

Agnes Scott

Opening Convocation & Honors Day

Convocation Address
Elizabeth Kiss
President
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"Discovering Hidden Worlds Above, Around and Within Us"

Good morning! It's my great pleasure to speak to you today at my fourth Opening Convocation and Honors Day. I confess that this moment has a special poignancy for me, since the class with which I entered—the class of 2010—officially begins its senior year today. I can't quite believe you will be graduating this spring! Watching a radiant and exuberant group of seniors at the Hub Sing last night reminded me just how quickly time has flown for you and for me over the past three years, yet also how rich and eventful those years have been.

As the first-years know, our summer reading book, *Einstein's Dreams*,¹ invites us to explore and rethink our relationship to time. Time flows in unusual ways in academic communities. In four short years a new generation arrives, "grows up" and leaves the nest. At the opening of every academic year—and especially on this special ceremonial occasion—we vividly experience our connection to both the future and the past. Welcoming our new students, we get a delicious taste of the future—in the words of this year's orientation theme, "The Future is Now!" Yet we also feel especially connected with the past—welcoming alumnae back to campus, participating in a ritual of academic pageantry that recalls our roots in medieval universities and taking time in our busy lives to pause, reflect on and celebrate Agnes Scott's enduring purpose and mission as an institution of higher learning.

First, though, let's give our warmest Scottie welcome to our future—the remarkable group of new students we are welcoming this fall. I would like to ask all of our new students—the class of 2013, our new Woodruff Scholars, transfer and international exchange students, post-bac pre-med and M.A.T. students—to stand. Welcome to Agnes Scott! We are so delighted to have you here. The class of 2013 is 240 strong, one of the largest first-year classes in the history of Agnes Scott. We are also welcoming 12 new Woodruff Scholars ranging in age from 24 to 50 and 18 transfer students from over a dozen institutions. Our new undergraduates are remarkably

¹ Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams* (Warner Books, 1994).

diverse, representing 33 states and 19 countries, with record numbers of international and Latina students.

This strength and diversity is also evident in our graduate programs. Our 21 post-bac pre-med students, one of the largest classes ever, range in age from 22 to 42 and include people with law degrees, masters in divinity and Ph.D.s in physics and in psychology. Our 26 M.A.T. students, the second largest class in the history of this program, range in age from 21 to 55 and come with a fascinating array of backgrounds, from teaching science in Jamaica to teaching English in Sweden to doing mathematical modeling for the NASA space station to being a massage therapist. We are excited about the talent and energy all of you are bringing to our campus!

Indeed, even on the first day of classes, that talent will be on display. I encourage all of you to join the class of 2013 this afternoon from 4:30 to 6:30 at The Dalton Gallery of the Dana Fine Arts Building to view and experience the beautiful pieces of poetry, art and film our first-year students have created in response to Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*.

We are also delighted to welcome a talented group of new faculty and staff who will add so much to our curriculum and to the life of this college. Please stand so we can welcome you to the family! I want especially to welcome our new vice president for college advancement, Rob Parker, to his first Opening Convocation and Honors Day. Rob's warm and thoughtful leadership style is already making its mark in the few short days he has been on campus. And he earned lots of points last night for participating with gusto in his first Hub Sing—and bringing his daughter Larkin, a high school senior, with him!

Many of you will remember that our motto last year was "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. This was particularly true in a year when Agnes Scott had to navigate significant budgetary challenges in the midst of an alarming global recession, where everyone's insights were needed to help inform tough budget decisions and everyone's commitment was essential to help us recruit a strong new class. Well, my motto for this year is "The Village Rocks!" We really pulled together and the results are obvious. And what a wonderful vote of confidence we received from our higher education peers, being ranked second among national liberal arts colleges as an "Up-and-Coming School" known for its innovation and 17th for our intense commitment to teaching. I am grateful to each and every one of you who made this possible through your dedicated teaching, mentoring, administrative leadership and support and generous financial contributions to the college. While I could ask everyone to stand and be recognized, I would like in particular for us to thank those involved in admissions and in 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, the registrar's office, international education, accounting and financial aid and many others—welcome and orient our new students and their families. Once again our families were effusive in their praise of the care that went into welcoming our new students. So I would like to ask all of the staff, students, faculty, alumnae and friends who were involved in admissions and 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 and Professor Cal Johnson for the beautiful music this morning.

Today, as students and faculty return to classes, the learning adventure at the heart of Agnes Scott College begins anew. We are excited about new additions to the curriculum this year, including environmental and sustainability studies, film and media studies and public health. All across our curriculum—the creative arts, humanities, social and natural sciences—we are about to set out anew on journeys of discovery.

Those journeys, and how they reveal hidden worlds above, around and within us, form my theme today. As Agnes Scott we affirm the enduring importance of a liberal education—an education that equips us to think critically, to ask questions fearlessly and creatively and to engage the world around us and one another in a spirit of curiosity, wonder and respect.

Often, in speaking to prospective students and their parents, I emphasize how a liberal education is the best preparation for professional success in the ever-changing social economic and technological environment of the 21st century. That is certainly, and very importantly, true. This morning, however, I'd like to focus less on the instrumental benefits of a liberal education and more on the intrinsic power, the pleasures and occasional terrors, of the learning process.

"Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."² So begins one of the most famous passages of western philosophy, the Conclusion to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, published in 1788. This happens to be one of my favorite philosophical sentences. Now I have to confess that part of the reason for this may be that so many of Kant's other sentences are so incredibly hard to decipher. Reading Kant gave me that experience, so important in college, of tackling a text or problem or challenge that at first you find utterly mind-boggling and think you will never, ever be able to understand or solve—in this case a text that you read and re-read till your brain hurts and you finally catch a tantalizing glimpse of some deep and powerful argument, some compelling insight, that changes your world. That was my experience with Kant. So in the midst of this hard-earned

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Lewis White Beck, trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 166.

admiration of his work, this particular sentence, so direct, elegant and moving, pierced my heart.

Kant goes on to elaborate on what happens when we reflect on "the starry heavens above" and "the moral law within." The former effort "broadens the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems and into the limitless times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their continuance." And this view of "a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature, which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came, the matter which is for a little time provided with vital force, we know not how."³

Whereas the latter—the effort to reflect often and steadily on the moral law within me—"begins at my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity but which is comprehensible only to the understanding." It "infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality." Indeed, Kant argues elsewhere that it is this recognition of our moral autonomy that gives us dignity, a value beyond price.

The starry heavens above me, the moral law within me—and, we might add, the infinitely fascinating social, biological and ecological world around me—our efforts to reflect on these do indeed fill our minds with admiration and awe. This is what liberal education is all about—this is the journey our new students are entering and what our graduates carry with them all their lives. What we discover on these journeys of discovery can surprise us. Sometimes—let's be honest—it frightens or threatens us.

This year, faculty all across the curriculum, from astronomy and chemistry to classics, philosophy, music and theatre, will be involved in Project Galileo, a commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the invention of the telescope by Galileo Galilei. Indeed, as Professor De Pree noted in an e-mail to the community yesterday, it was on August 25, 1609—400 years ago yesterday—that Galileo showed his first telescope to Venetian merchants and lawmakers. This launched for him a journey that led him to be called, by no less a figure than Einstein, the father of modern science.

You see, it is an interesting fact that Galileo didn't set out to become the father of modern science—did not set out to persuasively debunk the reigning understanding of the universe. He certainly didn't set out to challenge the church authorities and subject himself to condemnation and arrest. No, actually, he wanted to make some extra cash and saw a commercial opportunity in the telescope. He had three illegitimate children to support and wasn't happy with how his career was going. So he figured getting into the business of refining and selling these new-fangled optical contraptions would be a useful sideline.⁴

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ James Owen, "Galileo's Telescope at 400: Facts, Myths, More," *National Geographic News*, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/pf/33056056.html>. Accessed August 25, 2009.

But once he turned his newfangled instrument to the starry heavens above, Galileo was hooked. He wanted to make sense of the stunning new worlds that were revealed. What could explain these “small, fixed stars” near Jupiter, which appeared to change position and suddenly to disappear? He had observed Jupiter’s moons and discovered clear evidence that the universe was much bigger and more complicated than it was widely believed at the time. Everything didn’t revolve around the earth—around us. Those satellites were orbiting Jupiter itself, and we were orbiting the sun. Later, Galileo was also the first to realize that the Milky Way, which had long been an object of fascination in the night sky, was composed of millions of stars. While many people helped invent the telescope, it was Galileo’s painstaking observations of the starry heavens above that made him a pivotal figure in the Copernican Revolution that dramatically shifted our understanding of the universe and revealed what Kant eloquently described as “an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems” and our planet as “a mere speck in the universe.”

The life of Galileo is full of resonances for us today. He found fame and fortune, only to come into conflict with the church orthodoxy of his day. Put on trial, he was eventually placed under house arrest and died in isolation. His story dramatically captures how faith and learning can be pitted against one another, and how the liberated and curious mind can threaten those in power. It reminds us of how hard-won, fragile and vitally important is the affirmation, in the Reformed tradition that informs Agnes Scott College, of the compatibility of faith and learning and of the free exercise of mind as a God-given talent and responsibility. Centuries later, the playwright Bertolt Brecht found inspiration in Galileo for his efforts to explore the complexities of opposition to political repression, whether in the Soviet Union or here in the United States during the McCarthy era.

Yet as Brecht makes clear in his play *Galileo*—to be performed by Agnes Scott’s Blackfriars theatre troupe this fall—there is more to Galileo’s story than that. Did he cave under pressure and recant his views? Is he a paragon of moral and scientific courage in the face of oppression? The evidence is tantalizingly unclear, and Galileo’s story invites us to reflect on motivation, courage and the moral law within.

So just as we are called to discover and explore hidden worlds above and around us—in the stars, in our genes, in the laws of markets, in political institutions and social movements—so we are also called to discover inner space of our moral, spiritual, psychological and aesthetic selves. Kant believed that his explorations of the power and limits of reason and his assertions of moral autonomy constituted a second Copernican Revolution, which like the first threatened conventional powers but opened up liberating possibilities. In ways that Kant probably could not have imagined, his thought is linked to revolutions in psychology, ethics and politics. Indeed, one way of looking at all of the great civil rights movements of the past two centuries is that they lay claim to the dignity of inner space, asserting that blacks, women, gays and lesbians and others have inner lives as rich and complex, access to

moral laws and spiritual aspirations, desires for civic and moral autonomy, as deep as anyone else. But alongside our shared dignity are our shared imperfections. All of us, just like Galileo, are deeply imperfect creatures of mixed motivations and uncertain moral courage, and our imperfections are the rich stuff of literature, theology, drama and philosophy.

I am talking, then, about no small thing: Agnes Scott is committed to inviting and enabling you to discover hidden worlds above, around and within you.

As we begin our journeys of discovery this semester, I want to leave you with one last point. One of the reasons Kant's passage pierced my heart is that it is beautiful. It stopped me in my tracks, made me think deeply, to reflect on the big question of what it's all about. Let's face it, in this 24/7 Facebook, Google, Twitter, Blackberry, IM and cell-phone connected world, when all of us are madly multi-tasking, we find it harder and harder to take the time to connect to the hidden worlds above, around and within us. Yet it is that willingness to take the time for patient and steady reflection that leads us to discovery. The psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihály called it "flow" —the state of mindfulness when we are fully immersed in an activity, when time seems to stand still. Professor Hackett and others on this campus are engaged in an effort to explore the theme of mindfulness across the curriculum, in both western and non-western traditions. Chaplain Kate, in her sermon last Sunday, talked about taking time to feed your soul. Marisela Martinez, at the Unity Dessert, called on us to engage in active listening with one another, to recognize the richness of life experience and wisdom that every member of this community offers us if we are open to them. Whether it is immersing and losing yourself in music, dance, in a poem, in a math problem, in prayer or in conversation, I urge all of us to remember, as the year begins, to take the time to immerse ourselves in the journey of discovery and all the beauty and complexity it reveals. Have a wonderful year!