

Agnes Scott

Opening Convocation & Honors Day

Convocation Address

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President
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"The Power of Rethinking"

Good morning! It's my great pleasure to speak to you today at my third Opening Convocation and Honors Day. This ceremonial occasion brings us together to welcome new members of the Agnes Scott community, to recognize students for exceptional academic achievement and leadership and to celebrate the beginning of the academic year. At this exciting but stressful time of move-in, registration, last-minute changes to syllabi and last-minute trips to Target for things we forgot to bring back to school, it is good for us to gather in this special space that holds memories of so many decades of Agnes Scott history and reflect on our shared mission and aspirations.

But first, let's give our warmest Scottie welcome to all our newcomers. I would like to ask all of our new students – the class of 2012 and our Woodruff Scholars, transfer and international exchange students, as well as our post-bac/pre-med and M.A.T. students – to stand. Welcome to Agnes Scott! We are delighted to have you here. You hail from 25 states and 12 countries and I can already tell, from my conversations with you over the past few days, that you bring great talent, passion and enthusiasm to your new home. There are many outstanding merit scholars among you. I particularly want to recognize three:

- Our new Davis Scholar, Stacey Love from Kingston, Jamaica, a member of the first graduating class of the United World College in Costa Rica;
- Our new Goizueta Scholar, Susana Martinez from Buffalo, New York
- And our new Presidential Scholar, Andrea Love from Seattle, Wash.

To all of our new students: we look forward to all that you will bring to Agnes Scott as you embark on your journey across the "Oceans of Opportunity" that this community provides. Speaking of that orientation theme, "Oceans of Opportunity": since the class of 2012 is our new "blue" class I suppose we should not have been surprised that your arrival coincided with a break in Atlanta's drought! So, while I know the rain produced some uncomfortably soggy moments over the past few days, on behalf of all the plants and animals in our area, and those of us keeping an anxious eye on Atlanta's drinking water supply: thank you!

We are also delighted to welcome an exceptionally talented and diverse group of new faculty who will add so much to our curriculum and to the life of this college. Please stand so we can welcome you. And we are so excited about new staff members who are bringing their skill, enthusiasm and dedication to offices all across campus – can all of our new staff colleagues please stand? Welcome to the family! I want especially to welcome our new vice president for student life and dean of students, Donna Lee, to her first Opening Convocation. Dean Lee's wisdom, warmth and eloquence have already, in the few short weeks she has been on campus, endeared her to students, staff and faculty and we are thrilled to have her with us.

Our special motto for this year is "It Takes a Village." It takes the talents, initiative and dedication of people all across campus, whether cleaning the residence halls or answering the phones or teaching in the classroom or working in the library to make Agnes Scott College great. Nowhere is this more evident than during first-year orientation and move-in, when a veritable village of Scotties – Orientation Council, ASC 101 leaders, faculty advisers, student athletes, Alumnae Board and Parents Council members, staff from dining services, student life and academic affairs, and many others – welcome our new students and their families. I can't tell you the number of parents who came up to me this past weekend to praise your efforts and to say "This was so much better organized and friendlier than for our daughter's older sibling at University X or College Y – and believe me they named names! It made me so proud of Agnes Scott. So I would like to ask all of the staff, students and faculty who were involved in orientation activities to please stand so we can thank you.

Last but not least, I want to thank Amy Whitworth of the Office of the Dean of the College for organizing this convocation, Professor Cal Johnson for the beautiful music this morning and the anonymous faculty member who gave the lovely flowers in memory of a beloved member of our village who passed away this summer: Esther Ojo, a resource librarian here in McCain Library and wife of French professor Philip Ojo. With these beautiful flowers we all remember and honor Esther's beautiful spirit and all of the many ways she embodied Agnes Scott's mission in her gracious support of our students' research and learning.

My theme this morning is The Power of Rethinking. It is inspired by a new version of the Scottie dog logo that you will be seeing around campus this fall – a Scottie with a green ribbon and the words: grrrReduce, grrrReuse, grrrRecycle, grrrRethink. The logo was developed this summer by students, staff and faculty involved in our sustainability initiatives to help communicate key messages as we implement an ambitious single-stream recycling program that will enable us to recycle most of the waste we produce on campus. The first three words – reduce, reuse, recycle – will be familiar to most of you as an important and helpful "mantra" of the environmental movement. But I was most intrigued by the selection of the fourth: Rethink.

Thinking, after all, is at the heart of our college's mission. It's right there in our mission statement: we educate women (and a few good men, I like to add, to acknowledge our male M.A.T. and post-bac pre-med students) to think deeply, live honorably and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their times.

Fundamentally, the goal of a liberal education is to produce people who have the tools to think deeply and critically and to lead lives of purpose and consequence informed by that thinking. And thinking, despite the iconic image of Rodin's solitary, hunched over, muscle-bound Thinker, is something we do, and learn to do, together – through probing seminar discussions; in writing or research or performance that is shared, critiqued, revised and shared again; in late-night residence hall conversations when we bare our minds, hearts and souls; and in our many deliberations about how we as a college should move forward.

That's why we mean it when we say a liberal education is designed for lifelong learning – because it isn't simply a matter of mastering a particular skill that you then put into practice, although certainly we expect our students to master many new skills – but rather the acquisition of skills and capabilities that enable you to navigate new and unfamiliar territory. We want you to be able to think and rethink – to continually rethink the world and your place and role in it.

Rethinking is an especially apt concept for a woman's college because from the moment of our founding to the present day our very identity has been an invitation, even a provocation, to rethink: to rethink what women are capable of doing and ought to aspire to do, to rethink the inequities, whether overt or subtle, that continue to shape our judgments and expectations of women. I was struck by this thought when preparing my remarks on "living honorably" at the Honor Code signing ceremony for our new students last weekend. Agnes Scott College instituted a system of student self-government, including an honor code, in 1906, at a time when women in this country did not yet have the right to vote, when their right in the state of Georgia, once married, to own property and sign contracts in their own name was very newly won in principle and not always honored in practice, and when most professional and vocational paths remained more or less firmly closed to them. Talk about an invitation to rethink conventional wisdom! Even today, we learned from the results of a national study of women college graduates this past spring, the graduates of women's colleges have a 20 percent greater likelihood of earning a graduate degree than their sisters who graduate from coed liberal arts colleges. Here, we want to challenge and inspire you to rethink what you're capable of. Pursue a Ph.D.! Apply for a Rhodes Scholarship! Start your own non-profit organization! Become a CEO! Be a change agent, a culture shaper, in whatever organization or community you join!

Rethinking has certain key features – I want briefly to explore three of them. First, it crosses boundaries and challenges categories. I've already mentioned how a woman's college like Agnes Scott – through our curriculum as well as our very identity and everyday practice – invites us to rethink the boundaries and categories of gender.

But think, for instance, of how the disciplines of microbiology and animal behavior and psychology have challenged us to rethink what it means to be human. The genetic overlap between humans and chimpanzees, even between humans and mice, is a fascinating challenge to conventional wisdom about our species uniqueness. So is growing evidence of tool use in other animals (I recently learned that chimps in Senegal have started using spears). What are the boundaries – biological, intellectual, moral – that distinguish humans from other animals?

At a liberal arts college like Agnes Scott, we have the opportunity to continually rethink questions like these through diverse modes of inquiry, to draw on biology, psychology, theology, political science, philosophy, anthropology, art and through such interdisciplinary programs as neuroscience and human rights.

We have opportunities to rethink boundaries and categories in other ways as well. Consider the journey we have embarked on as a community, through our new strategic plan, to continually rethink what it means to "Live Honorably." That journey has already led us to cross and bridge boundaries in all sorts of interesting ways.

Just a year ago, at this very convocation, I announced that Agnes Scott would become a charter signatory of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. We have made amazing progress in the past twelve months in tackling questions of sustainability across campus – indeed a member of our national advisory board in an e-mail to me yesterday expressed "awe" at what had been accomplished. What made that possible was (and she will hate me for saying this) great leadership from our Director of Sustainability Susan Kidd – but just as important, the willingness of our community to cross boundaries and join together to rethink what we are doing. In that rethinking process, our facilities staff, students, faculty, trustees and distinguished alumnae are co-leaders and learners, breaking down some of the silos and hierarchies that too often prevent us from thinking and learning as deeply as we should. Similarly, our ongoing efforts, in a time of resource constraints, to make progress toward a living wage have challenged us to cross boundaries, to be more attentive to the voices and to honor the expertise of dining and facilities staff and to question conventional wisdom about wage markets. These are, and will continue to be, deep and sometimes uncomfortable and difficult conversations – but then that's what a commitment to rethinking often requires, a willingness to go beyond our comfort zones.

A second aspect of re-thinking is that it turns challenges into opportunities. The invention of one of my personal addictions provides a great illustration of this. I am talking about that astonishingly useful aide to living, the post-it note. The post-it note is the product of rethinking. In 1970, a man named Spencer Silver working at 3M laboratories was trying to come up with a new, strong adhesive. He failed miserably. Instead of coming up with a super-strong adhesive, he came up with a super-weak one, which stuck to objects but could easily be lifted off. He abandoned the project. Four years later, a 3M colleague who sang in a church choir and kept

losing the little slips of paper he put in his hymnal had a Eureka moment and remembered his buddy Spencer's super-weak adhesive. Presto! The post-it note was born. (Actually it took another six years.) What I especially like about the story is that it wasn't the original inventor but a colleague who had that Eureka moment – demonstrating how it does indeed take a village of rethinking people to turn challenges into opportunities.

The visionary environmentalist carpet manufacturer Ray Anderson of Interface has argued that we have to learn from nature and in his words "turn waste into food." We're doing that at Evans Dining Hall (I hasten to add that I am not speaking literally) by recycling the used grease into bio-diesel that fuels the CLIFF bus that runs by our campus and goes to Emory and North DeKalb Mall. We're doing that with our new single-stream recycling initiative and the award-winning printer cartridge recycling program launched by our IT department.

Or consider this: one of the most interesting new concepts emerging in the field of international relations and political science in recent years has been that of "soft power" – power based not on military force but on the force of persuasion and intercultural competence. "Soft power" has arisen in practice out of efforts to turn challenges into opportunities – to change the world when you don't have an army at your disposal to back you up. But what is fascinating is that as scholars and practitioners – including military strategists – have started exploring the concept they came to realize that "soft power" – or its lack – can and often does defeat "hard power." While it's probably fair to say that Russia's recent incursion into Georgia reminds us that "hard power" remains a force to be reckoned with, the challenges the U.S. military has faced in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate the profound limits of "hard power."

I mention the example of "soft power" because I think it illustrates not only how rethinking can produce surprising revelations about conventional wisdom, but because as Agnes Scott looks to the future, whether in considering as we develop our new Center for Women's Global Leadership what a small women's liberal arts college can contribute to a global dialogue about humanitarian issues that affect women, or whether we are trying to refine our strategies for competing in a crowded higher education marketplace, or seeking to make our everyday practices more efficient, we need to continually rethink how we turn our challenges into opportunities.

The third and final aspect of rethinking I want to explore is that it turns answers into questions (and vice versa). The reason the sustainability initiative added "rethink" to the mantra of "reduce, reuse, recycle" is that a vibrant intelligent approach to sustainability requires a continual willingness to question and critique our assumptions and actions. Finding the right balance between critique and commitment is one of the central goals of a liberal education, and what drives the effort to find that balance is rethinking.

I'm especially excited about a new program we are launching this Friday that invites us to turn answers into questions and questions into answers. Every Friday at 10 a.m., we'll have an opportunity to gather in the Julia Thompson Smith Chapel and hear brief reflections on core beliefs presented by diverse members of the Agnes Scott community – faculty, staff, students and alumnae from a wide array of traditions of faith and belief. This new program, modeled on the public radio program "This I Believe," is coordinated by Chaplain Kate and will, I think, be a wonderful opportunity for all of us to reflect on and rethink who we are and what we stand for, what differentiates and unites us, and to be inspired by the marvelous diverse and inclusive community that is Agnes Scott.

So, welcome back to a new academic year! I invite all of us, and especially our new students, faculty and staff, to join in the adventure of rethinking and to find ways together to cross boundaries, turn challenges into opportunities and continually seek the right balance between critique and commitment as we turn answers into questions and vice versa.

Finally: In case you haven't been within earshot of me since last Friday, let me mention that Agnes Scott got some terrific recognition in the national rankings we all love to hate, U.S. News & World Report. Agnes Scott was ranked #9 in a listing of "Schools to Watch" – schools identified by their peers as making promising and innovative changes. We are indeed a school to watch – and it is the power of rethinking that will keep us there.