Dr. Marjorie Hass, President
Austin College

Trustees, colleagues, President Emeritus Oscar Page, former first ladies Anna Laura Page and Sarah Bernice Moseley, First Gentleman Larry Hass, honored guests, and students, welcome to the official opening of the new academic year.

We do look fine in our robes, don’t we? We look ready to re-make our community as we gather together after our summer break. And we look different than we did last year; we have newcomers among us. We welcome each of you and look forward to the difference you will make here.

This summer I spent a day at the Chicago Art Institute viewing a major retrospective of the work of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. You may not recognize his name but you have surely seen his images. One of the founders of Magnum Photos, a long-time photographer for *Life* Magazine, and the most influential photojournalist of our time, his photos and his style have achieved iconic status. When you picture the French intellectuals of the ’50s, or China as re-discovered by the West in the ’40s, or the people of Moscow after the Second World War, your visual image is probably shaped by Cartier-Bresson’s eye and camera.

Cartier-Bresson has said that the art of his photography is about finding “the decisive moment,” about “fix[ing] forever the precise and transitory instant.”¹ And although photography is a relatively recent expressive form, requiring modern technical advancements, the practice of capturing the specificity of an instant, of finding the kernel of core meaning and holding it steady, is ancient. The Haiku form of poetry, for example, aims at just this same act of “recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived.”²

---

Every experience, says philosopher Jeffrey Maitland, “seeks a language in which to express itself.” This is our shared fate, our common human nature. But our individuality lies in how we are **struck** by the moment and in our choice of expressive language. Cartier-Bresson’s interest lay in the momentary encounter between the individual and “history.” His language was the black-and-white photographic image. Three hundred years earlier, the Haiku master Matsuo Basho, on the other hand, was struck by the way the change of seasons reveals itself in single moment. His expressive language was a tightly controlled, metered, use of Japanese.

For each of us, our capacity to make our creative mark lies in our own unique **idiom**, the specific way our passion for the world finds its proper expression.

Find, for example, your interest and passion in this moment. Check in with yourself right now—what part of “the now” draws you in, interests you the most? Is it the emotional tenor of the evening? The pattern of light and shade on the chapel wall? The renewal of time and its passage as we meet again for convocation? Is it the history of ceremony or ritual? The temperature change that you felt as the chapel filled up? What are you holding on to?

Don’t try to find what you’ve been told matters, find what you, in your soul, notice and find interesting.

Let it well up within you and imagine the multiple ways it might find translation into a language. How would you capture it in poetic form? Or say it plainly in your mother tongue? Maybe preach it or teach it in your second language? How could you express it in the language of science? Or as a mathematical relationship? Would you write it as history or as literature? Could you dance the light and shade? Paint the change in temperature? Calculate the structure of ritual?

Austin College emphasizes language learning—the natural everyday languages of the world—but also the specialized languages of the disciplines and the arts. And we encourage translation, the moving between and among these languages to find common and uncommon ground.

---

For those of you new to Austin College, you will find that the goals of your professors are two-fold: to help you find your passionate interest and the idiom in which it will be expressed. They have walked this path and can model for you both the results of expression and the fits and starts and growing pains that come with seeking it. In every classroom, you will find a coach who has learned to “sing the world” (that’s philosopher Merleau-Ponty’s phrase) and who is in the midst of voicing her or his unique song. What makes our faculty special is that they care not only about their own creative projects but about your nascent ones, too.

As the seniors across the aisle can tell you, it is a gift but it’s not a free ride. You’ll be expected to stretch, to let your head grow and your heart break, to give it all you have. And then, because this is Austin College, you’ll be expected to make sure that your way of singing helps to heal, rather than hurt, the world. It is a tall order. Four years isn’t enough time. So, let’s get started.

I wish you every blessing in this new year.