THE NEW SCHOOL

2007 University Commencement Remarks from Amber Seely

In the last year, The New School issued two controversial invitations to speak to leaders in the Republican Party. These two invitations sparked much discussion amongst students, faculty and staff about the nature of debate and about what we stand for at the New School.

This kind of debate is very familiar to me. I grew up in a very politically and religiously conservative home in Middle America—in Hilliard, Ohio. I was raised and educated isolated and protected from many of the evils of the world, liberals included. My Grandmother was a firecracker—she was the only democrat I knew existed in the world and that was kept very hush-hush.

I did not question many of the things I was taught until I studied abroad for a semester in Jerusalem, Israel and my eyes were opened to more variety of thought, religious belief and political stance than I ever imagined existed. Metaphorically and literally—I went to Israel with long hair, wearing a skirt, and carrying a Bible primed for life as a homemaker, I came back with a pixie haircut, wearing overalls, and carrying The Feminine Mystique, primed for a life as an agent for social change. I further confounded my family when I showed a preference for inner-city life, started wearing black, and voting democratic. As you can imagine, holidays get pretty interesting.

Today my colleagues and professors are often surprised to find that this liberal NYC girl comes from a dairy farming family and knows all the words to the hymn "Just a Closer Walk with Thee".

Given all the conflicting rhetoric I've absorbed—I take comfort in the F. Scott Fitzgerald quote: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

I have found my knowledge of and ability to empathize with both the right and the left to be a valuable asset as I am constantly confronted with individuals on both sides of the political spectrum who are passionately convinced of their beliefs.

Fortunately, my Democratic Grandmother modeled for me how to debate with those you disagree with. How to politely, in true mid-western fashion—but forcefully—disagree and engage in dignified debate.

My grandmother Eloise was an exceptionally gracious woman. She passed away in 2002 and when I was helping my mother and aunts clean out her house we found a letter my Grandmother had written to Gerald Ford in 1976—when my mother was pregnant with me—saying that although she voted for Jimmy Carter, she admired how Ford had conducted himself during the presidential campaign he ultimately lost. This letter made my heart swell with pride and made a big impression on me. My Grandmother was able to see the see the humanity of her opponent and even in the victory of her candidate, Carter, she reached out to congratulate and include her opponent in a continuing dialogue.

The world needs bridge-builders like my Grandmother, people who can listen to both, indeed all, sides and discern what is worth keeping and where bridges can be built and/or strengthened.

We must embrace those who think differently—and welcome dialogue—and push ourselves to be professionals, to truly and honestly debate with intelligence, skill and persuasiveness.

If my experience has taught me anything, it's that isolation is dangerous. We are all emerging from our safe little circles in school where everyone—or almost everyone—thinks the same way we do.

Now, whether we like it or not, we're going to be working with people and possibly for people who think and believe differently than we do. If we keep expecting the whole world to change to be what we think it should be—and it doesn't—it's really discouraging. Dignified debate is a tool for combating that discouragement.

Our education at the New School has provided us with the skills, inspiration and experience we need. We are walking out of the New School into an era of intense divisiveness in today's political climate. Being open to and respecting others is the very essence and beauty of being a liberal.

The New School is wrapped in a set of beliefs, that's why we chose to come here.

We at the New School are concerned about:

- Environmental Irresponsibility
- America's reliance on the automobile and the use of oil

- And our rampant creation of waste products
- Unchecked globalization
- Sweatshop labor
- Racial disparities
- Our failing health care system
- A criminal justice system that does little more than create life long dependence
- An education system that fails to help those who need education the most

We care about

- The economically vulnerable
- About cities in decline
- Children that languish in the foster care system
- Affordable Housing
- Homelessness
- Immigration
- Corruption

And particular places like Post Katrina New Orleans that suffer from all of the above.

These things MUST CHANGE!

And WE are the ones who will change them.

We will not change these things on our own, but by persuading and leading those around us to adopt more socially responsible behavior and policies—we will lead change.

Combining the knowledge we've gained at the New School with the skill of articulation, the ability to keep an open mind, the enthusiasm of our youth—and the conviction of our morals is an outrageously powerful tool for reshaping the world we face.

We will not achieve success by staying rigid in who we are now, but by being guided by our vision of a better world and being open to who we want to become.

I'm scared about many things. I'm worried that I will lose my clarity of vision, and the sense of urgency I feel now. I fear that I will lose my inspiration. I fear bureaucracy. I fear the grind of going to work 9 to 5.

But when I look at you all today, at the sheer number of us, at our excitement, at our determination, I feel so inspired. We must keep each other accountable to accomplish the things we dream of doing, of revolutionizing the things we plan on changing. It's up to us—no complacency, no apathy, we're going to do it. And we will do it with style, grace, determination and dignity.

The needs in our world are overwhelming, yet we live in hope and seek to make a difference.