

Inauguration of Mary Dana Hinton  
Hollins University  
April 22, 2022

## Leading with Courage and Grace

Trustees, faculty, staff, students, honored guests, it is a joy to celebrate with you this morning. The inauguration of Mary Dana Hinton as the 13th president of Hollins University is a momentous day for this campus and for all of higher education.

Hollins has a storied history of devotion to the intellectual progress of women and a commitment to creativity, self-expression, and problem solving. These are hallmarks of its unique and special character. But it is also part of several networks and association, including the Council of Independent Colleges where it is one of more than 675 sister institutions here in this country and abroad—each devoted to student-centered, relationship-driven, liberal arts education. Together, we educate more than two million students every year. We educate them one by one on 675 unique campuses, each with unique cultures, and missions. Individually we may be small, but collectively we are a mighty part of the broader higher education ecosystem and a boon to the cultural, political, and economic success of this country and the world.

Hollins is a special example of why our sector matters. Beyond degrees and career preparation, a Hollins education aims at the spirit. Here students are helped to see that their insights, their words, and their actions matter. Hollins cultivates habits of mind such as humility, consistency, compassion, and respect.

These habits grow best in communities of care-- where you are known and challenged, and pushed, and loved. Communities where learning occurs amidst relationships and togetherness. Communities where your assumptions are tested, your failures are noted, and your successes celebrated. Communities where everyone has a seat at the table – a table where differences abound yet the commitment to remaining in dialogue is firm. Hollins is this kind of community. And each of you here has participated in the hard work required to build and sustain it.

The past two years – a time of pandemic, racial reckoning, truth decay, and economic uncertainty, and war—have highlighted the challenges universities like Hollins face. But these past few years are only part of the story. Humanity is in the midst of great cultural and historic change as we adapt to revolutionary developments in technology, as we strive to make the promises of democracy and economic growth truly available to a diverse citizenry, and as we grapple with the fragility of our planet and its life-sustaining ecosystem.

The liberal arts universities that thrive will be the ones that tackle these competing pressures head on--the ones that protect and expand student-centered learning grounded in free inquiry and responsive to a diverse population of democratic citizens; the ones that understand the changing nature of work and public life; the ones that build a culture of inclusive excellence, and find real solutions to affordability and access.

The work ahead will not be easy. We will need leaders who, like Mary, can lead us with courage and grace.

We are used to seeking out courage in our leaders, but we often miss the mark. We confuse it with recklessness or arrogance and so we wind up with leaders who talk a big game but aren't willing to put themselves on the line. The leaders that embody real courage are the ones who not only speak truth but listen to it. They are the ones who stand up when called and sit down when the waters don't need stirring. They lead on behalf of principles and persons. Courageous doesn't mean fearless. There is no need for courage if the stakes aren't high and the risks aren't real.

Mary's courageous leadership has already made an impact on Hollins and higher education. I marvel too at her grace.

We are less used to seeking out gracefulness in our leaders. Perhaps this is because when we think of 'grace' we sometimes reduce it to merely a type of style. The word does refer to elegance, refinement, and a kind of feminine ability to make ordinary actions into things of beauty. Gracefulness was the special charm of the three graces, those sister goddesses of Greek mythology: Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia. In song and art there they are, lovely women busy dancing and helping Aphrodite emerge from a clamshell. Like most of the women represented in Western art, they are usually painted by men, shown nude, and sporting whatever embodied form was most attractive to the artist's male audience at the time.

There is nothing wrong with gracefulness as an aesthetic style but it is hard to see these painted ladies as models of leadership until we wrest them out of these patriarchal portraits and see in them a way of transforming ho hum dailyness into something special and maybe even holy. When we look at these Graces in their full glory, we see their real virtues. Virtues that draw on feminine energy to wield power and thereby make positive change. What does grace encourage us to

do? To *grace a situation with our presence* and thereby confer honor on its actors. To provide a *period of grace* in which others can fix something or make it right without fear of punishment. To *say grace* and in so doing, to lift up words of appreciation for even the most ordinary of meals and gifts.

The graceful leader shines her light on the things that matter. She makes a space for others to shine, to make good, and to make a gift of themselves. Everyone has a place at her table. She finds the best in us and she inspires us to give each other the benefit of the doubt and to give others more than they are strictly due. Her beauty comes from her actions as she offers grace to others and teaches us to both offer and receive it.

As with courage, grace is desperately needed on our campuses and in our larger world. How fortunate we are to have Mary as our model and our friend.

You have my deepest personal congratulations and the warm wishes of the full membership of the Council of Independent Colleges. I was touched to learn that your college motto is “Levavi Oculos” (Lift your eyes”) from the 121<sup>st</sup> psalm. I end with these beautiful words and blessings in honor of Mary, her family, and the entire Hollins community.

אָשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יָבֹא עֲזָרִי:

עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שְׂמִים וְאָרֶץ:

I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?  
My help is from Adonai, the Maker of heaven and Earth.

*May the sun befriend you in the daytime and the moon at night. May you be guarded from all evil. May you be protected in your going out and your coming in –today and every day.*