

Baccalaureate 2013

I am honored to speak on this occasion on behalf of my faculty colleagues. For seniors to ask for one of us as the speaker at this moment honors us all. Thank you for that.

Here we all are together for a last time inside. Tomorrow morning we will be outside with a 14,000-foot mountain towering over us. Thinking toward that scene I chose the reading Candace just shared with you, a reading about being inside-out, about how the grandeur of the natural world, especially of mountains, makes us think about our interior selves. Augustine of Hippo, the last great intellectual of classical antiquity, was perhaps remembering the Alps, toward which he had looked out from his sojourn in the north of Italy, when he wrote this passage. Likelier he meant the Atlas range of his African home, not so lofty as Pikes Peak. A thousand years after Augustine wrote the passage we have just heard in his *Confessions*, the Italian humanist Petrarch climbed another smaller-than-Pikes-Peak mountain in the Savoy, in the southeast of France, and pulled a pocket-sized copy of the great African's book out of his knapsack. According to a letter he wrote that evening to a beloved teacher, Petrarch by pure chance opened the volume to Augustine's very passage about mountains, on human awe over natural grandeur. So we today, like Petrarch, pull that little book out of our jeans pockets--Candace and I did that for you--and look again at Augustine's thoughts on nature, human memory, and the place of education in fusing them.

People go to admire the high mountains and all the beauty of the universe, the African says. And then they forget themselves. I don't think that is true anymore, do you? In our culture, in twenty-first-century culture, you seniors' culture, time in the mountains is time discovering yourself, expanding your possibilities, dissolving yourself into nature, going into the wild. Ancient and Renaissance people weren't so interested in wildness, maybe because they had more of it. But I still think Augustine's point holds, that our interior spaces, our imaginations, our memories, are big enough to hold the entire world. That should be a source of wonder, an appreciation of beauty as great as any mountain's. Tomorrow morning we will be able to see Pikes Peak and all up and down the Front Range. We will remember the vista, not just we on this stage in the funny-colored costumes, we who remain here, but all you who go on now to other places and are not daily reminded of the snow on the Peak or last summer's burn scar. We will remember not only the view but many other things about tomorrow morning in different bits and pieces. We will all remember it in our own ways, but we will remember it inside ourselves exactly as Petrarch remembered another mountain vista, and Augustine did before him.

Augustine and Petrarch were both interested in how all that works and what we should value in it, especially about the role of the liberal arts in our appreciation of an outside world that we can bring inside ourselves. The metaphor they used to characterize that interior embrace is here around us this afternoon, quite literally. Augustine talked about *aulae memoriae*, the halls of memory. When he used the term he was thinking about such great basilican showplaces of Roman imperial power as were familiar in Italy, where he had been, and in Africa, where he was, or in far-away Judea, which he imagined. This chapel, Shove, refers to those structures. It is smaller and it is decorated differently, but like the late antique basilicas whose bones still ring the Mediterranean, it has a grand central nave and narrower side-aisles. The whole points toward an apse, a head, the place where our attention is directed as we enter from the back, as we just did. At first the emperor would stand in the apse, on a dais, to be hailed by his subjects, and there in later Christian times the divine would seem to touch earth on an altar of sacrifice. The basilican form dominated the stone architecture of Europe up to Petrarch's time in the Romanesque buildings our chapel imitates. It predicated the Gothic style, with its pointed arches flung higher, not as earth-bound as these but divided in similar tripartite dignity. So this Romanesque building is heir to all that, a well-worn, evocative figure for human imagination extended across time. Its massive stone frame suggests the universal amplitude of memory as we experience it differentially, filling it with our various desires, experiences, and recollections. But for all of us it is capacious and resonant, a worthy storehouse not only for the events of ordinary days but also for ceremonial moments like this graduation weekend.

My hope is that we remember Baccalaureate today and Commencement tomorrow the better by accepting this great space's invitation to consider our common memory and common enterprise, to consider too with Augustine the African what this might have to do with the kind of study he says he owns—the same kind of study you have just completed, and which we hope you too hold not just as an image, but as a toolkit for encountering the world you now fully possess. So let us take a moment to look around this building.

I wonder how much you have been here, and what for. State occasions—all-College occasions, more properly speaking—take place here. So you have come to Shove, I guess, for convocation as these past four years have begun, and a few weeks ago when many of you were honored for your contributions. You have been here for musical events. Some of you have been to the chapel for observances of your various religious faiths, and for meetings in Sacred Grounds, the coffeehouse downstairs. I understand that many of you have been up the tower, and I am sure that has been because you enjoyed the proximity to heaven. Not so many students, but many of us who are long-term members of this teaching community have been here again and

again in Shove for memorial services. So this is a joyful space, a space of artistic challenge, and space of mourning all at the same time. These layers of signification make it most of all a ritual space. It calls us to think behind the surfaces of the times at which we gather here both to those moments' transcendent meaning and to the character of our community. Today, our being here in Shove seals and ennobles the occasion of your leaving us.

But this building, begun in 1929, is in a medieval style. How is its play on the past about us? And what does that have to do with Augustine's sense of memory? Shove is a great hall like the great halls of his memory, but how does its form engage our understanding? History helps us here—and as a historian I have to laugh a little wickedly when I say that because I am well aware that history is something we hijack. We never stand outside it dispassionately. Sometimes we try, and that is a good thing, but we desiccate it, we take the life out of it, unless we make it work for us, unless we take it from those who made it and turn it to our own purposes. So when we note that this building is grounded in the history of Colorado College and the kind of education it represents, you need to notice how not so much because that is interesting in itself—although it is—but because you need to steal away that big piece of your last four years so you can make of it what you will. So look around.

You entered under a stone tympanum, the bas-relief sculpture under the west door, of a great teacher, of Jesus as rabbi, a theme extended in the windows above it. More windows march up the side aisles, bordering the great nave, where most of you sit. And that word “nave” means what it seems to, that it is a kind of ship which we enter as for a journey. The aisle windows tell about the spread of learning from the Roman Empire across Europe, especially to Britain. And the Pilgrim Chapel, to my left, has more windows, another showing Jesus triumphant, and then a lovely window with a less overtly Christian theme—one of King Arthur's knight Galahad. Here the armored figure is a representation of victorious youth—that's you—and at the bottom of the window we see something quite modern, soldiers of the First World War being blessed before they crossed the English Channel to fight in the trenches of Flanders. One could hope that worked for them, but long list of CC students and alums inside the Palmer staircase, young men who died between 1917 and 1919, suggests it may not have in any direct way.

And then everywhere around the building, on the ceiling, in the windows, are the heraldic symbols, the crests, of educational institutions—the Ivies, other fine colleges, British universities—all of them connected in one way or another with the founders of the college or the Shove family which built this chapel for it. So we see here more broadly that this building honors the ancestry of this college in an ancient Mediterranean tradition of learning nourished in the European Middle Ages, a kind of

education in which teachers and students are centered, in which knowledge is important in itself, but in which the central goal is the human reception of that knowledge. But we learn too that that this specific historical tradition opens itself to a wider world, as the aisle windows tell—that this kind of education reaches out to many other traditions filled with variety and difference, what we today would call a diverse and global context.

Now, that is the schoolbook tour of this building. I have left out the great rose window behind me, but before we get there let us look down, at the stone itself, how it lies here in what used to be high prairie. Shove's plan, its architectural footprint, is cruciform. It alludes to the cross as the primary symbol of European belief for many centuries, but beyond that it is a virtually human form. It has arms and a head, so represents a human body on the earth. It suggests like Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man that the proportions of a man or woman's body are beautiful as the natural world's are. They resolve into the geometric precisions of circles and squares in mathematical ratios of body to head, of arms to body. These simple relationships are the same as musical harmonies. And as people from long before Augustine to well after Petrarch believed, harmonies moved the very stars. So this building mirrors both heaven and the human self, purporting their essential likeness. Today those of us using this lectern are miked, but you will find if you stand here—and I wonder if you have done this—and, hoping you are alone in the building because it is kind of embarrassing to get caught, sing out, the acoustics are so beautiful that you will sound like an angel, even if you have not been one during this past week. So on some practical level, the association works.

So Shove is made for sound, for human voices, but still more it is made for light. The light of its windows wraps it, letting in the world outside as do the various senses of living person. Light comes into the head especially. Look behind me. The day floods in through the great rose window of the apse. The chapel is literally oriented, turned toward the orient, the rising of the sun. It so acknowledges light as enlightenment, as revelation, as learning, a metaphor shared by religions and philosophical traditions around the world. And there we find suspended the definitive window of the chapel, the end-point of our visual experience. This window is about, of all things, the liberal arts, the ways of learning that Augustine saw as agents of the human imagination ordering and marshaling all the filmy imagery of our recollections.

Here at CC we have forty-two majors. There are not that many departments, so some of those are interdisciplinary majors. Any way you cut it that is a lot of disciplines, a lot of different ways of looking at the human and natural worlds. But properly speaking there are really only seven liberal arts, or at least there have been from the time this scheme of education was thought up in classical antiquity. In the image here

Jesus again appears as the central image, as teacher. Around him this rose window actually has ten petals, and the reason for that is that the great medieval disciplines of theology, medicine, and law—the graduate faculties of the first medieval university, Paris, still important studies—are added in here to what was studied in the liberal arts faculty. Theology is at the top, with medicine on her right and law on her left. Some of you will go on to study medicine or law—I am guessing fewer will do theology, But then following around from two o'clock the same ancient and venerable liberal arts are personified—the three verbal arts (grammar, rhetoric, and logic or dialectic) and then the four mathematical arts (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music).

Where, we ask, is comp lit? Where is neuroscience? One answer might be that they are not shown in the glass because the Middle Ages didn't study those disciplines' materials, but that would not be the best answer. We might instead say that the modern fields are represented there by implication, because they proceed from the same conviction that to read, speak, and argue lucidly is to be able to explore both the order and the beauty of the world around us. And these glass ladies, at whose attributes, whose teaching tools you can now squint, gather into the body of this chapel as to the halls of our memory such light as best illumines the treasures we assemble inside. The assemblage of these ancient and modern arts teaches us to order and to appreciate all the contents of our minds, the view on the outside of the Peak just as of human neurons and Nabokov's butterflies. Most importantly, it orients us—it gives us the direction toward which we want to aim our energies, so we can seek beauty and find purpose.

Shove is made of stone and light. I and your other teachers are, like you and unlike Augustine or even Petrarch, moderns. With you, we look too at the great squares and semicircular arches of this space as relics of the past. But today with Augustine and Petrarch I claim this place for you, for your use, even as you leave it here. Your learning and your voice are what it signifies. Your memory of it, like the halls of Augustine's memory, affirms the importance of your reception of the worlds you have taken in while you were students here. You share this with each other. You share it with us, your teachers. And you share it with the figures memorialized in these walls and windows, with a great community of human beings across time who have been taught, with you, that we hold all that we know in the light of our memory, as washed with color by our study.

The light of this great hall is then the light of knowledge, but it is also the light of blessing. Many of us here have been touched in one way or another by Quaker, by Friends tradition—our chaplain Kate Holbrook and me, and I am sure others of you, by Quaker schooling. One of the women of the Shove family was a Quaker preacher. And the Friends have a wonderful way of building community and extending their

hearts gently, respectful of difference but affirmative in outreach. To speak their hopes they say, "I hold you in the light." If you are troubled or adventuring or parting or effecting justice—"I hold you in the light."

Another ancient author whom Augustine particularly loved had said in encouraging people to go forth joyfully in the world, "put on the armor of light." That may sound for us a bit martial. Today I think he might have said pack light, pack this light. It weighs less than a good 0-degree bag. It weighs nothing, but it holds everything. You do not need the heaviness of this stone building when you understand it as a way to shape the light, to set your experience in the light. So take this with you. Take Colorado with you. Tomorrow morning remember that the Front Range is made of the stone and light as is this building. And remember as you go, packing light, that we hold you in that light as we see it here, as we will feel it, with any luck, tomorrow morning unmediated by Shove's brilliant glass.