



**OPENING CONVOCATION ADDRESS
PRESIDENT MARJORIE HASS
AUGUST 29, 2011**

“A Friend to Your Passions: Teaching and Learning at Austin College”

Good evening. I bid welcome to each of you: our new freshmen, our newly robed seniors, distinguished faculty and staff, honored guests, and “first gentleman” Larry Hass. We gather on this fine night in our beautiful chapel to re-form our community on the eve of this academic year. Like many of our Kangaroo rituals, Opening Convocation occurs in liminal time: the time in-between, just on the verge, something is ending and something else is about to begin.

Throughout human history and in every known culture, liminal time is a time for magic making, a time when the veil between the worlds thins, when G-d is especially near. It is a time for rituals of protection and blessing, a time to don our special garments and gather in our sacred spaces in postures of awe.

It is in this spirit that I address you this evening and speak especially to the newcomers among us. I offer you a potent wish: that this year you learn to be a friend to your passions and to the passions of your classmates.

I came across this idea in a small book I read recently about achieving excellence and mastery by George Leonard, who actually uses the phrase, “friend to your excitement.”¹ Mr. Leonard is an accomplished journalist, but it was through his long, patient study of the martial art of Aikido that he came to understand the difference between being “good enough” and being “as good as you can be.”

Mr. Leonard has a lot of wise advice in his little book, but his brief description of the need to surround yourself with those who will be “friends of your excitement” and your passions struck me as an elegant way of talking about exactly what we do here at Austin College.

A friend to your passions loves your deep talents and looks to share opportunities with you to spark interest and engagement. A friend to your passions pushes you to explore more deeply, to work more intensively, and to seek joy over mere contentment or comfort.

¹ *Mastery: the Key to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment* by George Leonard (NY: Penguin, 1992).

Your professors will meet you in this spirit, as will your coaches and the many staff members with whom you will interact. Each of them will look to call forth your inner energy—the spark that presses you towards shaping the practices and passions that will define your life. We are a community that encourages and supports this style of friendship.

Most of our seniors already have found and befriended the passions within themselves. Many of you newer students may still be searching. You may know you have an interest, or even a potential “major,” but it hasn’t really revealed itself to you as your own “True North.” But we all are friends to your passions, and we will keep you at it—we will support your searching and finding and developing them.

At the same time, you probably already have many others in your life who have befriended your passivity, your laziness, and your second best efforts. Some of those supposed friends travel under the name of “X-Box,” “Real Housewives,” and “time spent trolling on Facebook.”

But who among us are the friends of your greatness? I would say it is the real people as well as the pastimes and habits that support you in both your play and your work. The ones who remind you that the best work is work that feels like play. The ones who know that excellence requires time and attention and energy—and who love you for that; the ones who can receive your excitement without asking what is in it for them.

One of the great charms of the early Harry Potter books was J. K. Rowling’s homely insight that magical power requires the same kind of study and effort as do our ordinary skills. What I loved about that aspect of Harry’s world is its startling reminder that there is something *equally* magical about our own abilities—that with great effort and passion we too can learn to heal the sick, defeat evil, speak in a foreign tongue, or uncover the hidden secrets of history.

Each of you has the power to be a Hermione or Ron to someone else’s Harry—to help them uncover the latent magic hidden within them and to stand by, one friend to another, as that magic is unfurled through every day practice. That is the kind of friendship we foster here.

I wish each of you an extraordinary and magical year; a year pointed to True North, and a year filled with every blessing and excitement.