

Convocation Speech, Fall 2017

On behalf of the faculty, your fellow students, college staff, faculty, and alumni — all of us — welcome to St. John's.

You have joined a community of learners who wrestle with bold and radical ideas in ways that are increasingly unusual in American higher education. We do our work with a searching temperament and with honesty tempered by civility. These values — honesty, a commitment to searching, civility, a respect for and openness to the ideas of others — are largely lost in American higher education. But they still have a home here at St. John's.

And, now, you have a home here with us as well.

You are here... so I am confident that you know that you have chosen to make your home in a very unusual community. But I am not sure you yet know how unusual it truly is.

So, let me just say this: St John's is as different from other small liberal arts colleges -- schools like Middlebury, Carleton, or Oberlin — as they are from Ohio State.

There are many reasons why this is so. The most important are fundamental and substantial. After you have chosen this college, which is a brave choice, pretty much from here on out you *do not get to choose* what you study. You are studying what other people — after diligent thought and sometimes a lifetime's exploration — have determined will offer you the best platform on which to build your life. Not just your academic or intellectual life, but your whole

life. This curriculum is not designed to constitute the totality of your learning but, again, to provide the platform from which you can move to a lifetime of learning.

You have chosen a college that will prepare you to think, to synthesize, to create, and to make informed judgments. These habits of mind will last your lifetime and will take you anywhere you choose to go.

But I am the president of the college; I probably *would* say that. So, as you sit there thinking about what your time at St. John's will mean, and what it will prepare you for, it would help if I read a small section from a recent article titled, "The most forward-thinking, future-proof college in America teaches every student the exact same stuff," by Peter Marber in the business journal *Quartz*.

"Perhaps instead of reinventing higher education, we can give students what they need for the future by returning to the roots of liberal arts. Consider St. John's College, America's third-oldest institution of higher education...which has emerged as one of the most distinctive colleges in the country by maintaining a strict focus on the classics of the Western canon....

Marber then notes that St John's asks you to read original texts and says, "This is crucial to the school's philosophy; by freeing texts from context, St. John's claims it frees students' minds to ponder the multiple possibilities and meanings that are actually *in* the text. Those possibilities are then discussed and debated, and discarded when weak or specious, leaving better interpretations space to surface. St. John's is not a cloister, and of course students and faculty are well aware of the history and social settings of their studies. But an attempt is made to focus on the texts themselves, and understand their content, meaning and

merit deeply through debate. This is what creates independent thinking.

“...Sure, compared to the telephone book size course catalogs most colleges and universities offer in the 21st century, St. John’s curriculum may seem limited. But “Johnnies,” as St. John’s students call themselves, and faculty would argue just the opposite. This curriculum is carefully designed not only to build knowledge, but also to understand how knowledge is ultimately created; it is teaching students *how to learn*.

“...We live in an age when 2.5 quintillion bytes of data are created every day, with much being intentionally misleading, ‘fake’ or just plain wrong. What could be more valuable than developing an intellectual filter, cultivating the capacity to know what is important to know, distilling enormous amounts of information to form a rational position, or knowing how to listen and respond to—or perhaps integrate—someone else’s point of view? In this vein, St. John’s uses traditional texts taught in ancient methods to impart skills that have never been more crucial.”

“Skills that have never been more crucial...” Here is a highly successful business person lauding the quality of education you will get here...what you will learn and study and how it will help you grow. All true. But the other point he is making is that the world needs – and will seek to employ - the skills you will develop here...because they have “never been more crucial...”

As you embrace the Program and give your studies your full attention you will of course also be thinking about the larger questions behind it all – Questions such as, what is a good life, and how do we make one for ourselves? How do I want to live? What kind of life will satisfy my intellectual yearnings and my social needs as well as help me reach my professional and personal goals?

And what exactly are my personal and professional goals?

These are huge questions, and they may seem at times overwhelming. But they are after all the key questions of our life here, and the right questions for you to be asking, even if - like all large questions – the answers are hard to come by, and are not easy.

Your time here should give you the tools to grapple with these questionsto gain glimmers of understanding.

And your time here should change you...it will change you... you will not leave here with the same beliefs and the same way of looking at the world that you have right now.

In a commencement speech at another college several years ago, the writer Richard Russo said that “sending ... kids off to college is a lot like putting them in the witness protection program. If the person who comes out is easily recognizable as the same person who went in, something has gone terribly, dangerously wrong.”

You have enrolled in a college that is unlike any other in the country, and second to none in its ability to prepare you for whatever comes your way. Your tutors could teach anywhere. They teach here, at least in part, because for them, to be a part of a community of learners is much more wondrous than to “profess.” That is why they are tutors and not professors. You are now their admittedly less experienced colleagues, here to offer your hard work and your insights that you will bring to your seminars, tutorials, and preceptorials. Your fellow learners, your classmates and your faculty and all of us, will benefit greatly from

what you have to offer. Be present. Share yourself. Get and give all that you have.

You know what else? And this is sometimes hard for us at St. John's: Have some fun. Not *too* much fun. Play with ideas. Tell terrible jokes.

Hike. Kick a soccer ball. Help a kid in town to learn to read. Enjoy the incredible, sometimes almost preposterous beauty of this this wondrous place ... the constant drama of the sky ... the clouds and the sunsets. Take care of yourself. Sit in the Plaza downtown and think about the history under your feet and all around you. Whatever it means to you, make the most of these four years. Become you.

Thank you for all for the bravery in choosing to join us in this incredible community. We welcome you to your new home at St. John's College.