“Kindred Spirits: Teaching and Learning at Austin College”
Opening Convocation
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Austin College

Trustees, colleagues, friends, president emeritus Oscar Page, former first ladies, Anna Laura Page and Sara Bernice Moseley, current first gentleman, Larry Hass, members of the class of 2013, and the newly robed class of 2010, I bid you welcome, bienvenu, shalom, wilkommen, hola, and as they say in my newly adopted state, “howdy, y’all.” The view from up here is great. I can see all of you sparkling away out there.

As we begin the new academic year, we dress in these symbols of learning, we gather, and we reflect. And we prepare to take up again the 160-year-old conversation that is Austin College. Many of you have been part of this conversation for a long time and others are, like me, newcomers. But all of us recognize with gratitude the good fortunes that have brought us here and the many, many people to whom we must offer thanks.

As I thought about what I would say to you this evening, I quickly knew that I would talk about teaching and learning because that is the heart of what we do here. We teach and we learn—all of us, no matter our job title or position in the institution.

Since teaching is a form of “live theater,” it is both wonderful and ephemeral. The words that pass between teacher and student usually remain between them alone. A teacher’s teachings are typically impermanent—living on only in the effects created within the student.

We are, however, fortunate to have a record of the classroom teachings of a man recognized as one of America’s best and most influential professors. He taught in Philadelphia and New York for about thirty years until his death in 1929. His teachings touched—directly or indirectly—all of the major twentieth century American practitioners in his field. His students were so moved by his wisdom that in his later years, they encouraged him to gather his lecture notes, comments to students, and letters, and publish them in book form. The teacher’s name was Robert Henri and the book collecting his course notes is called The Art Spirit.
Henri’s subject was painting. But as with any great teacher, the subject was merely an occasion to teach the most fundamental lessons of all: about excellence, about the human spirit, about truth and life and death. Painters will learn a great deal from reading *The Art Spirit*. But the rest of us may learn even more because we will not be misled into thinking that Henri’s lessons are limited to canvas and brushstroke.

At this point, I am tempted to dismiss you and send you off to just read the book for yourselves. But I can’t resist taking a few moments to talk about a passage from this book that has been running through my head since I arrived on campus—a few of Henri’s sentences that miraculously conjure up for me Austin College and the work of teaching and learning that happens here. After all, you’ve come all this way, you’ve put on your robes, and you were expecting Henry Winkler. I should say something!

In his classes, Henri spent a lot of time talking with his students about the nature of diligent study. And he says something that strikes me as perfect advice for those entering Austin College for the first time:

> If you want to know how to do a thing, you must first have a complete desire to do that thing. Then go to kindred spirits—others who have wanted to do that thing—and study their ways and means, learn from their successes and failures and add your quota … and with … this knowledge you may go forth, expressing through the play of forms the music that is in you and which is very personal to you.¹

Henri tells his students that such desire is rare. Most of us start our education full of confusion about what we want to do. Some of you new students may already have a clear and perfect vision of your calling. But most of you probably do not. One core function of Austin College is to give you the space, tools, and guidance you need to be able to hear your soul speaking. To let you come to know yourself and your deepest desires; to help you find that set of things that you want to do with such a deep desire, “body and soul,” that you will struggle and sacrifice to do them with excellence.

And Henri advises that the path to passion and excellence ought to include spending time with what he calls “kindred spirits”: those who have travelled this path before you and with whom you can study the ways and means of your craft. What a beautiful image of the teacher: a kindred spirit. And my goodness, we have a passel of them right here—on campus, all around this room even.

“Kindred spirits”—that is one way of describing the essence of our faculty. Whatever their department or discipline, they embody the spirit of passion and excellence that Henri attributes to the genuine creative artist. And because they have made teaching a part of their self-expression, they will share with you a precious gift: their own paths of self-discovery, their successes and failures of technique, and their ever-moving and burning curiosities.

Your professors will do you the honor and dignity of taking you seriously, of listening to your song and treating you as a companion in spirit. In thinking about this precious side of teaching, I am reminded of the gift Rainer Maria Rilke gave to a young poet:

I have copied your sonnet, because I found that it is lovely and simple and born in the form in which it moves with such quiet decorum. ... And now I give you this copy because I know that it is important and full of new experience to come upon a work of one’s own again written in a strange hand. Read the lines as though they were someone else’s, and you will feel deep within you how much they are your own.²

I distinctly remember the first time one of my professors did me the honor of reading my written work as a piece of writing rather than as a “homework” assignment. The professor’s name was Tim McCarthy and he had many critical things to say about that particular paper. But he said them as one philosopher to another and so offered me a glimpse of the kind of scholar I could become. Trust me when I say that this will happen to you here at Austin College.

And beyond the classroom, you will find a community of alumni, and staff, and friends who continue to live out the lessons learned here. They too are kindred spirits and will greet you as one of their own. The Austin College community, on campus and beyond, is diverse. As I meet members of our extended family, I am astonished at the variety of expressive forms, of songs, that are brought into being by those who have been touched by Austin College. We are not a tribe or a clan, bound together by a shared recent history or parent. But we are kin, bound together by our passion for doing and making with excellence and grace.

To those of you who are beginning your Austin College education, welcome. May you have the courage to uncover your passions and to accept the burdens and the joys to which they lead.

To those of you who are preparing for the final steps in this part of your education, many blessings. May you find ways to solidify your personal vision for the future. And may that vision include a desire to remain actively engaged with this community of kindred spirits.

To those of you—trustees, alumni, staff, faculty, and friends—who form the ongoing circle that is Austin College, may you continue to find yourself nourished among kindred spirits and may you draw from that nourishment renewed commitment to supporting and nurturing this College and its members.

It is a privilege to be among you this evening. Thank you for your gracious attention.