Deep Knowledge
President Carl Strikwerda
Convocation, August 27, 2013

“So what kind of business are you in?” the traveler next to me in the airplane asked. “I’m a college professor,” I answered. “So you’re in the education biz,” he replied. “You’re stuffing all those kids’ heads full of knowledge.” He seemed to be only half joking. “Well,” I said to my loquacious traveling companion, “I look at this way. If all I’m doing is stuffing people’s heads with knowledge, they’ll forget all of it. It’s what I’m teaching them that they can’t forget that’s the real education biz.” A bit puzzled, my glib seatmate said, “I’ll have to think about that for a minute. What you can you teach someone that they can’t forget?”

Class of 2017, distinguished faculty, esteemed Senior Staff colleagues, valued staff members of the College, and honorable members of our Board of Trustees, I invite you to join my slightly befuddled fellow airline passenger and think for a minute about what is that you can know and never forget. The initial presumption of my fellow traveler no doubt reflects what many people might have told, you, Class of 2017. You learned some things in high school. You’ll learn a lot more in college. And to show everybody how much you learned, you get to walk back into the Dell here in four years and get a fancy piece of paper that allows you to put the letters B.A., B.S., or some other abbreviation behind your name.

But, in fact, if that is all that education is, the accumulation, the acquisition of knowledge as information, you as a college graduate will have gained little from your four years here, and this College will have failed you. Believe it or not, you have already forgotten much of the knowledge that you learned in high school. You will forget much of the knowledge in the sense of information that you learn in classes here, too. But, despite that, if you have taken your classes seriously here, and we as a faculty and staff have done our job aright, you will graduate educated far beyond the level that you are now. You will be educated so that your education will have only begun and indeed will continue your entire life.

Class of 2017, the most important knowledge you will gain is what I call deep knowledge. Deep knowledge is knowing how to do complex tasks well. On a mundane level, it is the difference between knowing a lot about a bicycle and knowing how to balance one’s self while pumping your legs up and down, in other words, riding a bicycle. Once one learns how to ride a bicycle, or to swim, or to drive a car, these things become almost instinctual. At a much deeper level, too, the most important things you will learn in college are those things that you know how to do. True education is instilling, awakening in a way within a person, what I call “deep knowledge.”

What do I mean by “deep knowledge”?
Let me give you an example from my own college education. One of the most challenging but powerful learning experiences I had in college was in a history class. The professor made the final exam a long quotation, written by somebody during the Renaissance, the era we had studied, and posed one question: “Who wrote this?” If you knew the answer, you can write the person’s name, leave, and get an A. The quotation was pretty obscure, however, so none of us knew who had written it. Our job was to analyze the quotation and make an argument as to who or what kind of person would most likely to have written it and when he or she lived. The quotation was in the form of a letter. It mentioned Protestants, so instantly I knew it had to have been written after 1517 when the Reformation began and the Catholic Church began to break apart. The letter writer referred to “this kingdom,” worried if civil war might break out, and wondered if war might be bad for trade with the East. It was the Italians who traded with the east, but the Italians lived in city-states, not a kingdom. It took pages to explain why, but if you’d paid attention in the course, you could turn in a final exam that argued that the letter had probably been written by the ambassador of Venice or some other Italian trading city back home from the kingdom of France in the 1560s where civil war was ready to break out between Catholics and Protestants. In the course, we had had to learn what had happened when and who had done what during the Renaissance. But the professor wasn’t teaching us the information. He was teaching us how to analyze a text carefully, how to use references as clues, and how to see that events could have enormous consequences. It was the deep knowledge of what documents reveal and of how institutions work that I learned then and have applied throughout my career.

Scientists, artists, and scholars in every discipline could find similar examples. Deep knowledge is the ability to analyze, to create, to test, to apply, to critique, to argue, to innovate, and to synthesize. Deep knowledge means that you will know how to carry out an experiment, understand a novel, analyze survey results, write a program, direct a play, help a client, write a poem, map out circuits, teach a class, construct a balance sheet, interpret a text, or design a system. Aristotle put it well: “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” Deep knowledge is always incomplete and always being renewed. Deep knowledge means knowing that you have to ask, each time you confront a new challenge, “What else do I have to learn to meet this challenge?” Yes, you will learn vast amounts of knowledge, in the sense of information. But you will acquire it in order to solve a problem or make something new. Acquiring deep knowledge requires that you venture out into unknown territory, beyond what you know. As one Nobel Prize laureate said, “One does not discover new lands without losing sight of land for a long time.” It is the problem that you have never encountered that we best prepare you for. Once you have learned this kind of deep knowledge in a field, you never forget it.

Elizabethtown College is committed to deep knowledge. We know that students who do more than simply acquire information perform at a higher level, do more with what they’ve learned, and keep on learning. We have long been committed to having as many students as possible do five signature learning experiences: internships, research with faculty members, study abroad, capstone courses that integrate the individual courses of majors, and service learning courses where students are involved with a business, school, hospital, or community agency. Class of 2017, you are the first class in the history of the College that will be required to do at least two of these five signature learning experiences. Many of you will do three, four, or even all five of them. By doing them, you will learn deeply, and you will learn how to learn in profound ways for the rest of your life. And you will never forget it.
Deep knowledge comes in still another form: knowledge of how one must act as a moral person. Self-reflection is one of the most important ways to learn how to act as a moral person. Understanding the presumptions of others and one’s own presumptions is critical. You must learn to ask yourself, what is it that I am assuming without questioning? You must confront your own biases, emotions, and ambitions. Left unexamined, they can lead you astray. Examined aright, they can become your allies in learning and doing. Almost all of us have an inner guardian that wards off challenges to our fundamental beliefs, to our insecurities, and to our hard-won previous decisions. Deep knowledge of one’s self takes courage. As the sociologist Parker Palmer wrote, “Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best.” This is one reason we at Elizabethtown College stress holistic education—education that engages the whole person—through education not only in the laboratory, seminar room, and library, but also in service activities, on teams, through internships, and via clubs and organizations. If you open yourself to criticism, challenges, and encouragement from others, you can draw courage from them to face the truth about yourself and create your own deep principles by which to live. Your fellow students, the community off-campus, your coaches, your supervisor on the job here on campus, and the staff who work with you can be some of your best instructors.

The path to deep knowledge is challenging. It stretches your mind, questions your beliefs, demands new powers you may not even know you have right now. But it is an exciting journey. You would not want to miss it for the world.

So, Class of 2017, should you have a traveling companion such as I had who says, well, you must be learning a lot in college, remember that indeed you are. And you will never forget it. Thank you.