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Opening Convocation – August 28, 2019

Building a Better World: One Choice at a Time

Good evening, students, faculty, staff, and friends and welcome to the Opening Convocation for the 171st academic year of Austin College. We are grateful all of you are here to share in this special event celebrating the beginning of a new academic year. This event really is a *celebration*! It is about welcoming our new students, cheering on the graduating class and connecting with everyone in between who supports them! Convocation marks the official start to the school year. This event helps us see, feel and believe, we are part of a community that is driven to achieve, lead, succeed and serve by raising one another up as we all prepare to shake things up, have fun, and to make good things happen, to make a difference in the world. I remember my very own convocation as a new freshman . . . looking around I wondered to myself, what am I doing here? Did I make the right decision? Do I belong? I've learned a few things over the years having lived through that experience and many more . . . To the new students I want you to understand this . . . you belong here! Whoever you are and wherever you are from, rest assured that this is your College and this is your time.

This evening not only do I have the distinct honor of welcoming you, I am also here to ask for your help. I want you to help me build a better world because, at the end of the day, the education you receive at Austin College is not merely a declaration to the world of what you now know, nor is it simply the key to a richer, more fulfilling life. It is a call to action; it invests in you a responsibility to understand your place in the world — to feel, viscerally, the power you have to make a difference. Austin College is a place where you can realize your dreams, pursue your passions, and be curious about yourself and the world. It is also a place where you can pursue big, authentic, and relevant questions, address human, environmental, and societal challenges, and build a better world.

At Austin College you have choices. It is a luxury and a privilege to have choices, and here you actually do get to transform the world every day by your choices and your actions. As Angela Davis says, *You have to act as if it's possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do that all the time.* Small steps lead to big accomplishments. Life is about taking one significant, life-transforming step at a

time. You can start **right here, right now** by making a choice, because life is about choices. According to Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust Survivor: *Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*

Whether you are an incoming student or a graduating senior, through your choices, you will radically transform whatever moment you're in, which leads to bigger moments. Because in reality success, it's a process.

So this evening, I thought I'd start with a story about a Outward Bound experience from the founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal, Parker Palmer. The story illustrates the often scary, sometimes painful, and transformative power of choices:

I thought Outward Bound might be a useful challenge and I elected to spend ten days at a place called Hurricane Island. I should have known from the name what was in store for me. The next time I will choose the program at Pleasant Valley, or at Happy Gardens! It was a week of sheer terror. It was also a week of amazing growth and great teaching and a deep sense of community, the likes of which I've seldom experienced. In the middle of that Outward Bound course I faced the challenge that I had most feared. They backed me up to the edge of a cliff that was 110 feet off the ground. They tied a very thin rope to my waist, a frayed and stretchy rope, and then they told me to back down that cliff.

So I said, "Well, what do I do?"

The instructor, in typical Outward Bound fashion, said, "GO!"

So I went, and I went BOOM! down to that first ledge. I just slammed into that ledge with considerable force.

The instructor looked down at me and said, "I don't think you quite have it yet." I said. "Right. Now what do I do?"

He said. "The only way to do this is to lean back as far as you can because you have to get your feet at right angles to the rock face so you'll have pressure on them." Of course, I knew that he was wrong. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as you can. So I tried it again, and ...BOOM! I hit the ledge. Not quite as hard, but I slipped and hit it again.

He said, "You still don't have it." And I said, "Well, what do I do?"

And he said, "lean way back and take the next step." The next step was a very big one, but I took it. Wonder of wonders, I began to get it. I leaned back, and sure enough, I was moving down that rock face, eyes on the heavens, making tiny, tiny, tiny movements with my feet, but gaining confidence with every step.

Parker's story beautifully expresses the challenges I am going to issue to you this evening as you begin your first OR last academic year. First off, I challenge you to:

1. Choose to say "Yes" and Collect the Stamps:

Say yes — yes to a full, rich, passionate life. So many of us are rushing through life – focused on the destination, the goal – major, minor, professional school/job, not the journey. A great education, and life for that matter, is really all about the journey – about who you meet, and what you learn, endure, understand, appreciate, discover and choose to do along the way.

The reality is that you face an increasingly complex, multicultural, and technologically advanced global knowledge economy in which most of the jobs you are going to inhabit don't even exist yet. An economy where, on average, you will change jobs fifteen times before you retire. (Wolfe 2016) What we do here at Austin College addresses more than the first job. Rather than a one-way ticket to a pre-determined destination, the Austin College educational experience becomes a "passport" – a collection of knowledge and experiences that prepare you to respond to unknown opportunities and challenges. I urge you to collect the stamps from all different places. If you are really passionate about science, expand your purview to include the humanities and visa- versa. Play an instrument, sing, create art, write poetry, learn computer code -- get out of your comfort zone, collect the stamps, and build a well-rounded life.

2. Choose to get out of your comfort zone:

Our job is to make you uncomfortable! Step outside your comfort zone, do something that scares you, get out of your element, connect – get to know people very different from yourself. Take a moment to look at the people in this room. (Our community is remarkably diverse. Ethnic minorities and people of color make-up over ½ of the student body, and 52% of your incoming class.) We are all a mix of backgrounds, of influences, of experiences. Choose to take the time to find out about each other. What an opportunity to put yourself in the shoes of someone different; someone who grew up with different levels of privilege than

you, someone who had to think about their own race or ethnicity every day, or who never had to think about it at all, someone who grew up in a different kind of neighborhood or religion, or without much of any family. Find out how their background shaped, and continues to shape, their choices. Connect and you will grow personally, socially, and intellectually – I promise.

3. Choose Curiosity over Fear:

If there is one gift I could give to all of you it would be to that *your curiosity is always greater than your fear*. Nelson Mandela said *I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it*. The brave person is not the one who does not feel afraid, but the one who conquers that fear. To be curious means that you are willing to risk failure and possibly slam into the side of a mountain until you get it right; and, if there is one skill that is really needed in order for curiosity to exist, it is knowing how to fail. Failure is not only an option, it is sometimes THE best option. We all want to succeed, especially if we consider success to be things working out the way we want them to. We don't usually have a lot of practicing failing. It can be hard to tell what's a failure and what's just something that is shifting your life in a different direction. The truth is, we learn as much or more from failure as we do from "successes".

4. Choose action:

As Leonardo Da Vinci said *It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things*. Find what you love to do and do it and be a person of action. Take advantage of the "something else's" – engage in an international experience, be a part of a music ensemble and/or theatre production, work with a professor on a research project, join one or more of our 70+ clubs and organizations, join the esports team, volunteer for a service project through the Service Station, participate in athletics . . . I could go on and on . . . the opportunities are limitless and out there so you can "happen to them."

5. Choose connection:

I've been reading a lot about trees lately. Did you know that trees are interconnected beings and are only as strong as the forest that surrounds them? The reasons are the same as for human communities: there are advantages to working together. The community provides the foundational support necessary for life to thrive. So, I challenge you to be an integral part of our community and be kind and

supportive of one another. Connect to your passion, each other, the community and the world. When you “lean way back and take the next step” we’ve got the rope!

Many of you already know this remarkable group of individuals, and for those of you who don’t, you soon will. Our faculty and staff share the ability to transform you by creating an exciting community of inquiry that goes beyond the classroom connecting you to purpose, the experience of belonging to something infinitely greater than yourself. Their goal is to spark each and every one of your imaginations, to find a hook in your heart and mind so that you feel a desire to learn and become even more curious about yourself and the world. They will encourage the development of you as a responsible, open minded, empathetic and engaged human being who recognizes and acts on the responsibility to contribute to a larger community. In short, they have your back and will not let you fall, you may hit the side of a mountain occasionally, but you will not fall.

In closing, choose to say yes to being uncomfortable and curious in the face of fear and to actively happening to things by being connected to yourself and community. We chose every single one of you extraordinary people to be a member of our family, and we are so excited and proud you chose us back. You made the right move, this place will change you for the better and enable you to succeed in life and make a difference in the world. So lean way back, take that step, hold the rope for each other and let’s build a better world and keep creating this community together.

Thank you and ‘Go Roos’!

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