Mount Aloysius is fairly unique in the ranks of higher education institutions in that we choose a theme each year and try to coordinate Orientation, the Connections courses, our Speakers Series and other events around that single idea. Our theme this year is a simple one, “The Good Life.”

The Greek word Eudaimonia is commonly interpreted as “happiness.” Its root words are significant—“eu” for “good” and “daimon” for “spirit.” When Aristotle, Epictetus and the Stoics began parsing this notion of eudaimonia they aligned it with Greek words for character (“ethike arête”), and argued that eudaimonia signified not just “happiness” but the “highest human good.” Socrates pursued perhaps the most extreme definition of the idea, arguing that “life is not worth living if the soul is ruined by wrongdoing.”

There is a long history of intellectual and moral thought on the idea, and we will be treated to a short course in it at our Fall Honors Lecture—“The Pursuit of Happiness: from Aristotle to Augustine” by Dr. Larry Jackson.

There is an American history to this idea as well. The Declaration of Independence gave us a signature definition of the good life as “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Whatever the intent in 1776, public policy discussions of the good life today tend to focus far more on metrics like “economic growth” and “average annual consumption” than on any values like happiness or the common good or even liberty.

Our youngest son Andy is the mean age of this class. When I told him I would be speaking to you today, he sent me an email all the way from Santiago. He says that for your generation “what you engage in and how you engage in it can be far more important than a profitable result or even success judged by someone else’s mark.” I think, with that sentiment, that he—and you, his “co-generationists” —are on the right mark. The key here and now is that you do engage. It is our hope for you that you will ultimately decide that finding meaning in what you do is the highest goal—a life full of meaning—rather than a search for a life full of happiness per se.

At this early time in our approach to the theme, it may be far easier for us to identify what isn’t The Good Life, and I won’t resist the temptation. It’s not fame, or wealth, or celebrity or even “celebritude” (which apparently means being famous “for all the wrong reasons”). In Mahatma Gandhi’s pursuit of peace, he identified a litany of pernicious, problematic and destructive traits that he viewed as the polar opposite of The Good Life. His Seven Social Sins included: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, science without humanity, knowledge without character, politics without principle, commerce without morality, and worship without sacrifice.
You will have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of these giants in your classes, through our Speaker Series and through an exercise next semester when we try to define The Good Life by decade—what was The Good Life in the 50’s, 60’s, right up to the ought’s. You will work with faculty and staff as we apply our own imaginings about happiness and culture, liberty and morality to this seminal question.

Two weekends ago, I saw the movie Groundhog Day, again, with Bill Murray in the lead role. It’s an entertaining morality play, as Murray fumbles his way through a succession of do-overs—during which he relives his Groundhog Day in our own Punxsutawney PA over and over again.

In the course of re-orchestrating this “day in his life,” Murray evolves from an egocentric jerk into a much more complete human being who appreciates the goodness of others and yearns to replicate it himself.

I am not sure we will get many chances to replay anything in our lives until we get it perfect. But there is still a lesson here about The Good Life at Mount Aloysius. You’ll learn the campus well in these next few months—where the birds chirp earliest in the morning, where to best capture the beautiful sunsets, where to find the quiet spaces. You’ll learn familiar faces—faculty, staff, administrators, fellow students; you’ll learn their unique stories as you share your own.

I do believe there is a metaphor in the movie for all of us this year; I think the real point is that when Murray got the chance to hit that reset button over and over, he ultimately realized that his path to The Good Life is through goodness in a moral sense, not goods in the material way.

Our oldest son Tom says that the lesson of Murray’s fable is that the more you give, the more you get. Part of the good life for each of us lies in our interactions with others and how much of our happiness we share. And maybe that is the calculus of happiness, a rationale well-known to ancient philosophers and familiar to founding fathers but distant to us as we speed ever faster into the future.

You have had several “resets” already—your orientation discussions of the Ten Golden Rules on Living the Good Life; your first Connections class introduction to the theme. Some of you will have a chance to peruse Pope Francis’ Ten Secrets to Happiness and Thomas Jefferson’s Ten Rules for a Good Life. All of you will hear Father Byron’s thoughts on the topic in just a few moments.

Well, we are going to let you hit that reset button each time we schedule an event that explores the idea of The Good Life. And it is up to us to take that discussion one step further, to plumb our own depths and find our way to if not true happiness, at least our own version of a good life and a meaningful existence.

So, again welcome to this 75th Convocation. Your journey to the good life begins.