

**Martin Luther King, Jr. and Horatio Alger, Jr. Meet the
Zoombinis**

By Dr. Rebecca G. Adams

2008 Spring Ashby College Commencement

Thank you, Aaron Dell, for that kind introduction.

I want to thank Fran Arndt, Jeanne Aaroe, and Paul Ashby for their support this year.

I have a dream. By a dream, I don't mean a vision of the future, which is what Martin Luther King Junior had, but the kind of dream you have while you are asleep. I have the same dream over and over. It isn't a unique dream. In fact it is a pretty common type of dream, at least among college professors. Perhaps some of you students will recognize my dream as well.

It is the last day of high school. Much to my surprise, I find out that my Chemistry final is scheduled to start in a few minutes. Sometimes when I have this dream, I am surprised that the final is scheduled for *that* day; other times I am surprised that I had been enrolled in Chemistry *at all*. In any case, I must get to the room where the final is being given and pass it. Otherwise I won't graduate. I am frantic. No matter how fast I run, no matter how far I go, no matter how many people I pass, I never reach the room where the final is being given. I wake up in a cold sweat.

All kidding aside, you wouldn't be here today if you hadn't taken your high school finals. Not only have all of you graduated from high school, you have all completed at least your first two years of college. **You** are to be congratulated.

My father was the first person in my family to attend college. When my father completed high school, he received a scholarship to attend the University of Wisconsin to study architecture, but my grandparents didn't have the extra money it would have cost. Fortunately, my dad wasn't content with his lot in life. He attended night classes. Although his college education was interrupted by the birth of children and job offers that were too good to refuse, in those days having some college was worth about as much on the job market as having some graduate school is now. He eventually had two successful careers, one in the electronics industry and one as a miniature furniture designer and manufacturer.

My father's story is not unlike one Horatio Alger Junior would have written. In 1873 in the Preface to *Bound to Rise*, Alger wrote that nowhere in Europe "are such opportunities afforded to those who wish to rise, as in America." He went on to say, "[w]e hear indeed, occasional instances of prominent [European] men who have risen from the ranks; but what is rare and occasional in Europe is the rule with us. Let this thought stimulate the ambition of those boys, who . . . are hampered by poverty and limited advantages, and teach them that an honorable position in life may be attained by those who are willing to work for it." The phrase "a Horatio Alger story" is often used to describe the career of someone who rose from poverty to wealth and position.

It is important to remember that Horatio Alger was a novelist; he wrote fiction. Yes, as students who have taken introductory sociology with me know, upward mobility is possible in the United States, though it is certainly not the rule. And yes, people from all types of backgrounds succeed in America, but the playing field isn't as level as Alger's stories imply. It is simply not equally easy for all Americans to attain success. You are a lot more likely to die wealthy if you are born that way than if you are born poor. Note that Alger's heroes were all Caucasian males. They may have been poor, but at least to their advantage they weren't women or ethnic minorities.

Alger could have learned something about American society from the video game, the Logical Journey of the Zoombinis. The premise is that the Zoombinis need to evacuate their island and, to reach the safety of Zoombiniville, they have to face many challenges along the way. Although Zoombinis are all cute little creatures, they have different types of eyes, noses, feet, and hairstyles.

I retrieved my daughter's copy of the game from our attic and played it recently. As a band of 16 of them started their journey on the Big, the Bad, and the Hungry Trail, their first challenge was to cross one of two bridges across a deep ravine to the Allergic Cliffs. All of the Zoombinis with wild haircuts crossed the top bridge with no difficulty. When the Zoombinis with buzz cuts tried to cross the same bridge, one of the cliffs sneezed and blew them back to their starting point. They had to take the other bridge to make it safely to the other side.

Next their journey took them to the Stone Cold Caves, where once again the Zoombinis with buzz cuts had to follow a different path than their fellow

travelers to reach the safety of a cave. I didn't finish the game and deliver my band of Zoombinis to the safety of Zoombiniville, but I played long enough to find out that the Zoombinis with buzz cuts were definitely having a bad hair day. They didn't have the same opportunities as the Zoombinis with less conventional haircuts.

When the Zoombinis started to cross over the ravine to the cliffs on the other side, they saw no obstacles before them. Similarly, as you look forward to finishing your college degree or to moving up the career ladder, it may appear that nothing is going to stop you from reaching the top rung. Beware, however, because there might be a glass ceiling over your head, and bumping your head against it would be a rude awakening. Although this could happen to anyone, regardless of gender or ethnicity, women and minorities are particularly likely to have this experience because they aren't as likely to have the sponsorship of well-placed, powerful senior colleagues. Like the Zoombinis with buzz cuts, caught unawares when the cliff sneezes, women and ethnic minorities are sometimes a bit stunned when they tumble back down the career ladder.

My advice to those of you who intend to work after you graduate is to begin cultivating relationships with potential sponsors now, whether you still have two years of course work remaining or are about to leave UNCG. Hopefully, when you are ready, one of your sponsors will reach down through the entry hatch in the glass ceiling and pull you up the ladder. If all else fails when the time comes, keep bumping your head against the glass ceiling until it shatters. Not only will you make it through the glass ceiling, those following behind you will be able to climb to the top of the ladder without difficulty.

So Horatio Alger didn't acknowledge that being a woman, belonging to an ethnic minority, or having a bad hair cut could make success more difficult to attain. He was right about one thing though. Research has repeatedly shown that the most important predictor of occupational success is educational attainment. Like my father, Horatio Alger's characters not only worked hard, but they took advantage of opportunities to further their education. So have you. You **are** to be congratulated.

Things have changed since my dad left college to start his first career. Some college is no longer enough to enter high prestige occupations, and even a college degree isn't worth as much as it used to be. Today so many people have college degrees that graduate school is becoming a necessary prerequisite for success. Don't misunderstand me--attending college is definitely financially

worth it. Research shows that having *a* college degree, in any subject, is better than having *no* college degree, and college graduates earn about 1/3 more than high school graduates. It is clear, however, that a graduate degree makes success even more likely. Those with master's degrees earn twice as much as high school graduates, and those with doctoral degrees or professional degrees earn three or four times as much.

So, like my band of Zoombinis who successfully crossed a bridge to the Allergic Cliffs, entered a Stone Cold Cave, and made it to the end of The Big, the Bad, and the Hungry Trail, those of you who are leaving Warren Ashby Residential College at the end of this semester have reached your first goal. Those of you graduating from UNCG are a bit further along on your journey. To continue on to Zoombiniville, however, my band of little creatures still have to follow other trails and face other challenges. In order to achieve your goals, so do you. Many of you have probably been so focused on working towards your bachelor's degree that you haven't thought about graduate school yet, but you will most likely do so eventually. So those of who still have two more years until you finish your bachelor's degree should keep your GPA up, take advantage of the opportunities available on and off campus and inside and outside of class to develop your skill set, and make sure you are as liberally educated as possible when you leave UNCG so you are ready for anything that happens to you on your way to your destination.

I am honored to have been asked to speak to you today. I have always valued my time at the Warren Ashby Residential College, because here students are not afraid to be different and they are not afraid to make a difference. Your experience here will thus serve you well, not only until you finish your degree if that is still on your to-do list, but as you live your life after leaving UNCG as well.

Those of you who are about to leave RC have all shared a common experience, but as you begin the next leg of your adventure and move out into the broader UNCG community, your experiences will begin to diverge. You will each take different classes, major in different subjects, and have different teachers, and life will deal each of you different cards. Some of you will probably be lucky enough to progress towards your degree with no impediments, but I suspect that many of you will face some challenges along the way. Some of you, like my father, are the first in your families to attend college, which I am sure represents a challenge. During your remaining time at UNCG, others of you will have difficulty finding enough time to meet all of your

obligations; suffer from a serious illness; reconsider your political, religious, or sexual identity; experience financial difficulties; or deal with family problems. Some of you will simply get bad haircuts. Whatever barriers you encounter, however, I have confidence that you will overcome them and finish your degree.

But can you do it alone? I doubt it. Even though it was a struggle for my parents to pay the bills while I was in college, they wouldn't hear of me dropping out and taking a full-time job. I was to finish my father's unfinished business. I was to graduate from college. Of course, in the end I not only received a B.A., but also went on to complete an MA and PhD. I stand here today to tell you that it would have never happened without the love and support of my parents and, then later, my husband. I am grateful to them, as you are grateful to your parents, guardians, grandparents, or other family members and friends—all of those who have been helping you find the room where your Chemistry final is being given, cross the bridge to the cliff, and follow the path into a cave, and who will help you to finish your degree.

So, my final charge to you is to honor those who have helped you get this far by helping someone else.

- Show other students how to find the room where their Chemistry final is being given. Help people figure out what bridge they can cross safely to the other side of the ravine. Encourage and support others as they strive to further their education.
- Don't sneeze if the people trying to cross the bridge are from different backgrounds than you are. Welcome the creatures with the buzz cuts into your cave. Develop a diverse network.
- Continue to follow the remaining trails until you reach the safety of Zoombiniville. Finish your bachelor's degree. Consider attending graduate school. Cultivate relationships with people, such as former RC'ers or other UNCG alumni, who can help you. Figure out how to climb the career ladder that reaches beyond the glass ceiling.
- And once you have left UNCG and attained success, reach down through the entry hatch in the glass ceiling and help those behind you up the ladder.

Maybe I do have a dream similar to the one Martin Luther King Junior had after all. If you, the May 2008 Warren Ashby Residential College graduates help make this dream a reality, **you are, to be, congratulated!**