



Commencement Address - Ashoke Chatterjee '51

8th June 2007

“MIXED FRUIT JAM” or One Fool’s Guide to Achieving Excellence

There is no greater honor for a Woodstock alum than an invitation to be Commencement Speaker, so my grateful thanks to you, the Class of 2007, and to your mentors. This honor does not come easy. A very responsible lady has warned that your minds are on tonight’s party. Therefore, I am not to go on and on. And then, a second challenge. I have been re-cycled. I’ve done this before, and that same responsible lady tells me no one can recall which graduation ceremony I addressed or what on earth I said when I did so. So I am to be concise, and worthy of being recycled. After all, ten minutes in Parker Hall is not just ten minutes. I should know. Allen Parker welcomed me to this place after I was rejected by the first school I ever attended. Standing before you is a re-cycled speaker, once rejected on disciplinary grounds at age six by a convent in Allahabad. This makes your choice remarkable. More so as “Achieving Excellence”, not recycling rejects, is what some say Woodstock School is about. Be that as it may, my theme is about an item of recycled rejects with which you should be very familiar after years at Indian breakfast tables. My theme, ladies and gentlemen, is Mixed Fruit Jam. Mixed Fruit Jam (or MFJ) brings to quivering life the lowest common denominator they warned you about in Math class. MFJ comprises everything that should have been thrown away but wasn’t, any pulpy scrap that willingly surrenders originality under oodles of sugar, all identity removed by what is politely described as ‘permitted food coloring’, the kind that would get you a D if you tried it in Art class.

So what has MFJ to do with Woodstock’s Class of 2007, or with ‘Quintessence’, your Class watchword? Dare I suggest that this marvelous collection of 67 young men and women from so many nations and states, each with a confident identity and each sharing a common Woodstock experience, be now equated with some purpley, sugary left-over mish-mash? Never! That would risk dismissal all over again, this time at age seventy-two. No mish-mash, this rainbow before me, this fabric of so many threads, each confident in its own color, strength and place within the pattern that we know and love as Woodstock. Your years here bring together a myriad influences and perspectives, gifting you with identities so much larger than their sum. The diploma you are about to receive confirms your academic achievement. It also represents something more that goes out with you into the world --- something transcending. It is your ability to understand others, to respect even what you do not accept, to think and decide for yourself rather than be swept away by the dogmas of intolerance that abound. Because you are who you are, you can, each in your own way, help make this world kinder, less poisoned by prejudice, more open to the generosity of genuine caring. Like your School, you are “a microcosm of the world-that-could-be”.

That description of Woodstock comes from another alum, Margaret Loehlin Shafer of the Class of 1956. With her husband Byron, Margaret was here a few weeks ago listening to those who have endured the recent trials visited upon this School. What Margaret and Byron heard went well beyond pain. They heard affirmations of hope for a Woodstock that can learn from its yesterdays, define its present, and strive for its tomorrows with the same integrity and courage that it demands from those

who come here to learn. They found a community tested by fire, willing to stand up and be counted, committed to the qualities that have made this place so special for all these years, qualities that some describe as 'excellence'.

The dictionary defines excellence as superiority, that quality so spectacularly absent in Mixed Fruit Jam. In our land, school excellence is most often measured by the surpassing marks that "toppers" receive over hundreds of other young people devastated each year by lower percentage points. So is Woodstock just about beating marketplace competition? Is excellence a goalpost? Or is it for us a pursuit with no end? And who measures excellence, how, and why? You need to know because 'Quintessence' --- your watchword --- is all about perfection. We all need to know, because today many others claim qualities that once seemed so distinctly 'Woodstock': international standards of academic excellence, spectacular setting, solid infrastructure, a world community of teachers and students, building world citizens. In this me-too situation, does international education become another MFJ within a globalized society? Or are you and each of us Woodstockites connected by some other quality, another 'quintessence', one beyond facsimile, not limited by competition, but vibrant in its own right, exemplary and original with a proud history of 153 years?

A geriatric bunch tried to find some answers six years ago. That was when my Class of '51 (the best Class ever, I have to say, present company excepted) came panting up the hillside for its 50th reunion. Amidst the joy and chaos of the Quad and the bazaar, we spent a lot of our time reflecting on the journey between 'Then' and 'Now'. Then, we were a pretty typical graduating class: several nationalities, most of us born and raised in India with a Woodstock connection often stretching back to kindergarten. Most parents were missionaries, or from service backgrounds. Each of us was good at something, not so good at others. A few top scholars, a handful of sports stars, lots of hikers, actors, even a shikari blissfully unaware that shooting a tiger near Flag Hill would one day be an ecological no-no. A bunch made excellent because Woodstock had cherished us. Graduating here on a cold November evening so full of tears and laughter, we had gone out, some to college, others to work. Some became doctors and scientists. Others became homemakers, servicemen, musicians, poets, authors, and managers. Many traveled, others stayed close to home --- or whatever home seemed to be so far from Landour. Significantly, many became educators. Others served their faith in far-off places. Several left one faith to find peace in another. Others kept searching, even fifty years on. All forged deep relationships, some of which worked out and some of which didn't. All had shared their lives through Class letters, the Quad, and those amazing reunions. Now, as we met again on a hillside none had ever really left, our concerns were about families and friends coping with a world so much more complex than a childhood in these hills. At home in the world because of Woodstock, we had been out of home everywhere because of Woodstock. Third Culture Casualties? Not really. Woodstock had done much more than set us apart. Much more than that, growing together had given us an ability to see the world through others' eyes. Far more than differences, we reminisced about connections --- Woodstock connections carried through our lives, other connections beyond Woodstock, often enriched because of Woodstock. As we remembered, we seemed to be evaluating our own lives through lives that had touched our own --- trying to understand the difference we had made, that others had made to us. Was caring the true measure of an "education for a world of difference"? And if so, was service the true quality of excellence? Because we had been cherished and served at Woodstock, to cherish and serve seemed the 'difference' we had most wanted to make. Not as a bunch of saints, just as a regular bunch of Woodstock-wallahs. Not as a Third Culture, but as believers in One World. One World of respect, even of love. Love --- now that's a

mushy word, almost as sticky as MFJ. Yet the Class of 1951 had learned through its journeys that love is, above all else, the gift of seeing the world through others' eyes. If we had achieved any measure of excellence, that was it: service through excellence, excellence through service. Excellence as caring, as being more patient, as being a whole lot more tolerant. Tolerant, even of Mixed Fruit Jam.

Yes, let me confess that I started out all wrong this morning. The fool is I. Like the stars and the trees and Woodstock-wallahs, MFJ too has its right to be here, to a place in this world. It does not waste, it conserves. It delights those who can't afford gourmet alternatives or trips to Sister's Bazaar. And who am I to disparage discarded and re-cycled items? I, the six-year-old discarded by St Anthony's Convent, sheltered by Woodstock. I, the re-cycled speaker so generously re-invited. And if truth were told, MFJ is no stranger at Chatterjee breakfasts. Indeed, the family was horrified that I had planned to disparage the stuff at your graduation. "What's wrong with you?" they exclaimed "We've been eating MFJ for years. Kabir much prefers it to all that marmalade stuff you haul down from the hills". So there. My opinions should not run away with me, or with you. To be tolerated, I must be tolerant. It is then that I can aspire to service through excellence, that quintessence of Woodstock. It is then that I will have lived up to the teaching that has inspired this great School through its history: "These things endure: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love". There is no better way to stand up and be counted, no better road to excellence.

Good luck, Godspeed, and thank you.