Education as Intimate Immensity
OPENING CONVOCATION ADDRESS
PRESIDENT MARJORIE HASS
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New students, seniors, special guests, distinguished faculty, handsome first gentle... Good evening and welcome to the opening of our 167th year.

One hundred and sixty-seven years of Austin College is a long time. Longer than any of our lifetimes. Longer than living memory. Our estimation of time and distance usually calls on human sized spans: a season, a year, a mile. We are comfortable with measuring the world against our own experience. It feels natural to say that elephants are large, pennies are small and (from where we stand now) Ethiopia is far away. Using ourselves as a yardstick is how we tend to work.

No wonder then that we are thrown when we encounter aspects of reality that can’t be usefully measured against our ordinary experience. This summer I watched the Cosmos series hosted by Dr. Neil De Grasse Tyson. I don’t know what our astrophysicist friends think of that program, but as a novice stargazer, I found in it images and metaphors that helped me grasp the immensity of cosmic space and time. Concepts such as “light years” and “billions” and “eons” came to life in a way that made me appreciate anew how small and fleeting is the content not only of a single human life—mine or yours, for example—but of humanity itself. For all our grandeur and pride, we are small flecks within a much greater whole.

This cosmic perspective is awesome; it leaves us wonderstruck. Without ourselves as a measure, we get a bit dizzy, disoriented. At times we may be frightened. But it is only from this cosmic perch that we can see the whole of humanity and the ultimate beauty of our finite time together on this spinning green and blue rock. The cosmic perspective, if we can tolerate the anxiety it produces, invites a compassionate sense of our mutual fragility and our radical improbability.

Some of us will say that this is where we find G-d. Others of us feel the magnitude in a purely secular way. But no matter the metaphysics, the physics itself leaves us changed and bound to each other in our shared humanity. Shifting ourselves towards the cosmic perspective, measuring against superhuman vastness, widens our thinking ethically and intellectually.
The education we practice at Austin College is going to invite you to take a look at the yardsticks you have brought with you. You may not even be aware of what they look like since you use them so often and so automatically. Our faculty will ask you to notice that some of those measuring rods are imprecise or uneven. And as with the ordinary ways of measuring time and space, some of them are simply limited by your own inevitably limited experiences.

The tools you find at Austin College will let you see farther and better. You will travel to the stars, but you will also be invited to come in close and look with new attention at what is right beside you. When we look at what is near to us—familiar structures and feelings and patterns—our rulers may be properly sized, but they are often blurry and shaped by habit or myth.

In the company of your professors and each other, you will sharpen your ability to understand and represent the most intimate workings of the human mind and heart. You will see myriad ways our species has found to represent, to sing, to reflect, the nuanced specificity of human experience. And as with the cosmic perspective, we hope that this “lyric” perspective shapes your intellect and also your ethical sensitivity. If the cosmic perspective shows us our insignificance, the lyric perspective reminds us that that we matter irreducibly.

In my tradition, the Rabbis suggest we carry a single piece of paper in our pockets. On one side, the paper should say, “I am but dust and ashes.” And on the other, it should say, “the whole world was created for my sake.” Our job is to look at one side of the paper until we believe it and then turn it over—in an endless loop of recognition and discovery.

It isn’t easy to hold on to this kind of complexity. And many forces around you urge you to see things as simpler than they are. From the clickbait of “seven easy ways to wealth and happiness,” to the replacement of politicians with entertainers, to the constructed narratives of so-called reality TV, you are regularly encountering content that has been pre-sorted, simplified, and packaged for you. Not a lot of chances for awe on The Bachelorette. Not much in the way of either lyricism or cosmic force when the talking heads are shouting pro or con.

A liberal arts education teaches you to step out of this simplistic daily-ness and into what French philosopher Gaston Bachelard called the “intimate immensity” of the world.

Tomorrow you will step into an Austin College classroom. Your very own Cosmos show. Your own lyric workshop. You will take a first step away from the measuring rods you have brought with you to observe from new angles, and to grasp new conceptual frameworks. This expansive cognitive flexibility is a hallmark of a liberal arts education. It is what you came here to find.
You will actually stand on the roof of the IDEA Center in the Adams Observatory to look through our telescope and see what lies light years beyond us. You will look through the pages of a novel and find the inside of your heart. You will study the sweeping path of impartial historical change as well as the specific moment of choice and neuronal firing that constitutes a single individual human movement. You will learn your power and your limit. You will find the very powers and limits of humanity. A good education should blow your mind.

I look forward to the community we will make together: intimate in size, immense in spirit.

I wish each of you every blessing in this beginning.