

A Brief History of Journeys Most Unlikely: Finding Your Story

Dr. Alison Fletcher

Juniata College Awards Convocation Speech, May 7, 2025

Alison Fletcher is the W. Newton & Hazel A. Long Professor of History at Juniata College.

Welcome to you all on this truly special occasion. Thank you, President Troha, for those kind words. It is wonderful to be standing here looking out at award winners, graduating seniors, colleagues, staff, families, and friends. I would like to begin by thanking all the families in the audience today. Without you, none of this would be possible. I am a survivor of sending three children through college, so I know what it means to nurture and support our children through the ups and downs of college life.

Standing here looking out at so many amazing young people I am pinching myself. You may have mapped out your future, or maybe only your next few years. Maybe you really have no idea what's next; or perhaps the last few months have changed what you thought would be your next steps.

When I was your age, if I had consulted a crystal ball and it told me I would be standing here today speaking to you all, I would have said nonsense and tossed into the bin. I did have a dream of what I wanted to do—but at that time, and for factors outside my control, it seemed an impossible dream. I wanted to study history—a discipline that I find fascinating and that I believe can help us understand our past and that, perhaps more importantly, can help shape our present.

And yet, on my unlikely journey to this podium, I did other things, useful and meaningful things—things I didn't really want to do, but that seemed the only possible course of action at the time. When I was seventeen, I became a nurse studying at the school Florence Nightingale started at St. Thomas Hospital in London. I walked up and down the old Victorian wards in an outfit that had a cap with large lace wings—ridiculous I know! But at one end of the ward, I could look out over the river Thames and see the Houses of Parliament, and we could hear Big Ben chime the hour. I went on to learn how to deliver babies, and I held the hands of dying patients. I learned a great deal—about myself, about what I could do, and about what skills I had and how I might use them in the future. I have used those skills ever since to guide me through life's ups and downs.

I got married—on reflection much too young—younger than most of you sitting immediately in front of me. My unlikely journey took us to the U.S.—a journey I never expected and that was my

husband's dream, a dream he forgot to mention to me before we got married. Foolishly, I had not read the small print in the footnotes of my marriage contract which said we will move to the United States at the very first available opportunity. There is a lesson there for us all: always read footnotes very carefully.

So, my unlikely journey took to me to a new country, to community college, to a liberal arts college, to graduate school, and then finally back into the classroom as a teacher of history. History is not about the memorization of dates, names, and events. At its heart, history is about story telling. I like to think I have one of the oldest and most important jobs in the world. Why? Because if you look back through the long centuries of the past you will see how important story telling has always been. It is profoundly linked to our humanity. The stories we tell ourselves help us to make sense of complex situations, to understand our emotions, and to make sense of our world. Stories can create a sense of community; they can help us connect to one another, to build understanding and to create shared experiences. Stories bring people together so we can make a positive impact on the world. It has been deeply fulfilling to bring alive in the classroom the voices of those long dead so my students can listen to them, learn from them, and be inspired by them.

bell Hooks was an amazing scholar and teacher whose books on teaching guided and shaped me as I worked to improve my skills in the classroom. She argued that teaching is always rooted in hopefulness.¹ I agree, even on those days when I feel frustrated or am faced with a pile of what every teacher loves most: grading. Importantly, however, teaching has also allowed me to continue learning—from my colleagues, but most of all from my students.

I cannot stand up here looking at your faces and not acknowledge that so many of you are graduating into a world that a few short months ago you thought you knew how to navigate, but that now seems less clear and less certain. How might our present shape your dreams, hopes, and desires for your future? Maybe you are just about to embark on your own unlikely journey.

As a historian, I think that the past is full of amazing people who I find an inspiration and an example for how to live my life. Have you ever played that game where you think about who might you invite to a very special dinner party, a party where you could sit round the table enjoy amazing food and just listen, learn, and be inspired by your guests?

I have, and sometimes my table gets quite crowded, so I will just mention two people who are always present. The first is someone I was lucky enough to meet. In fact, as I sometimes tell my students, he is the only person I have chased out of a restaurant to ask if I could shake his hand and thank him. His name was John Hume.² To me he strode across the landscape of thirty years of violence in the north of Ireland advocating a peaceful resolution often at huge personal risk. The second is Wangari Maathai who was a Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist who founded the Green Belt Movement. She also had a wonderful way with words. One of her many sayings was "It's the little things citizens

do. That's what will make the difference. My little thing is planting trees.”³ Both of these inspirational guests were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But perhaps you would like to invite contemporary figures to your table to inspire and guide you. This is entirely up to you. It is your dinner party after all.

I am sure my colleagues sitting here can think of many students who, after they graduated, had unlikely journeys to get them where they are today. I am going to mention just a few from my own department: The History and Art History Department.

I asked Emma, who is now the Exhibits and Graphics Specialist at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, how she finally got the position she wanted. It took five years, and the bullet list of things she told me she did would fill the next ten minutes. Suffice it to say that she never gave up, took unpaid or poorly paid internships that required other work to support, and networked at every available opportunity. She stressed to me that it was always sustaining to keep in touch with her teachers at Juniata.

Maddie dreamt of working at an academic publishing house—a very difficult goal to achieve. She was always very determined. One year she applied to at least sixty internships, finally landing one in California. When she didn't get the Fulbright to England that she wanted, she took a Master's in Classics in London. After graduating, she had no choice but to move back with her parents while she did free lancing, always working on her writing and continuing to network. She is now the Acquisition Editor for history and art history at Penn State Press.

And finally, Tom. He has always been fascinated by Norse mythology. He wrote his senior thesis on “Women in Saga Literature.” The final sentence of his thesis ended with the words “I believe these women can show a truth about Norse society that ... I long to know more about.”⁴ When he graduated, Tom had no idea where this desire would lead him. But he dreamed big, and we recently found out he has been accepted to study Norse mythology in the graduate program at the University of Iceland this Fall.

So, how should you prepare yourself for what might be your unlikely journey? Our worlds can shift and change, sometimes in a blink of an eye. So how do we keep our balance? How do we keep our hopes and dreams alive? There are no easy answers, but the stories that we tell ourselves can be a guide. Remember that you are stronger than you think you are. Look back on the challenges you have faced over the last few years; think about how you overcame them; and believe that you have the resilience, creativity, and confidence to navigate the future, whatever your journey looks like.

My students know how much I love reading poetry in class. They are very tolerant of this idiosyncrasy, and some truly enjoy it. So, I am going to end today with a few short lines from one of my favorite poets, Seamus Heaney:

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.⁵

Thank you for listening to me today.

NOTES

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress; Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994). I have been inspired by many books by bell hooks, but this one has influenced my thinking the most, as her teaching philosophy sees “hope” as essential for an education that would be transformative.
2. John Hume was a politician in Northern Ireland and a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate “John Hume: Facts,” The Nobel Prize, 2025, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1998/hume/facts/>.
3. For more information on Wangari Maathai, see “Words to Live By – A Tribute to Wangari Maathai,” Project Learning Tree, 2019, <https://www.plt.org/educator-tips/words-to-live-by-tribute-wangari-maathai/> and The Green Belt Movement, 2025, <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>.
4. Tom Montgomery, "Wyrð Women: Saga Women in the Viking Age" (Undergraduate Thesis, Juniata College, 2024), 42.
5. Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Phioctetes* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/19039148-the-cure-at-troy>.