

Opening Convocation  
August 24, 2016  
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## Fear and Fearlessness

Honored guests, esteemed faculty and staff, the Class of 2017, and the Class of 2020—welcome to our Opening Convocation.

It is always a pleasure to address you on this occasion as we mark the end of summer and the beginning of a new academic year.

This kind of in-between, liminal, moment is understood as magical in many human cultures and traditions. In the midst of change and on the cusp of transformation, we create rituals for protection and blessing. Tonight as we contemplate many transitions, from high school student to college student, from college to career, from summer inward absorption in creative projects to the outward energy of teaching, we enact our own ritual gathering.

We sense there is something at stake for us in this threshold—something that inspires fear and for which we must gather our courage. We recognize our vulnerability at this moment. If we are to be a community together, if we are to learn together and inspire each other to do great work, then we must take off much of the armor that keeps us feeling safe. We have to be willing to start with a beginner’s mind, with not already knowing what will happen, and with an open heart.

The bravest thing I did this summer was to take a piece of my writing—writing that was more lyrical, personal, and expressive than any I had done before—and hand it over to the scariest of all monsters, Professor Peter Anderson. (Like many of our professors, he has long fangs and sharp claws, and wields the dreaded red pen of death.) My fear didn’t feel good, but it was grounded in two good things: the hard work I did on this writing and the tremendous respect I had for Peter’s judgement as a writer and a teacher.

When Peter took my writing in his hands and his mind, his fangs disappeared. And what he returned to me was wisdom, advice, some praise, and some criticism. He affirmed my work and he challenged me to do it even better. He showed me some next steps I could take and left it to me to decide what to do.

He offered teaching.

And in taking it up, I learned.

If you are not a little bit afraid of showing your work to others, it might be that there isn’t enough of yourself in it. You may have opted for a pretty safe project, one that you can do in

the dark or at the last minute, one that didn't come with deep learning or enhanced self-knowledge. The good news is that our faculty know how to suss that out. They are experts not only in their fields but in knowing how and where and when to push you to take a risk. You might already feel a gentle claw—I mean hand—at your back. Your fear is not a sign that you are not ready to be here. It is a sign that you are ready.

I very much like the Buddhist practice of simply noticing fear and seeing it as a gate to be walked through rather than a monster to be vanquished. I also appreciate the insight of affect theory, which understands fear at its most basic as a patterned physiological response to a too rapid influx of sensation. We need to make fear our friend so that we can transform it into learning. We have seen all too clearly this summer what happens to fear when it is left to rot into violence or hate.

Our Austin College community is one where our armor can come off, where our fears can be shared. Take a moment to find the fear that is within you—fear of separation, of independence, of failure, of loss, of change. And recognize within that fear the seed of the learning you will do this year. The gift of teaching and learning that lies just before you is a treasure. Make the most of it.

I wish you every blessing in our work together.