

**Remarks to the Class of 2020**  
**First-Year Induction Ceremony, Transylvania University**  
**August 13, 2016**

Good morning. I am delighted to welcome all of you, parents and students of the class of 2020, to the beginning of this year's August Term. I want to congratulate you on your choice of Transylvania. For 237 years, we have been educating students to make their mark on the world. Today, with pride, we continue that tradition with you. We also want to give you a bit of a head start. You are here a few weeks before the upper classes arrive so you can become familiar with where things are and with the college staff who will matter to you; you will know the best times and places to find late night food and which shortcuts actually shorten journeys. And you will have a good sense of your professors' expectations before you start a full schedule of classes in September.

Still, if I were to hazard a guess, I would say that all of you, but especially we parents, are feeling more than a bit of anxiety. I will drop my second daughter off at college in a couple of weeks, and while I am supposed to be an "old hand" at the "letting go" thing, I am still full of anxiety and some sadness. I want her to learn the pleasure, the freedom, and responsibility that come with starting out on her own. But I also need to know and need her to know that she is not on her journey alone. Rest assured that your children are joining a community that cares. Now, we will not coddle. And we will not pamper. But we will do the very best we can to see that they have the chance to grow and even occasionally to fail in an environment designed to give them the understanding they need to make good choices.

I am sure, too, that many of you students have some of the same feelings as your parents. Today represents a major change, not only in your education but also in your daily life, your family life, your friendships, and just about all of your social networks. And I'll bet some of you are thinking to yourselves, "Why can't I just go home and keep things the way they were. What is the purpose of all this anyway?"

It is a great question, by the way. We hear so many competing stories about education and success that I think it is worthwhile to take a few minutes to reflect on what they all mean. Let me start with some words from Thomas Merton, who wrote in his autobiography, *The Seven Story Mountain*: “The logic of worldly success rests on a fallacy: the strange error that our perfection depends on the thoughts and opinions and applause of other men! A weird life it is, indeed, to be living always in somebody else’s imagination, as if that were the only place in which one could at last become real!”

Merton, I think, challenges each of us to become real through our own imaginations, rather than through the thoughts and opinions of others. He asks us to color the landscape of our inner lives, to develop a steady hand with which each of us can balance all our apprehension and ambition, disappointment and desire, inquiry and insight with resilience, ingenuity, and good cheer.

His assertion that the richness of our imagination determines the richness of our lives is echoed by American author Jim Mustich, who wrote, “We are born with five senses, and with them our task in life is to develop a sixth: sense of self, fashioned from reason, memory, and feeling, and from the content and context of our learning. That’s really what an education is: a shaping of the sense of self we carry with us as we discover, and develop, and finally, tell, the story of our lives.”

The early chapters of your life story are written. You might thank your parents and family before they leave today for their help with that. But continuing to write requires courage. It is easy to be who others want us to be. It is hard to be the author of our own self. It is harder still when you realize that all the delights and disappointments of your next chapters will be determined by the level of engagement you give to your courses, your teachers, and your peers over the next four years.

Nonetheless, through that engagement, the landscape of your imagination will take on a new vitality and you will begin to clarify the person you most want to be. You will develop a new, mature vision of yourself now and in the future. Out of this vision you will identify

goals to pursue and the moral convictions you will need to achieve them. And, if you accept the challenge of your courses and the guidance of your teachers, in four years you will be prepared to face all the grief and wonder, happiness and heartbreak, awe and mystery which will come your way, with grace, and strength, and poise, and love.

In a book called *Life of the Beloved*, Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen explores the difficulty of learning to be loved. Coming from loving families, this idea may sound strange, since you already know what it means to be loved. Being loved gives us the security that makes it possible to go about life with a sense that the world is not overwhelming or chaotic and that its vastness can be contained and managed. It gives us a sense of safety, of orderliness, and, most importantly, belonging. And when you don't have to worry about belonging, you are free to concentrate on the things you want to do.

Today you are in a room with new faces, starting new conversations, about to begin new routines, and your sense of belonging may be somewhat fragile, possibly even absent. You are being asked to leave behind familiar faces and conversations, a bedroom you just got comfortable in, and a way of living you have practiced almost to perfection. In the midst of this disorientation, however, you are not alone. Your family's love, soon to be distant, will not diminish. [It is okay to text your parents, by the way.] Neither will you be asked to surrender your past, replacing what you hold dear with an unknowable future. These new relationships that you develop with classmates, professors, work-study supervisors, university staff, and friends will be possible because they will build on what you have and know, and they will grow and ripen because you are entering into a new community where you will be beloved again.

And so, my hope for you is simple. This is your time to learn new things, to practice knowledge in the world, to discover, to imagine with other like-minded individuals, to know not only what the world is but also what it might become. Today Transylvania becomes your community of scholars and learners. This August Term you enter into a community that will supplement, deepen, and refine the love you bring with you. This alone won't make homesickness go away. But it should make you feel as if you can talk to

someone who can help you process those feelings, so that you can focus on the education you came here for.

Let me emphasize a lesson I hope you will internalize over the next four years. It is good to be focused on what you will do after college. It is better to focus on the type of person you will be. With the right package of knowledge, skills, and grit it is easy to get a job. But you are here for more. Our job is to help you find meaningful employment. But our mission is to help you make a meaningful life. And to do that, we will force you to reflect on questions of value and purpose. Together we will read and comment on, study and write about, question and transform the great books of world civilization. Together we will confront the contemporary scientific books and articles and experiments and technology that shape our daily lives and frame our future. Together we will go into the world and put knowledge into practice—helping those in need, managing the affairs of commerce and finance, and challenging the common sense of common sense. Mark Twain wrote, “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” Today you begin the long journey toward finding out why.

Your travels will not be easy. There will be bumps along the way. It requires effort on your part. But you are not alone. All that you bring with you—your past, your family, friends, and teachers—are with you. We are with you. We will teach you to read and write the world anew. Together in conversation and study we will discover what is good and what can be made better. Together in dialogue and debate we will try the patience and self-satisfaction of the already-made world around us. Together in community and reflection we will learn from each other, and in your time you will teach us. In the end you will call us alma mater, and we will be beloved one to the other.

Once more, I welcome you to your university; I welcome you to your company of scholars and learners; I welcome you to your home away from home. I urge you to seek, and to hear, and to choose to imagine a new future for yourself and for us all.

Let me conclude by starting the next chapter of your life story: "Once upon a time on a hot Saturday morning in Lexington, I began my college education at Transylvania University." What comes next is entirely up to you.

Have a great August Term. Have a great first year.