“New Horizons”
Inaugural Address
November 5, 2009

Dr. Marjorie Hass, President
Austin College

Trustees of the College; honored delegates and guests; President Emeritus Oscar Page; former first ladies Anna Laura Page and Sara Bernice Moseley; love of my life and also our first, first gentleman, Larry Hass; Cameron and Jessica, my inspirations; Mom and Dad, who always love and support me; sweet sister Stephanie and her beautiful family; my mentor and friend Randy Helm; colleagues and students; loving friends from far and near—and a big shout out by Webcast to 'Roos and friends and family—all over the nation and around the world—welcome!

If I look happy, it is because I am. I am overwhelmed with delight on this special day. It is one of the great delights of my life to be gathered here with you in honor of Austin College—to celebrate its remarkable past, exciting present, and glorious future. Larry, Cameron, Jessica, and I have been so warmly embraced by this community, so cared for and loved, and our gratitude is endless. Thank you for inviting us into the Austin College family with such gracious hospitality. I am moved beyond words at the honor of having been called to serve this institution as its president.

The theme of this inaugural celebration is “New Horizons.” And, you can only imagine how excited I am—as a philosopher, a professor, and as your new president—to spend some time thinking with you about a theme as rich and suggestive as this one. New horizons! My goodness, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty—all great thinkers of the horizon as a frame of being and perception. Happily, we will not go up the mountain of European Philosophy this evening. We are going to stay close to home, looking at the wide open horizon of the big Texas sky that strikes newcomers such as myself with so much force.

That horizon is the place where earth and sky meet. But, even in this most literal sense, that is just a way of talking. For the earth and the sky meet nowhere and everywhere. The illusion of a horizontal line in the distance before us is generated by our perceptual hardware (our eyes and minds)—and not by the firm existence of any such object.

You might remember learning this the hard way as a kid by trying to swim or run to that tantalizing sunrise in what seemed to be a touchable distance. The faster you ran, the farther it seemed. But even when you come to know that the horizon isn’t “there”—even when you’ve studied physics and optics and learned how the illusion works—you never stop seeing the horizon before you.
And more importantly, we never stop looking to the horizon as the place just out of reach but close enough almost to touch. The horizon stands for our hopes, for our futures, for our ability to hang on to those precious glimmers even when reason tells us that they are hard to attain.

And you can start to see why new horizons are so important for Austin College. A college grows in the healthy soil of good planning and sound strategic investments. But it also needs the rain of simple hope, the oxygen of grace, and the equivalent of lots of spiritual duct-tape. For what we do here is a form of practical magic. We find ways to see more. We teach the ways to see the horizon when it’s hidden, and we offer lessons in dream-following and dream-making.

How do we do it? We do it by allowing ourselves to look toward ever new horizons, to keep our dreams before us, to know that the even as we move forward, the vistas before us continue to grow.

We do it the way William James told us to. “Rise and look from the hill-top at the distant view” he said. “[R]epresent to yourself as vividly as possible the distance of the uttermost horizon; and then with inverted head look at the same. There will be a startling increase in the perspective, a most sensible recession of the maximum distance.”\(^1\) Upside down you’ll see farther and wider. Somehow the change in perspective erases a limit.

In sharing this experiment with us, William James was telling us a secret of actual perception: as wide, wild, and lovely as we find the world, there is always more, always something else to be found by widening our gaze and changing our perspective. What seems like an actual limit is just an illusion. But James also was telling us something about our own metaphorical horizons—turn yourself upside down and you’ll see more of what is before you.

One of the things a good liberal arts education offers is help in turning yourself upside down in this good, productive sense. We put your head closer to the earth and open up your vision. “Come to Sherman, see the world,” Austin College proudly and rightly proclaims. This is literally true because of our extraordinary commitment to a global education. But it is also true in its expression of our educational core: shake up your mind, see more, always more, and then let reason and knowledge orient you to a bigger perspective.

It may surprise you to learn that I know a lot about the Tarot deck. But, after all, I am married to a magician. There is a card in the Tarot deck called the “hanging man” that depicts a happy fellow suspended by his ankle from a tree branch. To my mind, he looks just like an Austin College freshman after the first week in C/I, our unique Communication/Inquiry program. He’s upside down but smiling, precarious but ready. The card recalls James’ perspectival shift—the wham in your brain—that real learning requires, the reorientation that lets you look wider, dream bigger, and know more.

When we turn to new horizons for Austin College, when we use this inaugural moment as a chance for headstands, we will be able to delight in a special kind of aspect dawning. For just as James told us, we will find that some parts of what we see remain unchanged. At Austin College, over time and tide, we remain true to our commitment to the liberal arts, we keep our covenant with the Presbyterian Church with loyalty and with love, and we continue on the path of pursuing excellence and holding the doors of access wide open.

But on our heads we also see with a wider gaze: our hopes for the future are brighter, our commitment to bringing that future into existence is deeper. And the ordinary moments—the unplanned but life-changing conversation between mentor and student, the hard-won “A” from the demanding professor—become extraordinary again.

When I stand on James' hill-top and turn on my head to look at Austin College, I see a wealth of opportunities just over “there” and ready for us to realize. I see a college that builds on its longstanding leadership in global education to create a more worldly community. I see a college that is widely known for “changing lives” with its distinctive, vibrant, hands-on, head-down approach to teaching and learning. And I see a college that builds the bonds between generations to develop the strongest alumni-student career network of any small college in the country. And that’s just in my first glance. Even as we make these visions real and whole, we will keep looking toward the horizon, in order to shape “always more” for this great college.

So please come—stand on your head with me. We'll help each other balance, because that is the Austin College way. And together, we'll see more, always more.