



Mount Aloysius College
September 16, 2011
Inaugural Address
President Thomas P. Foley

On this magnificent day, when Mt Aloysius moves into its 159th year with its 13th President, let me begin with thanks. Thanks to the good Lord, for this lovely break in the rain and for this beautiful setting. Thanks to Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, whose example has touched five continents and these Southern Allegheny Mountains.

We are grateful to my predecessors here with us today--Jim Gallagher, who has never stopped believing in—or talking about--the promise of Mt Aloysius in the 30 years since he served as its President; and Sister Mary Ann Dillon, who delivered on so much of that promise in the 13 years of her Presidency.

We are grateful to all the Trustees past and present, to the retired staff and faculty, to our donors and supporters—all of whom believe so strongly in the mission of this College and in the promise of our graduates.

And we are grateful to the faculty and staff here with us—who display an almost fiduciary sense of responsibility about the enterprise we call Mt Aloysius, as they work every day to deliver on its promise.

I am also grateful to my teachers who are with us today, teachers in the classroom, on the field of play, and in life.

- My friends from college and the years just after, what Dean Celeste Branham still calls our “formative years”
- My law school crew, though I’m not sure what it says about me that there are more rugby teammates than law school classmates here today (actually, I know exactly what that says about my priorities in those days)
- My friends from Ireland and Northern Ireland, led by Freda and Charlie, who encouraged me to match intellect with a passion for justice
- The Washington crew that befriended Michele and I, led here today by our chairman Kevin Peterson, who might have invented the term “foxhole friend”
- Our Red Cross friends, who between them have responded to thousands of disasters from Katrina to Haiti, and from 58th and Kingsessing in Philadelphia to Baltimore’s waterfront.
- And to the men and women with whom Michele and I raised our sons in Hershey-- fast and first friends, “still crazy”, as Paul Simon put it, and together, “after all these years”

I am grateful to some of my teachers who are not with us here today—Miss Beck, who first noticed the sleepy towhead in the fifth row of her 60 second grade students; Father Cahill, who taught *Moby Dick* with such ferocity you would have thought he knew Ahab personally; Guido Calebresi, a legal genius with a knack for kinship; Vince Starzinger, Sister Margaret Vincent, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Herb James, David T. Horn, Freda Lyness, Ann McCann, Bob Cunningham, Tom Fee and a host of others.

One of my high school teachers who is with us today required us to read “The Education of Henry Adams”, where it says “A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops.” That says it all about so many of my teachers and, as I have come to know, so many of our faculty and staff here at Mt Aloysius.

And of course, right at top of the “gratitude” list on this day—the Sisters of Mercy who built Mt Aloysius, and who remain its inspiration.

In Mary C. Sullivan’s edition of The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, she opens her introduction with these four lines from Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney’s poem *Sunlight*:

*And here is love
Like a tinsmith’s
scoop
Sunk past its
gleam
In the meal bin*

It is 158 years since that love—“like a tinsmith’s scoop sunk past its gleam in the meal bin”—first showed itself in these Allegheny Mountains, at the very moment when seven Ireland-born Sisters of Mercy welcomed 22 young girls to what was then *Saint Aloysius Academy*.

There are only two Sisters of Mercy left on our faculty and staff, though there at least five others who show up almost daily as volunteers. On my first day, I had personal visits from seven different Sisters, and at the end of their visits each assured me that they would be praying for me. By the time Sister Benedict Joseph left my office, I really wondered what I had done to need all these prayers.

After that first day, I wrote these words about the Sisters of Mercy on a card that I keep at my desk. It says: “they make you not want to disappoint them because their own self-sacrifice is so evident.” Their own self-sacrifice is so evident. Thank you to all the Sisters of Mercy who are with us today. May I ask them to stand so that we can thank them properly for their life-long gifts of mercy, service, justice and hospitality?

Inaugural speeches are by definition a bit of a paradox—words of wisdom from someone who can't possibly know much because, by definition, we just got here—that's the whole idea of inauguration. But we are now college presidents, so we talk at length anyway!

Harvard's President Gilpin charitably called these speeches "expressions of hope unchastened by the rod of experience." Well, I have been on the job for a year (the board of trustees wanted to be absolutely sure they made the right decision!!), and I have felt at least a wee bit of what Professor Gilpin called the "rod of experience" on my backside. So please allow me to offer three observations on this fabulous day, and let me be so bold as to begin with the word hope.

First, at Mt Aloysius, our history is our hope. The story of this college, and of the women who literally dug it out of the side of these mountains, is, frankly, remarkable. Aristotle argued that courage is the first virtue, and these Sisters of Mercy—with birth names like Amelia Ihmsen, Emma Cosgrave, the two Marys, Farley and Shields, Mary Ann Dillon and Virginia Birchy-- showed plenty of courage—both moral and physical--through long dark 19th century winters, short tight 20th century budgets and even a great fire--108 years ago--that destroyed much of what they had built. If you know anything about the Mercys, you know that they didn't whine, they just rebuilt.

There is a toughness there that undergirds the deep spirituality, and both qualities are central to the history of this place. It is hard in this day to match the perseverance of these daughters of pilgrims and poets and potteen makers--pioneers and protagonists, scholars and scolders that they were, and are. But that history of strength and forbearance--of courage really—is your history--all the Mt. Aloysius students in our audience today. It is also your hope—which St. Paul said in his letter to the Hebrews, "is the anchor of the soul."

And it is the hope of all our faculty and staff that you will learn that history, that you will embrace it as part of your personal story. And perhaps having someday lived it a bit, you will understand the words of the poet Seamus Heaney in his meditation on justice, that "once in a lifetime, ...justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

So first, thank you for bringing us to a place so anchored in hope, and with such a sacred and profound history. We will do all we can to preserve and protect it.

Second, at Mt Aloysius, we welcome the new challenges for higher education. All the talk about higher education these days is about access and affordability, and I must tell you that Mt Aloysius has been on that trail for a very long time. You can literally say that concerns about access and affordability prompted the very foundation of this institution 158 years ago.

Affordability—when there are more than a hundred private colleges in this country charging over \$50,000 a year, a Mt Aloysius education remains just about half that sum—one of lowest sticker prices for private higher education in the entire state.

On Access, Mt Aloysius has always focused its programs of study on the needs of the people and the region—so we have a mix of full and part time, continuing ed and online *access* to 70 associate and bachelor degree programs—that's not a new response to public outcry and governmental criticism—it is how it has always been done here.

At Mt Aloysius, access and affordability have long been *keystones* in our edifice of higher education, around which the rest of the structure is built. And that concern will continue as will the College's frontal assault on a relatively new challenge to higher education, and that challenge is technology.

We live in an era when "MySpace" is already old space, where "email" is the new "snail mail," where the first association with the word "web" is not "spider", and where a foreign government—Egypt's, entrenched for 40 years—can be toppled by a thousand protesters armed with smart phones, Facebook accounts and a common cause. The keyboard—faster than the pen and still mightier than the sword. My goodness, if Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest country in the world.

Technology has allowed us to redefine ourselves in much more than simply a nationalistic sense. Bonds of friendship, commonality, and cause are forged, tested, and strengthened instantaneously across oceans and often without an in-person encounter. And make no mistake, these developments in the technology of communications are like tectonic shifts under the very ground on which higher education rests—as NYU President John Sexton put it, "on the fields of knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination."

In higher education today, we all come late to the party, trying to keep pace with developments we couldn't even imagine—not just a generation ago—how about a year ago. I saw a video recently of a Good Samaritan somewhere in the Third World building a well by following the directions on his IPAD mounted on a dirt pile next to him. I saw a movie last month in Altoona where a teenager dialed up his blackberry to figure out how to pick a lock. The ripple effects of all these examples of "higher" education— how to peacefully overthrow a government, how to pick a lock, how to build a well--are not unrelated to what we do on this campus every day and are directly related to what we must do to prepare our students for when they leave this campus.

I want to ask each of you to think about the last time you went to the hospital. Did you see anyone carrying a chart or putting one in a slot at the bottom of your bed? Probably not, because as soon as the doctor or the nurse or the surg tech or the medical assistant finished treating you, they turned around to a laptop device mounted on the wall in your room or the hallway, and recorded their comments through a software program that will share them hospital-wide and add them instantly to your permanent record. Welcome to the 21st century in the hospital and at Mt Aloysius. And that particular transition—from unreadable doctor prose to legible, transparent, instantly messengered diagnoses and treatment plans—happened like that (snaps fingers).

Did you know that the majority of the jobs that will be filled by today's elementary school students don't even exist today? How will those kids or our students prepare for such change? Whether they are going to work in a manufacturing plant like the McLanahan Corporation, take over as warden at the federal prison in Cresson, run the nursing division at Somerset Hospital, or serve as rehab specialist at the Hiram G. Andrews Center, our graduates will have to "know how to know," as former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich puts it; their experience at Mt Aloysius must be the lynchpin for lifelong learning—so they can keep pace in their first professions, and prepare for whole new ones.

Today, we can order up a syllabus from MIT or Misericordia simply by going on line. And it's free. It's never been our way here at Mt Aloysius to have classes with even more than 30 students, and we average 14. But the days of 100-student classes, and droning lectures in halls with 300 pre-med majors are over. At Mt Aloysius, we already offer hybrid classes where students can pause, fast forward or even re-watch parts of lectures on our "smart boards" and we are already teaching continuing ed classes where you can interact at the speed of twitter with 10 other students—everyone can comment and see others comments much faster than if they were taking turns speaking out loud. Our son Matt's MBA class here is engaged in a semester long project with a group of architects in Quito, Ecuador--through the magic of Skype.

Are we up to the technology challenge at Mt Aloysius? You bet we are. We have more simulation labs and more high tech robot-ikins than any nursing school from State College all the way to Pittsburgh. 61% of all our classrooms are wired with the latest smart technology. YouTube is already old hat at Mt Aloysius, where word-heavy public reports are quickly converted into readable on-line magazines, complete with shimmering visuals, feedback functions and handy links for "deep divers." We just christened a new Technology Council whose mission is to keep us on top of all the implications of these new technologies for pedagogy, for internal and external communications, for recruitment and advancement strategies. And we are about to open our own Social Media Lab in the basement of a 110 year old building—I love the irony--so that our students and our faculty have the newest education tools on the market.

At Mt Aloysius, we have long produced graduates who are both job-ready and community-ready. Now, we need them to be technology-ready—to be as fluent in the new technologies of communications and education as they are in community service and service learning, in physical therapy and secondary education, in biology and criminology, in radiation science and political science.

So now we are adding a third leg to what I call the Mt Aloysius Compact. We will produce graduates who are not just job-ready, not just prepared to engage in community, but we will produce graduates who are technology-ready as well, because that is the only way to fulfill the promise behind the founding of this institution—to respond to the needs of the people and of the region. The Mt Aloysius Compact—job-ready, community-ready and technology-ready.

One caveat in all this brave new world of technology. Nobelist and philosopher Bertrand Russell warned that if we never spend time alone with our thoughts, we will never have thoughts of our own. There is a little bit of that danger lurking in the 24/7 nature of these new communication devices—anyone out there have children who never turn off their iPhones or send more than 50 twitter messages a day--actually that would be the majority of us.

Well, character is rarely formed in crowds and values don't just arrive all by their lonesome--not when you are instant messaging thirteen people simultaneously. Character and values, the backbone of any society, are generally thought to form and reform--to emerge, if you will--after periods of relative solitude, with the distance that occurs between a transformative event or thought or conversation and the revelation of its meaning for our lives. And that brings me to my final observation.

Third, at Mt Aloysius, we embrace the idea that the formation of personal values is a key part of any education. The College website is filled with examples in practice of the core values of the Mercys—mercy and justice, service and hospitality. Every student, every team, every club, every student organization performs community service while here—it’s written into their charters and into their class assignments, and we think most of them make it a habit when they leave here.

And as we work to ensure that our students are 21st century capable, that they are tech-fluent, that they “get it” about the importance of lifelong learning, we must not lose sight of those qualities that have distinguished our graduates in the workplace and in the community for a century—their qualities of empathy and compassion, their habits of civic engagement and civil discourse and their capacity for genuine human interaction.

Whether it’s at the hospital, in the classroom or on the shop floor, we want our graduates to use their heads *and* their hearts as they move through life, in effect “to synthesize faith with learning,” “to develop competence with compassion,” and “to put their gifts at the service of others” as it says in our mission statement. At the end of the day, our aspiration is that the Mt Aloysius nurse is the one you hope is on duty when your child goes for treatment. Our aspiration is that the Mt Aloysius prison warden is the one who started the parenting program for the incarcerated. Our aspiration is that the Mt Aloysius lawyer is the one who does *pro bono* work because she wants to, not because she has to. And it is our aspiration that our graduates always seek to understand what it is like to be in the shoes of the person on the other end of that care or transaction, at that all too human intersection where wants and needs meet help and hope.

Speaking of intersections, we stand at an especially painful one this week—the 10th anniversary of 9/11. In an act of heroism that American Presidents last weekend compared to Gettysburg and the Alamo, the Americans on Flight 93—riding in the skies just Johnstown—made a decision to sacrifice their own lives in order to save thousands of others. Those forty patriots came from very different backgrounds, different religions, they had different political beliefs, some very different ideas—but when they said “let’s roll”, they were as one—with each other and for their country. Yet, ten years later, at this point in our national history, we are often bombarded via the airwaves and by daily blogs with diatribes that portray those who have different ideas as lacking all redeeming virtues.

In a spring address to the College, I quoted our President’s challenge to the nation in January after the tragic events in Tucson, where six people were shot to death for spending a few minutes at a “Congress on the Corner” event. The President called on Americans to

“expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.”

Especially at Mt Aloysius, where we think the development of values has a place in the curriculum, we believe that education also has a role to play in the march to a more civil society. Critical thinking, the ability to listen, to analyze, to form ideas and to communicate them—these are all skills fundamental to both education and democracy. And for many, Mt Aloysius is where we learn these skills,

- By providing a safe, respectful environment that allows for opinions to be shared
- By creating an atmosphere where the holder of an opinion can feel safe
- By teaching critical thinking skills in classes as distinct as cross sectional anatomy and CLS, imaging principles and American History
- By encouraging the dispassionate consideration of complex issues
- By, in effect, giving students a nurturing environment to test their democratic skills.

Mt Aloysius College can be an incubator for democracy where all the skills are taught, all the behaviors are modeled so that when students become “citizens,” they will have the tools needed to make democracy work. In the end, this notion of citizenship is a question of values, American values, where we listen respectfully, even while we wait for our turn to disagree with vigor.

And that too is part of the Mt Aloysius promise—to produce job-ready, community-ready, technology-ready *citizens* of the greatest experiment in democracy in the history of the planet.

I started off talking about gratitude and need to finish there--one more acknowledgment. I am here today because of the lifelong support of my family—my wife Michele, who is proof positive that home is where the heart is; our three sons--Tom, Matt and Andy—the greatest joy of our lives and from whom Michele and I learn every day; my father who passed away five years yesterday; my 11 sisters and brothers; and my mother. My mother--who somehow managed to get a very good seat--is a great listener. I guess you have to be with 12 kids--and I believe that gift is the most important contribution that she passed on to us. I also think that is why she still has the girlfriends she started with 70 years ago.

My parents grew up under circumstances where college just wasn't in the cards and none of our grandparents had much chance at formal education. That is a very familiar story at Mt Aloysius. But there are 11 Foleys over there sitting amongst the fifty colleges officially represented here today. I don't think there is an athletic award given out in our small town that one of my brothers and sisters didn't win at least once, and literally dozens and dozens of other awards in high school and college. But I don't think any picture would make our parents happier than to see them all dressed in those robes today.

Some of them never got to their own graduation ceremony, because like some of our students at Mt Aloysius (and even some of our faculty and staff), they had to get back to their day jobs. Some of them started out in Community College, like some of our students at Mt Aloysius, or took more than the standard four years to get through. And not all the Foleys were “A” students either, because they had to balance their part time jobs with their full time books. But my brothers and sisters “never quit trying and they never tried quitting,” as the song says--in school or in life—and I think our Dad was most proud of them for that quality.

Our parents always put education at the top of the list for us, and the most prominent place in my mother's house is still reserved, not for the trophies but for the diplomas. Michele and I always believed that each of our sons has his own special talents, and that is something that we believe fervently at Mt Aloysius—about each and every one of our students.

So we end this speech as Michele and I began our journey at Mt Aloysius--with gratitude. Let me thank all of you for the parts you played in bringing us here. *I will do all in my power to advance the mission and the promise of Mount Aloysius College.*

Thank you.