



INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF MARY DANA HINTON, 13TH PRESIDENT OF HOLLINS UNIVERSITY

April 22, 2022

Good morning to family and friends; students and colleagues. To those who are with us in person and those who are joining from far away, I greet you with love and joy. Thank you for sharing this incredible day with me.

It is, indeed, an incredible honor to be with you today. This moment would not, could not, have happened without the work of many hands. I extend my most heartfelt thanks to all who contributed to this day. Thank you to the Board of Trustees who insisted this day was needed and possible and a special thank you to our Board Chair Alex Trower. Thank you to the Hollins faculty and staff who are here to share this moment, as we have shared so many moments. I see you and am grateful for you. To the Hollins students, you always show up in magnificent fashion. You are amazing. Thank you for making me the proudest president in the world. I am so grateful to my presidential colleagues who made time for this event on this day. To my CSB cabinet and colleagues who raised me as a president, thank you all for being here for me.

To my Hollins cabinet and Betsy Cossaboon, who have taken my hand and lead with me today, words cannot describe my gratitude to you. Your compassion and care for this place brings me to tears. To everyone who has shared a word or a song, I thank you for speaking to my spirit. Marjorie, you have shared many gifts, friend, the greatest of which comes from Esther 4:14. I will return to that shortly.

Thank you to the inauguration committee who all worked tirelessly to create a special day and who were patient with me at my most recalcitrant. I want to ask you to join me in thanking Sheyonn Baker and Megan Canfield, the extraordinary planners behind every good thing today. Thank you to my sisters, cousins, family, and friends who traveled from near and far to celebrate. A special thank you to Robert, Hallela, Hillel, and Hosanna. Without them, there is no President Hinton. Without them, there is no me. Love you.

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Friends, as we embrace this space, this moment that we are about to share, I have but one request—open your heart, be truly present and mindful in this moment. Do not just hear my words but allow our souls to connect. And whether it's the air, moon, wind, and sea that calls you; whether it's one of the many names of God, whether it is what rests in you alone, I ask you to summon that thing which breaks open your spirit. Allow it to work within you as I speak. Because without that connection, without that acceptance of who we are as we are, the words become meaningless. Please open your hearts with me.

IMAGINATION

As I prepared for this day, I spent a great deal of time thinking about imagination. What does it mean? How does the imagination differ from my propensity to say, “What if?” How does it inform our shared dreams and aspirations? Why has my soul been proclaiming this word so loudly, intently, and insistently since I arrived at Hollins? Why is the world of the imagination beckoning me now?

To be clear, I know what imagination means. The dictionary defines it as: “the faculty or action of forming new ideas, images, or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.” It is “the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful.” While these definitions are technically correct, they only begin to brush against the intense calling toward imagination that I have been feeling. A calling I have been aware of my whole life. A calling that is a rekindled flame in my soul.

IMAGINATION IS CONSCIOUS WORK. INTIMATE WORK. DRAINING WORK. VULNERABLE WORK. WORK THAT CAN LEAD TO BEAUTIFUL THINGS LIKE TODAY; MY MOTHER WOULD HAVE LOVED THIS DAY.

I began fueling my imagination when I was young. The imaginings borne in poverty are big and bold. Indeed, as Wendell Berry said, “You have to be able to imagine lives that aren’t yours...” This is what you do when faced with equal parts poverty and ambition. Imagination is kindled in unsuspecting moments, quiet places, and deep rituals.

You see, my imagination was born in the dust mites of Saturday morning rug cleanings that Natasha Trethewey spoke of. My imagination was born in my mother’s big, strong hands and brilliant mind. Hands which she often seemed embarrassed about, but hands that nurtured her children and many lives beyond. A brilliance unwanted and unrecognized by a world cast against her. Hands and a mind that far exceeded what the world imagined for her.

My imagination was also born in my father, who imagined me, someone he called pumpkin, attending a university. Though he was born only a few decades after enslavement ended, he imagined his daughters going to college and doing many incredible things. He prayed for that for us.

My imagination was born in the gracious home of the Cooper family. A family whose copper pots reflected my mother’s face but whose big hearts and radical kindness shifted the trajectory of my life by providing the resources and support to allow my imagination to breathe.

My imagination was born in a kitchen with Laurie Heatherington, my undergraduate advisor, who is with me today. Laurie encouraged me to just be me in a world that seemed to want me to be someone else. It was born in a rocking chair with Sr. Jean Messaros and the Sisters of Mercy. It was born in the conversation of the Dominican Sisters. It was nurtured and stoked and encouraged and deeply loved by the Benedictine Sisters in Saint Joseph, Minnesota. It swam in the fount of Sacred Heart Chapel.

You see, robust imagination is not just the territory of children; it is not the stuff of make-believe. Imagination is the innermost, profound work of thinking about life through an unexplored lens. Of looking at one’s circumstances and being able to conceive something different. Often something more.

Imagination is conscious work. Intimate work. Draining work. Vulnerable work. Work that can lead to beautiful things like today; my mother would have loved this day. Work that can lead to grievous disappointment

when left unsupported and unrealized. All too often, imaginings are left unexplored, not due to any failure of the beholder, but due to a society set up to question, deny, and defer the imagination.

And yet. And yet, I stand before you today, not because I am smarter than others or better than others. I stand before you today because I had the great good fortune of being able to receive an education that unleashed my imagination. My will for that education was a result of imagining something different. I imagined freedom; I imagined opportunity; I imagined unconditional love. And it was a liberal arts education that unlocked those imaginings for me. To me, the examination and manifestation of imaginings is what education is all about. So let us imagine a community of learning.

IMAGINE LEARNING/LIBERAL ARTS

As I mentioned, I have had a visceral urgency around imagination that has intensified here at Hollins; an urgency to think about, talk about, observe, and foster imagining. Perhaps I should describe it as a longing. It is a longing that wraps itself around my deep and abiding love of the liberal arts even as it causes me to examine that beloved way of learning and way of life.

It is within this academic community, at the intersection of imagination and the liberal arts, I also began to ponder the moral imagination. There are many definitions of moral imagination, but one could pose that it is the creative energy and effort to understand or visualize the struggle of another and to then harness the effort to bring to fruition the needs or imaginings of another. I would probably simplify it even further - perhaps too far - by saying it is seeing, valuing, and supporting the human potential of another. And if you permit me to take one more simplifying step, I will argue that liberal arts education is the work - the action if you will - of the moral imagination.

Before you email me, let me tell you that I know that this is not how the liberal arts are generally defined. That some want to return to the trivium and quadrivium and say that that is the authentic liberal arts. That the liberal arts are for those who breathe the most rarefied of air. That to examine the big questions of life should be left to those for whom it is their legacy. I have heard too many people say "today's students" - students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, questioning students, and, once upon time, women - are better suited for professional training or vocational training.

I would argue that limiting learning and circumscribing how we think about education and who has access to it is a failure of imagination. That to shroud oneself in exclusion in the name of the liberal arts is to fundamentally misunderstand and misappropriate that very thing we claim to love.

The liberal arts are for those whose minds imagine freedom, who imagine something different, who imagine something more. A liberal arts education is a call to imagine for the sake of creating and transforming. Creating and transforming self, creating and transforming community, and creating and transforming the world around us.

You see, it is the wandering imagination that discerns cures for disease. It is the wondering imagination that asks how we can reimagine learning and truly democratize excellent education. It is the unwavering imagination

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that chooses to break down barriers and develop structures of access and success. It is the willful imagination that refuses to be yoked to the past and courageously sojourns forward toward a future it determines for itself. A future wherein all can, and will, have access to education.

So, when I ask this community—the Hollins community—to imagine with me, I am asking that we do the work of liberal arts education creatively, with multiple perspectives at play, always centering the human experience of all those we encounter. I am asking that you believe that the essence of the liberal arts - the freeing of minds - also demands the freeing and nurturing of imagination. Not only our students' imaginations, but the imagination of each of us, unconstrained by title or by task.

In fact, this notion of imagination is, in many ways, baked into the very fabric of Hollins. Our motto, Levavi Oculos, is a reflection on the power of imagination. Levavi Oculos, which means lift up thine eyes, implies that there is something more to guide you. That the action of simply looking for that more will yield results. That it will free our imagination.

In the first year of my presidency, Hollins faculty and staff embarked on an effort rooted in our imagination. While the goal of the Imagination Campaign is to identify mission-aligned, revenue generating, culture building projects, the great joy of the Imagination Campaign for me is that it is an intentional effort of collective imagination. It held no barriers to participation. Rather, it demonstrated the power and importance of learning, thinking, and creating a vision together as a community. Even more, the Imagination Campaign allowed us—by bringing our full selves to the effort—to be cocreators of our future.

When I ask this community—the Hollins community—to imagine with me, I ask that we live into our institutional calling. To imagine more. To trust that the very act of lifting our eyes along with wandering, wondering, unwavering, and willful imaginations will yield the very best of the liberal arts. While this is essential, let us not pretend it will be easy.

IMAGINE JUSTICE AND JOY

You see, even as we begin to imagine, we begin to experience the burden of imagination. And it can be a burden not only because it runs the risk of disappointment, which it does, but because an imagination demands that you encounter ideas, people, places, and difficulties that may have heretofore been unexplored.

For example, the year I was born, Hollins graduated its first Black student, Cecelia Long. A woman with whom I am honored to share the stage today. I do not know that she imagined this moment when she was a young woman driving through the gates of Hollins. When I hear the stories of her contemporaries, women like Cynthia and Salome, I know that my standing before you may have felt unimaginable, perhaps even impossible. It may even have felt very unlikely to more recent alums like Antoinette, Savon, and others.

To be honest, I don't know that in the narrow passages of my life in Kittrell, North Carolina, that I imagined this moment either. Perhaps Cecelia and I share an instinct. We both dared to imagine something, not recognizing the path that those initial glimmers would set us on, nor the toll that imagining could take. You see, sometimes the price for imagining is success. And that success means being the first. I know what it is to feel

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the burden of being the unimaginable first. The burden of being doubted. The burden of being perceived as less than. The burden of the call to be more. The burden of a world telling you—you are not enough.

So, under the weight of imagination and burden, how did we get to this day? It was active work toward justice and equity that allowed us to arrive here. It was opening education to all and demanding equal access. It was the tireless work of imagination. And justice and equity remain constitutive to the work ahead for us at Hollins. This is the just call of education and democracy. At Hollins, we must ensure every student, every student, every student, has the opportunity to be successful. We must rebuke the perpetuation of inequity. This is the exhausting work of imagination; the justice work of imagination; the joyful work of imagination.

You see, when I hug a student and offer encouragement, or see tears in the eyes of an alumna I encounter on the loop, I find a powerful reminder of the joy one can feel when one answers the call and imaginings are realized. In addition to the burden, there is also joy in being first; there is joy in supporting others because you and they are, in fact, enough; there is joy in taking those initial steps despite so many more steps ahead. So, know that the work of imagination which includes the work of justice, is fraught. But it is also joyful. Hollins must do this joyful work.

I mentioned earlier that Marjorie's great gift to me was returning my attention to Esther 4:14. Marjorie, also a first, has spoken about how this verse found in the Torah and the Old Testament beckons her. It is also a text that calls me to free my imagination. The verse concludes with a question posed to Queen Esther. You see, she

WHO BUT YOU, FRIENDS, ARE CALLED FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS?

was navigating the challenges of leadership and was feeling conflicted about her role. The question asked was: "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" Who but you, friends, are called to imagine with me? Who but you, friends, are called to protect and proclaim the liberal arts? Who but you, friends, must press for justice to find joy? Who but you, friends, are called for such a time as this?

If you choose to take up the mantle of imagination with me – the work of learning and crafting justice and joy - we need to find the peace, the courage, and the compassion to sustain ourselves though this work.

IMAGINE BELONGING AND LOVE

Allow me to conclude with my favorite topic, the topic of love and belonging for others and self. We are most free to imagine when we are in a community where we are loved and where we feel we belong. And we must acknowledge that full love and belonging, sadly, for many, exists only within their imagination and hopes for the future. For some, the world has sought to tell you that you are not worthy of love. You are not worthy of the liberal arts. You are not worthy of justice. You are not worthy. So, we must, together, change that narrative internally, on campus, and beyond. Colin Wilson wrote, "Imagination should be used, not to escape reality, but to create it." Let us conclude by imagining together.

Imagine all you need to love and be loved is within your beating heart, your beaming smile, your talented mind.

Imagine your smile, your joy, and your confidence are as exquisitely real and powerful as your hurt and pain, sadness and doubt.

Imagine, your ambition is matched only by your grace. Your strength is matched only by your vulnerability. Your fear is matched only by the courage in your heart.

Imagine that every despite becomes a be-
cause: You are great not despite your past but
because of your past. You belong not despite
who you are but because of who you are.
You are great not despite your identity, but
because of your identity.

Imagine you found your worth and treasured
it like a new life: fragile, resilient, demanding
of your protection and care.

Imagine that as this pandemic storm begins
to pass, there we are holding one another's
hands, new and yet familiar bonds, catching
our breath because we see the dawn of a new
day—a day filled with learning, justice, joy,
belonging, and love.

Imagine we never forget this moment when
in this hushed silence, we hear our future, gently being called forth from all that we have shared in our past—the beauty and the pain. The world whispers to us. Softly. Quietly. Gently.

Imagine. You belong.
Imagine. You are enough.
Imagine. You are loved.

Imagine all these things are true because you are fearfully and wonderfully made. And may you come forth this day to embrace everything you imagine with hope, purpose, and joy.

Levavi Oculos!

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