Let Your Softness Shine

Trustees, faculty and staff, honored guests, esteemed First Gentleman, brand new freshmen, new transfer students, and graduating seniors—welcome. It is good to be together.

Every story has a beginning, and for our newcomers, this is the beginning of your Austin College story. A story is more than a plot or a series of events. A story is about internal transformation. The hero goes from being one way to being another way. Her heart, her mind, and her soul change, and they change because she has overcome a difficult challenge.

You are all good students and have racked up the kinds of accomplishments that got you admitted to Austin College. So I know that you are used to slaying dragons and meeting other kinds of heroic challenges. But I will bet that a lot of the things you have faced down were strains on your strengths. You picked something that you were good at, and you worked to get better. That can be transformative, and it can be the making of a good story. But there is an even deeper story that you can write when you hold back your superpowers a bit and let your softness and weakness shine through.

I learned about this deeper kind of challenge from studying Pilates. It is different than other physical practices, like dance and yoga in which I had engaged, because Pilates explicitly tends to the hidden parts of our physical selves.

You can understand this even from where you are sitting. If I ask you to raise your right knee a few inches, most of you will lead with your strength and put those large muscles on the front of your thigh to work. You will lift your knee quickly this way and without a great deal of thought or learning. The Pilates way, however, is to consciously relax that big strong leg muscle and, while keeping it soft, use the smaller muscles deep in your pelvic core to accomplish the same movement.

Different? Yes. Harder? Yes. Something that requires intention and focus and that provides an opportunity for new neural connections? Yes. You can learn a lot when you take a break from leading with your strong suit.

You probably already have a pretty firm idea of your academic strengths. And an equally ingrained idea of your weaknesses. Some of you are so convinced, you have already written off whole swaths of subjects and activities. If I asked you right now, you could easily tell me that you are sticking to the sciences because you are not a good writer, or you only want to take classes that don't use math,
or you just can’t handle giving in-class presentations, and so forth. Your secret plan for getting through college is to avoid anything that pokes at your soft underbelly. You know college will challenge you, and you are willing to take it on—but preferably only on your strong side.

Happily, you picked the wrong college for that. Austin College faculty members are going to welcome both parts of you into their classrooms. They will want to see the very best of you and help you make it even better. If you write well, they will help you polish that craft. If you already have a knack for running detailed experiments, they will show you how to become a first-rate scientist. But in addition to being experts in their fields, our faculty members are also Pilates instructors (although they may not know it). They know how to look at each student and see not only what is loudest, but also what lies underneath, hidden and ready to be brought forward.

They say that there are two kinds of teachers: those who teach subjects and those who teach students. Austin College faculty members are the second kind. That is why they want to get to know you. It isn’t that they need more friends. It is that they want to understand what kind of thinker and learner you are. They want to support you as you work on your strengths and your weaknesses.

They are also going to push you to understand “which is which” at an even deeper level. It isn’t just a matter of knowing what subjects you like best or what classes you find easiest. There are more fundamental things to understand. Are you a better starter or a better finisher? Are you happier in the midst of the disseminative, brainstorming, creative part of a project or in the crystalizing organization part? Do you express yourself best on paper or in speech? Do you prefer to work alone or on a team? There is no best way—and none of us will ever be perfectly balanced. But we can work with both parts of ourselves. We can sharpen the things we do well, and we can nurture the things we do less well.

The Austin College curriculum does that. And it is built into our co-curricular expectations too. You will find that your professors, your coaches, and the staff with whom you work expect you to improve even in the areas in which you are already great and even in the areas you think are hopeless.

The story of your education will be a layered one, the challenges that produce your transformation will be of many different kinds, and the dragons you slay will be both big and fire-breathing and also tiny and trying to hide. And you won’t have to do it alone. All of us will be there to help you.

Why do we go to so much trouble over you? Why can’t we let you be part of an easier story?
Well for one thing, we think it will make you a happier and more successful person. There is no one for whom their best qualities don’t turn into their biggest liabilities every so often. Having a wider repertoire of actions from which to choose helps you know when to speed ahead to win the race, and when to slow down so you don’t miss something important along the way.

But even more important than what your Austin College education does for you personally, is what it allows you to do for others. You will graduate ready to write a world-changing story. The human community needs Austin College graduates in a pressing and real way. There isn’t a single problem before us that can be solved by simple thinkers, fanatics, or narrowly trained experts. If we are to have any hope of a world healed and in peace, it will be because people like you learn to see deeply and widely—and learn to communicate that expanded vision to others.

And it will take more than just your collective strengths to make that so—it will take your collective weaknesses too. So by all means, hone your superpowers. But hone your mundane “Clark Kent” alter ego too. And then turn yourself toward others and use each of those gifts in the service of justice and love.

New students: I wish you every blessing in this new beginning. Seniors: I wish you every blessing in this beginning that is also an ending. Let’s work together to craft a tremendous story this year.