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Commencement Address
Santa Fe University of Art and Design
May 17, 2014

Look at you -- what an extraordinary sight -- having never officially graduated from anything, I can only imagine what you're feeling right now – BRAVO!!

Before I launch into a story, I'd like to thank President, Larry Hinz, Gerry Snyder, V.P. of Academic Affairs, Mary Anne Redding, Photography Department Chair, whose nomination led me to this hot seat and the entire Santa Fe University of Art and Design's Faculty and Board of Directors for agreeing to lure me out of the safe haven of my studio today.

I must confess that the last time I found myself in a robe like this I was 11 years old, an altar boy, in Tulsa, Oklahoma serving mass, when news eventually spread like wildfire through the congregation that while on vacation in Detroit, my mother had indeed eloped a few weeks before, with a close family friend who just happened to be a catholic priest. After that defining moment, facing an audience on stage always presents a kind of déjà vu of epic discomfort and I'm afraid the acute discomfort that I'm measuring in my boots now, is not diminished by this confession, rather it is amplified by the fact that I also stand before you on this auspicious day, a high school dropout! Not that I'm going to crawl inside under my academic bonnet to hide, because thankfully, Larry and Gerry did their best to fix the dropout thing with this honorary doctorate. (transfer tassel) Though imagining what you've just gone through to be sitting here, I feel to be an impostor, but never mind, it's beautiful and somewhere in me I've waited over 40 years to feel this circle close! I'm genuinely humbled and honored by this gesture of confidence and in recognition of what, on my resume still reads under education, as simply "life experience". This diploma definitely trumps beyond measure, its closest relative, the only other gilded document I've held in my hands -- the excommunication papers my family received in 1968 that in the blink of an eye, dashed any hope of my future as an All-Pro altar boy!

Though it wasn't originally my intention to share this way-too-personal introduction, it segues into the only reason this memory surfaced as I put thoughts on paper. Being invited to speak, initiated in me the deepest sense of gratitude for a specific teacher and a profound moment that shed light on the realization that often the worst and the best in life happens simultaneously. I dedicate this address to her, Sr. Roberta Shackle, (who passed away earlier this year) in honor of this year's graduating class, and to all instructors in this room, with degrees or without.

Back in Oklahoma, naturally, my mother, brother, sister and well, "Father Bill" and I, had to get the hell out of the state in a hurry, so we fled next-door to New Mexico where fortunately, Mom and Bill were able to begin new lives undercover as "social workers". Just before we made the move to the southwest however, my siblings and I lived in the convent behind my elementary school during the weeks my folks were figuring out next steps. One day after class, during a particularly emotional low point, my younger brother and sister and I, were shepherded by my third grade teacher, Sr. Roberta, into her pottery studio, where daily, when not spending time with kids, she created works in clay. Knowing little about motherhood, but knowing alot about children as young as we were, she could see we didn't possess adequate skills to deal with our sorrow and confusion, so she sat us down on the floor and handed each of us a warm lump of clay. Without a word of instruction, she began to read a book in a chair nearby, just far enough away to offer us a sense of independence with plenty of room for our grief, but close enough should we need her. In the nurturing embrace of the silence she created, I found a means of expressing myself through the clay I was given. In that instant, I was handed one of the greatest

gifts of my life. All three of us, now using our hands in various ways for our livelihood, recognize this intimate occasion, discovering a soft and pliant material, responsive to our touch and forgiving of our naïve approach, as life-changing and I am forever indebted to her compassionate generosity.

That's how it is with teachers -- you never know when what they say, do, or share will strike us like lightning -- it may be instantaneous and it may be weeks, months or years from now -- the catalyst may have been delivered in an off handed comment or as a major revelation, it may have come through a teacher you respected and admired or through one whose classes you daydreamed through -- it doesn't matter how direct or discrete it became lodged somewhere in your memory, when the shock wave hits shore, it can knock you flat and I don't know about you, but I want to be there, attentive, curious, hungry, with both hands open and standing prepared, to receive its blow and the fallout behind it!

The transitional threshold each of you are preparing to cross, encouraged me to contemplate deeply the teachers in my life, Sr. Roberta's gesture and that of others who opened doors that moments before, didn't appear to exist. Peter Wells, a letterpress printer and blacksmith living in El Rito, New Mexico stood opposite me forging at his anvil when I wandered into his shop, lured by the sound of hammering one day shortly after we settled in the village. Entranced by his fluid movements, I saw hot iron, for the first time, moving as if it were clay under the hammer's force. This scene felt familiar and I was oddly at ease in this environment, as if I had been there before, but hadn't. He interrupted his work only when the iron shape was completed -- and then, he reached out to place a hammer and the cool end of a white-hot bar of iron into my 13 year old hands. I felt the balanced weight of a full life's work poised in the palm of my hands before I even realized this was simply one of many choices I could make. Though I make my living as a sculptor now, using a wide variety of materials and methods to create my work, the hammer remains emblematic of a key to doors that could just as easily have remained locked -- the anvil is the metaphorical still point around which a swirl of activities literally lift me off my feet and hurl me far from my place of origin and sense of comfort.

Today, looking out at you, in the presence of family and friends, professors and mentors, neighbors and classmates, I'm reminded of the ancient Greek concept of the omphalos -- the center of the world, the navel, the umbilicus, the place of emergence. The Greeks believed that our umbilical cords, though severed at birth, remain symbolically attached to each of us for the rest of our lives as we strike out on our own. As our paths cross and crisscross in our wanderings, an invisible yet immense weaving begins to emerge -- a pattern woven into a kind of primordial orb that connects us all. It's bound to be a disorganized mess, no doubt, but it's vibrant, it's unwieldy, it's juicy, it's unpredictable, and it's alive, always changing and on the move. The purest sense of this cultural concept heightens our appreciation of the intricacies of lives crossing over and under one another in gatherings like this today. Accepting this, we are united with our past and present simultaneously and as a result, are encouraged to work together to create a beneficial future that recognizes our interdependence and the inseparable nature of our connections to one another. Like breath, taken for granted for most of our lives until it's our last one, our encounters with others, offer us the same potential as is held in any given moment, where ideas germinate just as easily as they evaporate into thin air -- whom we meet, whom we work with, whom we learn from, whom we dance with, whom we love, stitch together the connective tissue we owe our lives to.

Among Mande speaking peoples in West Africa, when a young blacksmith is ready to light a fire in his own forge, his teacher, usually a father, uncle or brother, hands him a freshly forged hammer incorporating a small fragment chipped from his own hammer so that when the young smith strikes hot iron, the inertia of each blow is felt to be amplified through the life force handed to him by others, in the form of both skill and time-tested methodology. This hard-won

information is not sourced from only one human being, but many human beings, not from one generation, but countless generations, not from one people, but from a multitude of peoples. This is the reciprocal call and response of knowledge being transferred and enhanced through careful and respectful observation -- this is the DNA of apprenticeship and it's the same the world over whether in the workshop or in the classroom -- apprenticeship schemes abound in the production of artists and scholars, writers and actors, designers and architects, dancers and photographers, musicians and filmmakers -- in academia, graduate students in the role of apprentices, post-doctorate fellow's as journeyman, and professors as masters.

Deep knowledge and the gifts it bestows, are to a blacksmith, like iron -- if at a subatomic level, this material possessed DNA too, we would be astonished at the life it has lived and the indispensable role it plays in our lives. From iron's molecular origin in an ever-expanding universe -- to its geomagnetic field that keeps us swirling upon our axis, orbiting the sun -- from iron's symbiotic relationship with our planet's very first life form, cyanobacteria, a blue-green algae that for over two billion years, before any land surfaced in the ocean, thrived on poisonous carbon dioxide inhaled from the air, feeding on iron sulfide in the sea -- to the inevitable indigestion resulting from eating iron, that released oxygen as a byproduct and facilitated evolution of life as we know it -- from iron rich particles that rusted in this new environment and settled in thin colorful crusts of magnetite and hematite upon the ocean floors -- launching us out of a black-and-white oxygen-starved world, into the world of color -- the browns, yellows, reds and oranges we associate with soil and rock did not exist before because all of these colors are signs of oxidized iron -- to banded iron formations, that developed as a result of this oxygenating process, that now provides all of the 15 million metric tons of iron ore mined throughout the world each year -- and on a micro-scale, to iron atoms embedded in our red blood cells that continue to enhance ours and other animal's ability to extract oxygen from the air we breathe -- these are simply a few of the inheritances this humble material, that I singled out for my life's work, has given me -- one material, one life, kept buoyant with the ballast of so much intellectual fodder!

Since my choice, at the age of 16, to walk away from a system of compulsory education, I have tried to allow my inquiry and search for learning to take a meandering back road route to reveal to me where I am and through what I have been traveling. You are on the edge of the same sort of commencement trajectory -- you will now build your own curriculum vitae -- "the courses of life" -- the creation and development of a maker's passport -- a resourceful guide and trusted reference that you are in constant dialogue with -- aiming the compass for your journey ahead.

All I want to add now in closing, is to make absolutely certain, that you're listening to the voice inside you -- not the loud one that looks over your shoulder, and everywhere else but inside, for a clue to where you stand in the world -- rather the small one, the whisper, the one that's hard to hear over the noise, the constant din outside -- that's the voice that knows what questions to ask and offers answers only you can decipher in return -- that's the voice that interprets the sounds and signals around you and translates them into new words and languages, never before heard, to announce you're coming -- that's the voice that takes in external stimuli; visual; physical; emotional and more and helps you navigate through outside influences, complex social relationships and the insecurities that abound when moving through uncharted waters as artists -- that's the voice that encourages you to draw the curtains on the stage of your life, to speak your own mind, develop your own ideas, to roll the film, to employ a brush, a pen, a hammer -- to make what you didn't know you could, to play and to feel, and to sing aloud in both crackly and sweet voices, to dream a life that only you can conceive of and know how best to bring to fruition -- it's your life, it's untethered now, there is no script, you are free to choose, to program, to plan. The voice you are listening for is inseparable from you, and it is activated in exact proportion to the degree that you are honest with yourselves. This voice asks provocative, uneasy questions on the periphery and in the shadows of your path -- it's not main stream, it's not downloadable,

blogged or tweeted -- and you'll find it most audible when you're in desperate need of an alternate perspective, though sure enough it arrives, just when you are settling into a rhythm quite comfortable.

Some of my colleagues remember, as I have, that it was this voice that first lured us to become artists, designers and blacksmiths when other career options may have looked much more promising or lucrative. I have never regretted listening to it, I've only regretted at times denying its presence, because this denial and the postponement that inevitably follows, makes the important choices all the more difficult to make.

The electrifying pulse of your desire to know and shape the world around you is palpable in this room -- take a deep breath and catapult yourselves toward the questions you've yet to ask, toward the answers you've not yet dreamed of -- it's all here at your fingertips -- dive into the only reliable way to forge your future -- in a perpetual present -- day by day -- following your intuitive yearning!

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Tom Joyce', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Tom Joyce

