

## CAMILLA PARLIN SMITH

July 4, 1990  
(third of three speeches)

When Charlie leaned over the Chapel pew last Sunday and announced that I had been selected by the committee to give the speech, I said, "You know, I was on the verge of volunteering."

I was thinking about the speech that Blackie had made at the cabin so many years ago when he gave the first 4th of July pat on the back to the United States. That was in the era of the VietNam war, and he felt that our children growing up were hearing mostly criticism of the United States since most of us were anti-, vehemently anti-, the VietNam war and were vocalizing this around our dinner tables, and our kids were hearing this, and he thought it was very important that our children hear from us in our generation some good things about the United States to balance off the Viet Nam criticism.

I was thinking about that as I was nearing my retirement from twenty years of teaching in an Agricultural and Technical College in Delhi, New York.

Most of us are from the four year college spectrum, and I thought it would be fitting if I gave you a report of the educational scene from a two year Agricultural and Cultural college.

Now, like Blackie said of the United States, I could tell you what is wrong with the educational system and so can you. You can line up criticisms as long as your arm as to what's wrong with American education. And maybe if you came up and spent some time on our two year campus, you'd be more convinced than ever that maybe the weaknesses were outweighing the strengths of our educational system.

I remember so long ago, one of the Hunts -- who's the Hunt who's the silver king? -- one or the other of them was interviewed one time and was asked, "How come you don't have a college education?" And his answer was, "Who needs a college education? All colleges teach you to do is work for someone else, and I don't ever intend to work for anybody."

There's so much that's bad about American education. We're just passing people through our halls, and they're all coming out pretty much the same. Where's the leadership in the political sphere, for example, coming from? We're already dreading the next political election. Who is there with brains and insight and compassion and vision who could run for a president that we'd be proud to vote for? It's a problem. What's happened to our educational system? We don't seem to be producing these kinds of leaders.

So it's easy to get very negative and pessimistic about American education.

But for twenty years I've been saying at Delhi College that there's one wonderful thing about American education. America is the only country in the world where anybody who at any time wants to be educated can go to a college and get a college education. We're the only country in the world in which that is true. And I think that is the greatest plus we have in American education.

*A school like Delhi College is a very interesting school in that you can see people coming to be educated who under any other kind of circumstance in any other country*

would never be able to have a college education.

I just want to tell you about a few of the students who have passed through Delhi to illustrate my point.

"Eddie the Boarder" we like to call him.

Long ago Harold befriended this young man who had come to Delhi College as a freshman, and I believe he had enrolled as a business major. In the course of his first semester his father died, and he sort of fell to pieces, and he came to live in our house, and did so for two years. So we got to know Eddie the Boarder quite well.

He had one semester in business administration and hated it, and said this isn't what he wanted to do at all. He had friends in the hotel management program. Maybe that's where he'd like to be.

So his second semester he enrolled in the hotel management program. And after a semester in hotel management he was sure that was not what he wanted to do.

His third semester he decided maybe he'd like to go into the liberal arts field, so that semester he was taking liberal arts.

He knew after his third semester he that this isn't what he wanted to do.

So his fourth semester he thought to himself, "I think I'd like to go into the construction program." He had always liked wood, he said. So in his fourth semester he enrolled in the construction program. He learned a lot more about wood, and he learned a lot about heavy equipment and a lot of other things, but he told Harold at the end of the semester, "You know, I've spent four semesters at Delhi Tech and now I know what I really want to do. I want to be a cabinet maker. I don't want to build big houses and big bridges. I want to build furniture."

So he went up to a New England town, Williamstown, and apprenticed himself as a cabinet maker, and is today in one of the very good cabinet making firms up in New England.

Here's a young man who used Delhi College to discover what it was that he really wanted to be and do. Our college affords many, many students that opportunity; just that, to find out what it is they really want to do.

A group of students who come to Delhi College who really interest me the most are the single mothers who come to Delhi College who are trapped in rural poverty. They have two or three or four children, their husbands have left them or one thing and another, and they're absolutely locked into rural poverty and the welfare system. But there's Delhi College that offers them the opportunity to get out of Delaware County. And many of these women come into our nursing program.

One of the women I remember most fondly came to take Freshman English with me. Now so many of these older women would come and they would tell me that they were terrified of Freshman English. They were sure they could pass their nursing courses, but it was the Freshman English course that was going to sink their ship.

Since I had returned to school myself after I'd been out for fifteen years, I could very sympathetically tell them, "I know what it's like to go back to school after you've been out for a long time. Let me tell you, you have the edge over these eighteen and nineteen year olds. You have life's experience. And that is going to do you more good in Freshman English than all the smarts they've picked up in writing term papers and such. You'll do fine."

And most of them did.

But this one woman came into Freshman English, and she just simply wasn't doing very well. And I found out later that her mother was opposed to her being in school. Her mother was always criticizing her that she was neglecting her children to go to school. Her husband was against her going to school. He didn't want her out meeting other people, being with other men. He wanted her at home. All her friends were criticizing her for going to school. She had three or four children, and she was on welfare. This whole crowd, her whole family, was against her being there.

So she wasn't doing her papers and finally come down toward the end of the semester. I said to her, "I'm badly torn. I know how badly you want this degree, but I just ---"

"You don't have to finish," she said. "I know I haven't done the work..I know I shouldn't pass."

She gave me a hand crocheted red pot holder with one of these plastic hollies on it. She said, "It's coming up to Christmas, and I'd like you to have this."

So I hung this red pot holder with the plastic holly over my desk, and it still hangs over my desk, or it will hang over my desk in Saratoga when I get unpacked. And I think of her often.

Several years later I saw one of the nursing teachers who is a good friend, and I said, "Oh, by the way, I'm so concerned about So-in-So. Can you tell me what's happened to her?"

This nursing teacher's face just lit up. She said, "Oh, didn't you know? She got her cap last June. She has left Delaware County. She has her nursing degree, and she's a nurse down in Livingston Manor or some place south of Delhi."

So she hadn't made it through Delhi College thanks to me, but she had persevered, and the people in the nursing program at Delhi had been there for her and encouraged her, and she did get through that nursing program at Delhi.

Who else should I tell you about?

I wish I had the letter that this philosophy student wrote to me which I received in the mail my last semester at the college. But that's in a box in Saratoga some place, so I'm going to have to wing it.

I take pictures of all my students the first day of class because that is the only way I can remember the names of one hundred new students each semester. So I looked up his picture. The minute I saw his picture I remembered him. A short, wiry, peppery little fellow. He got a C in philosophy from me. Now you get a C from me in philosophy that means you're not a very good student. I mean all you have to do in philosophy with me is try and you're almost guaranteed a B from me. He got a C, so he wasn't really academic material. But he'd done enough to get through.

This was about eight years ago.

This spring I got this letter from him. He says, "Hello, you probably don't remember me, but I was So-in-So. I'm the kid who goofed off in your philosophy class, and you gave me a C I think out of the goodness of your heart. You may remember that I was one of those radicals. You told us at the beginning of the class that we had to choose. You said, 'What's in the real world?' And you said to us, 'You can either believe that the real world is just atoms and molecules with electricity in it, or the real world has all of those material things, and it has a spirit dimension also. You have to choose because whatever you choose at the beginning of the semester you have to stick with. '

"Most of the students choose the real world with a spirit dimension because they believe in God, and they are very conservative. But I knew there was no God. I was one of the four guys, and we gave you a hard time all semester. We kept saying, 'No, there's nothing in the real world but atoms and molecules and electricity.'"

And he said, "I don't know why you didn't push us harder. You should have pushed us harder that there really is a spirit dimension and God. But maybe after all you did the right thing because I had to come to it myself."

"I just want you to know that I'm a born again Christian, and I'm really happy with my new faith. All that baloney I gave you in philosophy really started me thinking, so in a very real way I think you're partly responsible for the fact that I'm a born again Christian. I just wanted you to know that."

So there, a very ordinary C level Delhi Tech student -- somebody got through to him and it made a difference in his life.

There's my report from the two year Ag and Tech College scene. There's a lot that we're doing that is wrong. There's a lot of just passing people through the system. But every once in a while one of us teachers gets through to one of those students, gives them an opportunity to be educated which they wouldn't get if we didn't have a two year college system in our country.

So, like Hyla, I say, "God Bless America," and let's keep this educational system open for everybody. It's the greatest thing we have to offer to the world.

