pre-pharmacy students, and Gary’s colleague.

And then I realized: I wasn’t done. I couldn’t just become a professor and that was it. On any given day, in any given semester, I might have to become a different teacher in order to meet a new student’s specific needs, and I might need new skills to do it well. I became a devoted faculty advisor to a fraternity (now that’s one I really didn’t see coming.) Gary and I both became mentors. We watched our mutual student Kristy realize her passion for history (with a little geography thrown in) and coached her as she worked her way through writing lesson plans, and now I am watching her become a teacher. We did the same for Steven, and then cheered him on through a master’s degree in education. And quite frankly, I screamed my head off when he became a National Park Ranger. And now, I listen to Cameron tell me that he’s going to graduate school in geography, and when he insists that he’s going to only do research, I think, “But maybe, just maybe, you are meant to teach.” I can’t wait to see what he becomes.

Gary:

Jennifer and I would like to leave you with a challenge. It comes from a youtube video that was shown to me by my colleague, Barry Mehler. It shows a young teacher, Taylor Mali, who talks about being a guest at a party. Another guest began to make fun of teachers saying the only reason teachers teach is they cannot do anything else, and by implication, they were paid accordingly. This man asked him, “Be honest Taylor, what do you make.” Taylor responded, “I make a difference. I make children work harder than they ever thought they could. I make children write, read, question, criticize, and wonder. I make parents love their children for who they are and what they can be. I make a difference, how about you?” And that is our question
and our challenge to you, “How about you?” On your journey of becoming whatever that may be, become a difference maker.

**Jennifer:**

Today you become a graduate of Ferris State University. We, and your other faculty, have been honored to be a part of your journey to this achievement. You have helped us to become better teachers, better mentors, and better people. If you haven’t realized it yet, what we’ve become above all are your biggest fans. We wish you joy in your journey, grace and strength when joy is absent, and above all, we hope that you will never be done *becoming.*