CLASS RING

When words aren’t enough

By Scott C. Brown

I first didn’t understand it. Why would anybody at a place with a history as long as that of Mount Holyoke College start a new tradition? What would prompt a group of first-year students from the Class of 2004 to embark on a quest for a class ring? If I may be brutally honest, isn’t this a bit contrived, presumptuous, and, well, not all that original?

But every tradition starts somewhere, for different reasons. One class member said she envisioned herself wearing her class ring on a subway thirty years from now, and looking across the aisle and seeing a young student also wearing an MHC class ring. The students hoped the ring would be a visible, unifying symbol for their class and hopefully for classes to come. So the Class of 2004 decided to do it.

The creation of this tradition began with the mundane details. In their first year at Mount Holyoke, the Class of 2004 investigated different ring companies, selected a vendor, and chose a design. Once they had their ring, they needed to create a ceremony. They drew up a program that would have speakers from their class provide a history of the idea for the ring, a benediction from the dean of the college, and words from the dean of students who served as liaison to the class boards.

They also needed somebody to reflect on the occasion of this new tradition. One of our student office workers approached me about being a speaker. I had no idea why I was being asked, or what I was supposed to say. The first part was easy: the student said they had asked me to speak because the Career Development Center connects them with their futures and helps guide them wherever their paths might lead. They felt their ring was a symbol that could tie together their class, and perhaps all Mount Holyoke alumnae. So I was the speaker.

The second part was hard: I was not sure what to say. This invitation took me by surprise and forced me to struggle privately, not only with why they should do this at all, but also with the question, Who was I, a person trying to make some sense out of his own relationship to this history, to deliver these thoughts? To be honest, I had been a little intimidated coming to work at an institution that was so old (the first of the Seven Sisters) compared to the institution founded in the 1960s where I’d been a first-generation college student. After a considerable number of fits and starts, struggling through my own reflections on the occasion, I came to a much better understanding of why this tradition needed to be created by these students at this school. I shared my deepened understanding with the women of the Class of 2004:

A ring is a circle with no beginning and no end, a simple object to which we can ascribe powerful mean-

Scott C. Brown is director of the Career Development Center and adjunct lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Education at Mount Holyoke College. His e-mail address is scbrown@mtholyoke.edu.
ing. But what meaning will it have for you, the Class of 2004?

**A Ring of Tradition.** Traditions bind us: to this moment, to Mount Holyoke, to your past and to your future. Traditions draw on our collective strength, memory, and wisdom. A new tradition is not a contradiction. Traditions are timely and timeless; they enable us to make sense of these complex and changing times by connecting us to our core values, the enduring and the transcendent.

**A Ring of Community.** Counting you one by one, you represent nearly every state in our nation, a vast array of countries in our world, and every conceivable combination of interests and experiences. But within all of these differences, you make the one Class of 2004. The ring unites your class, and connects you to one another, a community like no other.

In this brief but shining moment, the Class of 2004 has come together. This is the last time your class will truly gather until convocation your senior year. This is important. You may not understand this now, but your class will be your touchstone on your journey throughout life. Your classmates were there from the start and will understand where you have come from. The women you are today are different from the women you were two years ago, and different from who you will be two years hence. You will be different—and they will know how. You will know more about yourself—and they will know why.


**A Ring of Promise.** Your class ring is both a question and an answer. What will this mean to you? To one another? It is a public and not so public way to remind yourself of your private thoughts. Your class ring is a talisman—a glance at your hand will remind you who you are and who you aspire to be. What is most important to you? What promises will you make to yourself? To one another? And who will hold you to your commitments and covenants? Remember, of one to whom much is given, much is required.

As Both an insider and an outsider to the creation tradition, I have come to a different perspective. At first I’d thought about the value of this new tradition only in terms of its potential for lasting impact on generations to follow, or perhaps the students’ desire to see their class etched prominently in the annals of the ongoing story of the college. I believe the need for this tradition started when class members began to feel, as they came to college, that they were leaving places to which they would never fully return and traveling to a place they could never fully explain. It was clear that they were experiencing something they had no language to describe, and when words failed, they yearned for symbols to do the ancient and archetypal work of communicating the ineffable. A touch awkwardly, with little guile and much possibility, they created this tradition to help them grope through the evanescence and perhaps grasp something more enduring. I am not sure if they knew that class rings have a very storied and significant role at some institutions. I don’t think they cared. After going through this whole experience, I don’t think they had a need to be original; they just had a need.

---

**I BELIEVE THE NEED FOR THIS TRADITION STARTED WHEN CLASS MEMBERS BEGAN TO FEEL, AS THEY CAME TO COLLEGE, THAT THEY WERE LEAVING PLACES TO WHICH THEY WOULD NEVER FULLY RETURN AND TRAVELING TO A PLACE THEY COULD NEVER FULLY EXPLAIN.**

---