

Sen. Susan M. Collins
Colby Commencement
May 27, 2018

Thank you, President Greene. Trustees, faculty and staff, alumni, families and friends, and, most of all, graduates, it is an honor to be with you today.

The journey from Capitol Hill to Mayflower Hill is one I always enjoy. Today's celebration occurs 104 years after my great aunt, Clara Collins Piper, received her Colby degree. Her journey from Caribou, Maine, to Waterville is truly inspiring. She first attended Colby as a 17-year-old in 1909, but then ran out of money and had to leave in 1911 to teach school to earn enough to complete her degree. She graduated in 1914 near the top of her class, Phi Beta Kappa, no less. How unusual that must have been in those days -- particularly for a young woman -- to want an education that much! She was a remarkable woman whose memory lives on in the endowed professorship that bears her name and in the Piper House.

I hope the story of my great aunt's determination will inspire you to put your Colby education to work to tackle tough problems and to persist until you succeed. Since nobody ever told you that earning a degree from Colby would be easy, I am asking you to take on another significant challenge today.

We live in a time of ever-worsening divisiveness, a time in which the sense of community, which has characterized our country, is not just in danger of being lost but, far too often, deliberately discarded. From the halls of government to social media -- perhaps "anti-social" would be the better term -- to the 24/7 news cycle, hyperpartisanship, insult, and accusation are poisoning our discourse, turning us against one another, and preventing us from coming together to solve problems. This phenomenon is weakening our sense of community and undermining our willingness to listen to others -- especially if they hold political views diametrically opposite of our own.

Political partisanship in America has become what commentator David Brooks calls "totalistic." Partisan identity, he writes, fills "the void left when their other attachments wither away -- religious, ethnic, communal and familial." This modern-day tribalism divides society into "us versus them," as increasingly, we isolate ourselves from those who aren't just like ourselves, wanting to talk only with those who mirror our political viewpoints and listen to the same media sources as we do.

It is deeply troubling that the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2016 was "post-truth." This is the condition in which emotion driven by partisan identity supersedes facts and understanding.

"Post-truth thinking," as Michael Hayden, the former head of two intelligence agencies, has pointed out, is contrary to the Enlightenment ideas, dominant in the West since the 17th century, that value experience and expertise, the centrality of fact, humility in the face of complexity, the need for study, and a respect for ideas.

Your Colby education strengthens those values. Through your rigorous studies, you have surrounded yourself with, as historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, Class of '64, put it, “people of diverse perspectives who can disagree with you without fear of retaliation.” That sense of community – a shared respect for knowledge, experience, and diverse viewpoints – is the first line of defense against post-truth tribalism.

Just as important, you have witnessed a real-world effort to rebuild a sense of community. The partnership between Colby College and the City of Waterville is truly remarkable. The generous support for this revitalization project by the Alford Foundation is but the latest demonstration of the love that this family has for this community and its people. This partnership is transforming downtown Waterville and expanding access to the arts and education. Most of all, it is bringing together people from all walks of life.

Colby’s investments in Waterville prove the old saying that one good turn deserves another. In 1930, the college was struggling financially, and the old downtown campus was in disrepair. A relocation to Augusta was imminent. Then, more than 600 citizens of Waterville – ordinary people with bills to pay and families to feed -- joined together and raised more than \$100,000 – an enormous sum during the Great Depression – to buy Mayflower Hill as a new home for the beautiful campus we know today. What a wonderful example of the power of community!

Bringing people together is crucial, but it’s not easy. The forces of polarization are strong and entrenched. Organizations on the far left and the far right demand 100 percent compliance with 100 percent of their views 100 percent of the time. Those in public office who seek compromise are vilified and threatened with primary challenges. Thus, we see in the U.S. Senate a shrinking center where moderates were once the predominant force.

It is particularly alarming that a Pew study found that a growing number of Republicans and Democrats view each other not just as the opposition party, but actually as a threat to our nation’s well-being. The more politically engaged a person is, the more likely it is that he or she has adopted this apocalyptic view of people who could be their neighbors, soccer coaches, and school-board members.

This atmosphere of suspicion isn’t just corrosive to our sense of community. It leaves us vulnerable. I am convinced that Russia’s chief aim in meddling in the elections of Western democracies like ours was to sow discord and undermine confidence in our democratic institutions. Russia drove a wedge between the American people, but we created the crack that they exploited.

It doesn’t have to be this way. More than a century ago, the famed British jurist Lord Moulton gave a speech titled “Law and Manners,” in which he described what he called the “three great domains of human action.”

The first is the domain of Positive Law, in which our actions are rightly governed by binding law – the prohibitions against murder or theft being obvious examples. At the other end of the spectrum is the domain of Free Choice, where our actions affect no one else and are above

criticism or constraint. Your favorite color or your favorite band is nobody's business but your own.

In between lies the land of Manners. It is here that we are free to do as we please legally, but we are constrained -- not by others, but by our own sense of duty, consideration, and respect. In Lord Moulton's view, the domain of Positive Law is essential to protect the vulnerable. The domain of Free Choice is where creativity and energy give birth to new movements, advancements, and inventions.

But it is in that middle domain, the width and breadth of the land of Manners, that the true greatness of a civilization is measured. It is a measure of how much a nation trusts its people and how much people trust each other and themselves. It is there that communities are built.

Colby College and the City of Waterville prove that is within our power to rekindle a spirit of community. Your education and the partnership you have helped forge demonstrate that, among people of good will, our strength is the sum of our similarities as well as our differences.

So, my challenge to you graduates is to spread that message wherever the future takes you. Whether the next phase of your life keeps you in Maine – a choice I heartily endorse – or to another state or country, you can help to restore the sense of community that makes life enriching and ennobling for all. Congratulations, Class of 2018, and good luck!