

AColyte

Commencement 2022

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



**BEFORE
YOU
GO...**

AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

That Time of Year

(You Knew It Was Coming)

May 2022

It's hard to say "Au Revoir"
So let's just say "Hors D'oeuvres"
--Martin Mull

This thing was bound to happen.
--The Radio Dept.

The world is about to turn.
--Rory Cooney
"Canticle of the Turning"

Turn me loose—
I'll never be the same!
--Jerry Jeff Walker

This is really addressed to graduating seniors, but the rest of y'all are welcome to read over their shoulders:

One of the coolest things about my job at this time of year is that I get to deliver the Charge and Benediction at the end of the Commencement service.

That means that I will be the last Austin College person to officially speak to the entire Class of 2022 when you're all assembled together in your caps and gowns on Saturday.

I don't want to get too puffed up or sentimental about that, but it's a job I take seriously.

I like being the last voice you'll hear as a class.

And I'll try to speak authentically on behalf of this whole institution.

We want to send you out into the world with

- a clear, affectionate, and serious endorsement of all you have done and
- real gratitude, hope, support, and excitement for all that you will do.

It won't be the main thing you'll remember from that morning, and it certainly won't be the most important thing that happens at Commencement, but I wanted to write it down for you—along with a little unpacking of the ideas—just in case you or your loved ones might want to look it over later.

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It's a version of the Benediction that we say at many campus-wide events and every Sunday night at worship.

I'm usually the one who says it, but it's a collection of words and ideas that have come from Austin College students through the years as we have

- a. studied the Bible together,
- ii. thought about which things matter more than other things, and
3. tried to think usefully about the rest of our lives.

At the end of the Commencement exercises, I'll say something like the following:

Therefore

That's a trick that the Apostle Paul uses in many of his letters in the New Testament. He spends the first part describing how things are—talking about things that he and his audience know and believe—and then he says “therefore” and issues a series of ethical instructions.

Here's a little cookie for all you grammar nerds:

For Paul,

the indicative precedes the imperative.

His literary structure is essentially, "since we know and believe this, we need to act like this."

At least to my mind, there's a similar relationship between all that has come before this year's Commencement and what will come after.

It's essentially, "since you've learned all sorts of things about yourselves and the world in the last four or so years—since you've accomplished a certain degree of education—now you need to act like educated people."

You'll never stop being part of #ROONation.

That—that Austin College education should matter for the rest of your life.

So here's what we hope you educated people will do:

Go out into the world and be people of peace.

We value peace around here. We don't necessarily want to encourage all of our students and graduates to be pacifists in all contexts, but we do want you to strive to live in harmony and right relationship within the communities in which you live out your lives.

We're not neutral about that. We think that's a better way for beloved, gifted, *educated* people to act in the world.

Be people of peace.

Always think about loving before you think about fighting.

Always.

Have courage.

We want the members of this community to face challenges squarely and act in accordance with your values—even when that’s difficult or unpopular. We recognize that there will always be situations in the lives of our students and graduates—as well as in the life of our College—that require courage.

We don’t want to pretend that everything will always be easy, but we do want to remind each other that we will always have opportunities to live out the principles that we say we believe in.

There will be times when we need to stand and deliver.

“Have courage” means, “Suck it up.” But I don’t necessarily think I should say that in front of your Mom.

Hold on tight to all that is good.

We want our graduates to be people who can identify, cherish, and appreciate good things—good ideas, good habits, good behaviors, good attitudes.

It’s not all good.

No doubt about it, there’s ugly crap out there that needs to be named and resisted.

We all need to be rigorous and serious and careful people who try to operate without illusions.

But it’s not all bad.

It’s not all disappointing.

It’s not all sub-par and tacky.

It’s not all hopeless.

We need to work on holding tightly to all that is good, to watch for it, to cherish it, to talk about it, even as we:

Return no one evil for evil.

This idea, which comes straight out of the book of Romans, seems like a no-brainer.

But—kind of like courage—the relevance of the call to return no one evil for evil often sneaks up on us.

We don't usually *plan* to get even with people who wrong us.

We don't set out intentionally to return evil for evil.

But we often face unexpected situations in which our knee-jerk reaction to being offended is to offend; when our response to being hurt is to be hurtful.

The call to return no one evil for evil is a call to maintain some sense of perspective and proportion and moderation even—especially—when perspective and proportion and moderation are absent in the behavior of others.

It's harder than it seems—but it's worth the effort.

To quote Delbert McClinton:

“It's hard not to argue with a fool;
But it's wrong.”

Don't do it.

Spend your energy building up.

Support the weak. and Strengthen the fainthearted.

The biblical tradition which gave rise to Austin College and has informed our life through 173 years includes numerous calls to look out for the people who are having a hard time.

Those calls take different forms in different contexts, but what they all have in common is the claim that it is the responsibility of beloved, gifted, and capable people (like us) to be especially mindful of, and attentive toward, people who face difficulties. We believe we're called and intended to look out for the ones that no one else seems to be looking out for.

Honor all people.

This one's tricky.

It seems all pious and grand and correct.

But the call to "honor all people" makes little sense unless it includes honoring racists; and homophobes; and book-burners; and "free speech" advocates who pick fights and dishonor others as much as we honor those at the margins of our society.

Honoring all people means working earnestly to muster up some real compassion for the people who will cancel every vote you'll ever cast and work hard against all the things that matter most to you.

It doesn't mean knuckling under and letting them win. But it does mean not disparaging and devaluing those who disparage and devalue you.

The distinction between rejecting and condemning some behaviors and rejecting and condemning persons who perpetrate those behaviors is often tenuous and uncertain.

But when we remember and remind each other to "honor *all* people," we proclaim a universal value that transcends any particular situations or details. When we're at our best, we refrain from deciding which people really matter and which ones don't.

There are times when that's really unpleasant.

But we can't ever decide that some people are inherently more or less valuable than others.

To quote Willie Nelson:

"There ain't nothing worth saving except one another."

Your brain is probably having some “Yes, but...” thoughts now.

See if you can tame those for a minute and sit with this call to honor *all* people.

Love and Serve the World.

Think about what you can do for this planet and all who live on it.

Don't discouraged because you can't fix all if it.

But don't forget to do what you can for who you can.

Try to live as lightly and intentionally as you can on this fragile little orbiting rock.

I'm pretty sure one of the best ways you can love and serve the world is to reproduce moderately and intentionally.

Share what you have.

Although our particular circumstances might differ greatly, we recognize that every single member of this community is phenomenally gifted. By almost any economic, hygienic, or political measure, we are all among the most fortunate, most able, most blessed people who have ever lived.

None of us should feel guilty about that.

But, as we recognize and claim our giftedness, we do need to work hard to ensure that our giftedness—this amazing panorama of things to which we have access—is good news for everybody else.

The call to share what we have is a call to live generously.

Speak truth tenderly and lovingly.

We need to speak the truth.

We need to know what we're talking about and freely share what we know.

But we need to do that as gently as we can.

We can never be right enough to make all conflict go away.

We can't scold people into behaving like they should.

We need to remember that sometimes it's more important to be loving than to be right.

Clean up your own messes.

This is usually the most popular line of this benediction—especially among mothers of teenagers.

It's a call to live responsibly.

That might seem a little silly. But in a world of World Series sign stealing, religiously-inspired violence and hatred, unprovoked invasions, and lies about elections, the notion of cleaning up your own messes seems both relevant and revolutionary.

Own your choices and actions.

Take responsibility.

Fix what you break.

Step up.

Use the brains God gave you.

Unfortunately, there are some people out there who think that institutions like ours who embrace and proclaim our Church-relatedness, should somehow limit the range of inquiry and discussion that we encourage or allow.

But we know we need to think about all of it.

All the time.

In terms of discussion, nothing—no topic—should ever be out of bounds.

We encourage and embrace diversity and pluralism around here. And that's not in spite of our Church-Relatedness, it's because of it.

Because we're Church-Related (*Presbyterian*-related), we're for studying, and examining, and asking, and listening, and thinking, and even arguing.

The real world where we really live is full of opportunities to articulate authentic faith in a multi-faith context.

But to do that, we have to think and learn and not simply to recite truths we've inherited from others.

There's more to learn than we know so far.

We need to use the brains God gave us.

And I'm pretty sure that means being suspicious of anybody who spends a lot of energy trying to ban books.

Act like gifted and beloved people
because that really IS what you really ARE.

This is a call to be people who approach every situation with more concern about what we have to offer than what we deserve to get.

It is also a reminder to each member of this community that—whether or not you or anyone else in your life remembers or knows it—we know that you are gifted and beloved.

Right now.

Seriously.

Never doubt that.

We know.

And go with the full confidence
That the grace, mercy, and peace of Almighty God
ARE with us all;
Today; Tomorrow; And forever.
Seriously.
Amen.

This last part is a little bit of full disclosure.

Austin College was the Presbyterian Church's idea. And we're still a Church-Related college. We work hard to be sure that that relationship is good news for all our students—regardless of their religious affiliations or lack thereof.

And we hope that heritage informs our understanding of what an educated person looks like.

Our fervent and sincere hope is that, when you our graduates look in the mirror, you see what we see:

Someone who is beloved
and gifted
and capable.

That's what we've been working together to do these last four years.

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Last Friday night, the Sallie Majors Interns and I had a wonderful dinner at Sugarbacon's in McKinney.

There were a total of 8 of us (Cara Clark, Larissa Gamble, Jessica Hoffman, Lilly Pappas, Emma Rigler, Ti'Anna Smith, Linnea, and me), so we all rode together in my minivan.

We had a really good time.

As we drove back up Hwy. 75 after dinner, I noticed that some of the lights along the highway near the 1417 exit were blue.

I said something like, “Those blue lights look kind of cool. And it was like I shot 20,000 volts through the van.

Suddenly everybody was in this conversation.

I was driving so I didn’t see who said what, but as we drove into town, I heard the following:

“Maybe the blue is less difficult on the eyes of drivers.”

“I wonder if it’s a light pollution concern as Sherman grows.”

“I wonder if that was an aesthetic choice—just to make them look better.”

“I heard that they are supposed to be tinted orange, but couldn’t get the paint.”

“I think that’s a supply-chain issue.”

“That’s what it says on Google.”

Think about that:

Six seniors in the van—none of whom knew I was gonna bring up the blue lights by the highway.

I didn’t know until I saw them.

But, in a matter of seconds, we were all in the same conversation.

Some made observations about the blue lights and speculated about their origin. Because they were interested.

Some made interesting and educated guesses about what the reason for the blue lights might be. Because they were interested.

(By the way,
for decades I have maintained that one of the distinctive features
about all us Austin College people
is that we're really good guessers.
We don't know everything.
But we know a lot about a lot of things.
And, because we know a lot about a lot of things,
we are confident that we can learn more than we currently know.
And some of what we know gives us context
for making good guesses about things we don't know for sure.)

Others looked it up because they wanted to know.
Right then.
Because they were interested.

Others told us the correct answer because, in another context, they had already
looked it up.
Because they were interested.

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That's who we are.

That's what we do.

That's what the world needs:
People like you
who are interested in why things are the way they are;
who understand that you are beloved, gifted and capable
and seek to ensure that your giftedness is good news for others.

That's why those of us who come to work here every day get up in the morning
and do it.

It's good to be us.

Thanks.

Until September, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Sinfully Proud of the Class of 2022
and Eager to Meet the Class of 2026

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

P.S.—Here's the full Benediction with Bible references:

Therefore, Go out into the world and be people of peace.

Acts 16:36

Have courage.

Acts 27:25

Hold on tight to all that is good.

Romans 12:9

Return no one evil for evil.

Romans 12:17

Support the weak.

Acts 20:35

Strengthen the fainthearted.

1 Thessalonians 5:14

Honor all people.

Philippians 2:29

Love and serve the world.

John 3:16; Genesis 1:26, 28

Share what you have.

Luke 19:8

Speak truth tenderly and lovingly.

Isaiah 40:2; Ephesians 4:15

Clean up your own messes.

Luke 19:8

Use the brains God gave you.

Genesis 2:19

Act like gifted, beloved, capable, safe people.

Because that really IS what you really ARE.

1 John 3:1; 1 Peter 4:10; Genesis 2:19; Psalm 139:7-8; Romans 8:38-39

**And go with the full confidence
That the grace, mercy, and peace of Almighty God**

2 Corinthians 13:13
ARE with us all;
Today; Tomorrow; and Forever.
Seriously.
Amen.