

On Hope: Speech written for the CAS 2025 All College Celebration  
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I've been thinking a lot about Hope lately, how to model it, how to encourage it in our students. But, I was not always a believer in the power of hope. I came into the discipline of political science during the Reagan era, focused on everything that was wrong in the world. I thought by understanding what was wrong I could contribute to making it right. It took me much too long to realize that focusing only on the negative is exhausting and leads to feelings of despair and powerlessness. Now, as I approach 60, I am quite certain that the best way to lead and inspire is to be our authentic selves through vulnerability, humility and openness to the transformations that happen through being in relationship with one another. To inspire, spark curiosity, and support students to grow into their authentic selves is the vocation of an educator.

If I look back to my own undergraduate learning it is not specific content that seems most important, though gaining knowledge and learning to think are both hallmarks of an education. What stands out are the people who inspired me, who encouraged curiosity, wonder, and wrestling with life's contradictions. I was fortunate to attend a small Catholic college where the core values of that faith were emphasized: dignity of the human person, solidarity with the most vulnerable, and prioritization of the least powerful. These core principles have driven my thinking and actions, but it took me a long time to develop confidence in myself.

I have been transformed during my years on the Bluff. Listening to Andrew Guest speak passionately about the liberal arts core and its importance to our goal of developing the whole person has been inspiring and helped me rethink my course objectives. The Engaged Humanities program, brilliantly conceived by Molly Hiro and Jen McDanel, has changed my entire approach to scholarship and allowed me to work with students on a different level. Having the sympathetic ear of Allie Stewart, Christi Hancock, Brad Franco, Tshombé Brown, Deana Julka, Brandy Daniels and so many others while navigating years of my daughter's mental health challenges has been a saving grace. Engaging in meaningful and respectful conversations with Fr. Charlie McCoy, Lt. Col. John Toll, my fourth-floor colleagues, and others, even when we disagree, shows that we are a family in support of each other. Being given the chance to build the

capacity for engaged, sustained, constructive dialogue by Provost Mengel is an opportunity to engage in Hope.

So what is Hope? In our MLK Day-On panel exploring Hope, I offered that Hope is a choice. It is an orientation to the world that we, as individuals, can choose. It is not a pollyannish naivete, but rather, it is the ability to imagine something better for ourselves and our world. Fr. Peter Walsh articulated that Hope “rather than being the thing that soothes us, is the thing that makes us uneasy with the way things are because we have a vision of where we really could be, and need to be, and want to be.” Itzel Cruz Megchun asserted, “do not let hope get lost when you are facing dualities, risks, uncertain things that will happen in your journey of life....you have to have faith as the anchor point of hope.”

From my own experiences, Hope is what keeps us from seeing all that is wrong in the world and falling into the dark hole of despair or, even worse, becoming cynics to the greater callings of justice and love. Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy* and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative states, “Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Hope allows us to push forward, even when the truth is distorted by the people in power. It allows us to stand when they tell us to sit down, and to speak when they say be quiet.” Hope matters because it is a necessary component in making the world a better place. Hope is fundamental to the education and preparation we provide our students.

But at its core Hope is not simple. It requires persistence, commitment and practice. Helping students build skills to engage respectfully, constructively, and thoughtfully is a commitment to Hope and a tool to affect change. In promoting constructive dialogues, the goal is not to confront people who spew nonsense or hatred or to allow them to belittle us. There is a line when it comes to dialogue. Rather, we are asking students to start getting more comfortable in talking to one another, sharing stories, figuring out how to work through disagreements, and beginning to understand those who might think or believe differently. I challenge our students to go into conversations, classrooms, and clubs without assumptions about their peers, to stretch themselves so that they engage beyond their own comfort level, and to give one another the benefit of the doubt so that trust may be built.

Understanding where other people are coming from, compassion, is the first step in building relationships, forgiveness is a key virtue in maintaining relationships, and relationship is the mechanism through which we can change hearts and minds. How we exist in the world and react to it are choices, regardless of our positionality, regardless of fairness, so I ask students *who do you want to be and how do you want to engage with the world?*

This past semester, I taught a Core “big ideas” course: *Democracy and Diversity, Politics in an Age of Fracture*. As one component, students completed a set of modules and discussions focused on learning to dialogue across difference. Rooted in psychology and developed by the Constructive Dialogue Institute, the Perspectives program helps students build skills to listen more deeply, ask questions to broaden understanding, and engage in storytelling as a way of building relationships.

In reflecting on the group discussions, one student stated:

This was a really memorable discussion for me because it was a chance where I got to listen to my group mates, empathize with them, and get to know their story better.

Another contributed:

I learned the importance of listening and understanding with an open mind the views, values, and perspectives of others. Trust is a big aspect of having a constructive dialogue and it is imperative that there is a mutual respect.... By listening to others with an open mind, we have an opportunity to shape and develop our own beliefs.

A third student reflected this way:

Sharing personal stories especially one having to do with topics we feel strongly about is more vulnerable because you never know what others are thinking about it. However, it is empowering sharing.

My perception is that many students are hesitant to share their ideas and stories for fear of what others might think of them or because they are anxious about being the focus of attention or because they are bombarded with messages on social media and hesitant to stand out. They, as we, are still developing their

beliefs, ideas, and identities and doing so in an environment where a small mistake can be blown up on social media into a widespread embarrassment.

In *Mind over Monsters*, Sarah Rose Cavanagh encourages educators to provide students with safe spaces in which they can be challenged. She quotes a colleague who asserts that life is a series of exposure therapies, and our classrooms need to be structured so that students not only learn, but also build skills and confidence. Students need spaces of what Cavanagh calls *compassionate challenge* so that they can try new ideas, make mistakes, be vulnerable, and confront their anxieties. Fostering constructive dialogue skills in the classroom is one way to compassionately challenge our students. Our world continues to change, and some of the major challenges of the past decade have left many weary, anxious, and, too often, despairing. So, we need to continue to adapt as an institution and meet our students where they are at, in all their complexity.

As an institution and as individuals, we already do many of these things well. I know this because of the students I engage with every day and those I have stayed in touch with over the years. Our graduates embody our Mission, especially to ethically engage with the world and respond to its needs. These include Justin who lobbied for reforms to the criminal justice system, and Lydia who defends the environment through the legal system, and Rick who helped protect immigrants as a JVC, and Josh who moved home to Guam to advocate for independence. I am so proud of our students, and we have played an important role in their development. I know it is cliché, but they are the future and this gives me Hope.

In this Jubilee Year of Hope in the Catholic Church, and with the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the University of Portland on the horizon, we are all called to be Beacons of Hope as we engage with an imperfect world. Hope Matters because it is the belief that love, equality, and justice will come to fruition because we will keep fighting until they do. How blessed are we to be in the position to support, inspire and model Hope for our students as they persevere through this beautiful, frustrating, and transformational experience called life.