Welcome to all. A special welcome to the Class of 2006! We—the faculty, staff, students, alumni and Board of Trustees—are thrilled that you have joined us! I am especially honored to deliver the convocation address today because you are my first class as the fifteenth President of Colgate. It is our tradition to say “Hi. Welcome to Colgate. It is going to be a great year.” Let’s make it a great year. Colgate will change us, and we will change Colgate!

We—you and I—are seeing many things for the first time. We are seeing the campus, the hills of the Chenango valley, Adam and Eve, and the new Colgate bookstore. We are seeing new faces and trying to remember new names. We are seeing the Frank Dining Hall, the Edge Cafe, Donovan’s Pub, Quacks, and trying to figure out where to go for what when. We are seeing class schedules, requirements, links, training programs, and trying to understand how best to do what when! And we are trying to see, to envision the new “I,” the new Rebecca, RaChelle, Joe, Kim, Clare, at Colgate. Seeing, really learning to see, is a way to think of your journey in the liberal arts through the next four years. Seeing is an apt metaphor for all you get to do, all you have to do, all that you will need to do to come out the other side as an engaged citizen who enjoys success and knows how to care for self, community and world. Let me follow this one word, seeing, as a guide to how you make your journey up and down the hills of Colgate. To see: to look upon, to examine, to see as to understand, to see closely, to see into the future, to foresee.
One of the great stories of Western civilization—a story that is about education as well as a life worth living—is the myth of the cave in Plato’s *The Republic*. If you do not know this myth, please put it on your list of “tasks to complete by 2006.” In the myth, which I can only mention here, Socrates portrays certain men living as prisoners underground in a cave, chained facing the wall by the neck and legs in darkness, a fire behind them providing only the dim shadows of light. The prisoners of the cave can only see the shaded and shadowy images of what men carry past the cave on a raised platform. When a prisoner is liberated he is free to see into the light. At first, it causes pain and confusion (please remember this as you face midterms!). Then he “will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him the water. . . he will be able to contemplate him as he is.” (Plato’s he and him is God and Truth— one and the same for Plato—which, by the way, is our motto!). From shadows, chains and darkness, freedom is defined and embodied as seeing the light. Life, or at least a life worth living, is made for seeing the light, by which we mean looking into the world. Or to quote a sage of the fifth century; “The learned are said to have seeing eyes/ the unlearned have only two sores on their faces.” (attributed to Tiruvalluvor)

Seeing, your journey of seeing into the Light, has three distinct but interrelated dimensions: wonder, insight, vision. The first dimension of seeing on our journey is simply seeing, looking at, beholding, wondering about and taking it in. In the early morning on the trails at the top of the hill, I jog with my dog, Lady. She and I have much to see. She looks for the squirrels and rabbits while I look at the light refracting through the trees or the mist rising from the hills of the Chenango valley. We engage, in quite separate ways, in seeing as wonder. On our morning journey into the light we maintain
what Maxine Greene has called for in all of education, an attitude of wide-awakefulness. Education as seeing into the light is about learning to see with wonder and amazement, learning to question. Alfred North Whitehead argued that education must educate against inertness, a laziness in seeing, a numbing of our ability to really see. One can simply keep the inner eyes inert while one glances but does not see. Surely you have had the experience of Charles Cap in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pathfinder*, who can’t see the raging water in Lake Ontario because he can only see what he knows so well, the Atlantic Ocean. He is numb to seeing Lake Ontario for what it is. He nearly wrecks the small boat, the *Scud*, because he fails to see the storms, the churning water and the special abilities of the boat. Only by yielding the steering of this now all-important, though formerly belittled, vessel to the Pathfinder is everyone saved. Natty sees the storms on Lake Ontario and sees the boat safely to shore. The inertness of refusing to see is dangerous in the storms of life. The inertness of failing to see the light or even the squirrels is a loss of beauty and pleasure in the daily walks of life.

Seeing encompasses both the empathy of connecting and the respectfulness toward otherness. On the one hand, this form of seeing means seeing as a knowing with, an empathy, a learning into the other. Parker Palmer tells the story, taken from Evelyn Fox Keller, of Nobel Prize–winning geneticist Barbara McClintock: When Keller asked McClintock, “How did you come up with such breathtaking insights into the genetic mysteries of ears of corn?” McClintock said, “Well you have to have a feeling for the organism.” And when Keller pressed her a little more, McClintock (then in her mid-eighties, when the only thing left is to tell the truth) said, “You have to learn to lean into the kernel.” (Remembering the Health of Higher Education, AAHE 1993) Diana Tietjens
Meyers calls this empathy: seeing from the other’s perspective of what life is really like for them. Seeing as wonder is about seeing from the perspective of another culture, another style of artistic expression, another gender, another way of being in the world. But seeing as wide-awakefulness also means seeing as respecting real otherness, understand that things and people are truly different than we are. The great philosopher Emmanuel Levinas talks about ethical optics: where you see the other as truly other and respect that you can never know, or master, the other, and your sight is the ethics of otherness. Seeing is about “otherness” even as it is about empathy.

Perhaps because of this dual sense of wonder, the metaphor of seeing leads into the second dimension: seeing as investigating, seeing into. If the first sense could be phrased, “Wow, did you see that?” the second shows the insight as in, “Yes, I see it, I get it, I understand. Looking at leads to looking into.

Brooks Holified, a friend and noted historian of American religion, used to begin his classes by describing what it was to take a walk in the North Georgia woods with Vicky, his wife, who has trained herself to be a botanist and an artist. When Vicky and Brooks walk in the woods, she can see more than Brooks can. He can see clumps of grass and weeds but each appears the same as the others. But Vicky is able to see them in a way that Brooks cannot, because she is able to name the wildflowers. Brooks observes, “When he sees a clump of plants, she sees four distinguishable flowers, each different from the others, because her ability to name them allows her to see each of them. To be able to name is to be able to see, and to learn new names and new ways of naming is to see the world afresh.”
This dimension of seeing requires great diligence, but it also can become an adventure, a journey of passion, a game of intrigue. I am trained to “interpret,” or even exegete, texts: to understand them in their historical location, to understand the references of the words used in the texts, to understand how different historical periods have read the texts in different ways. I think of interpretation as the investigative reporting side of humanistic scholarship. It is hard work, filled with lots of false leads and a thousand tips to follow, but nonetheless it is about what Whitehead called “the adventure of ideas,” and it can match—truly and really—the adventure of reading a Tom Clancy novel or the thrill of watching a Star Wars episode. This diligence, this adventure into detail, leads also, as Bernard Lonergan says simply, to insight. Said somewhat differently, the Sanskrit word for philosophy is darasana, which means seeing clearly.

We will teach you the diligent work of insight. An education in the liberal arts teaches the detail of investigating, taking apart, learning to learn what you need to know. It can be fun and it can be hard work! My image for this is the scene from the movie Karate Kid, where Daniel, the student—filled with the vision of being the karate master—is taken to the fence by Mr. Miyagi and told to paint it using an up and down hand motion. You who are artists know about the diligence of practice before you can draw a form satisfying to the eye. You who are athletes know precisely what I mean: the diligence of practice allows you to play the game or climb the mountain. The diligence of learning to see under the surface, into the details, step by step, in the lab, in the practice room or on the court is what allows you to invent something new, perform on stage, or win in the tournament. John Morris, a former faculty member and dean here and former president of Cazenovia and Union, and a great proponent of the liberal arts, told me about
a recent letter in *USA Today*. A woman lost her job in a corporate buyout. She was writing to point out that, no matter what the difficulties surrounding the loss of her employment, she was not fearful of finding another job because her liberal arts education had taught her how to learn what she needed for any job. The diligence of this dimension is what trains you for success no matter what career path you choose, no matter which community you find yourself in.

Two barriers to insight exist in this dimension of our journey of seeing. The first is superficiality: wanting to make sure our insight is the same as others, be it our peer group or academic guild! We live in a society of great conformity; note how stores across American carry the same clothes. The second, and closely related, problem is what Sir Francis Bacon called “idols of the mind,” and we might now call it ideological correctness of any kind. This barrier to insight prejudges what you will find and is, thus, an unwillingness to play with a different view, an unwillingness to dig in and really see something in new ways with fresh eyes. I like Proust on this issue: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

The diligence of insight as seeing leads to the third dimension: seeing as vision, as imagination, as seeing anew, a new way of seeing. This is seeing into the future, developing the hypothesis, seeing yourself over the finish line, seeing what this community could look like when you have made your contribution to it. Art—though ever as much as seeing as wonder and seeing as insight—belongs here too. The function of art, as Joseph Conrad once said, is to make people see.

Martha Nussbaum, a classicist and philosopher who will visit us this February, talks about the task in liberal arts of creating a “narrative imagination.” Nussbaum argues
that perhaps our greatest need is to make sure we have strong and flexible narrative imagination so we can see new possibilities for our life together. Walt Whitman understood the need to vision our civic good through the voices so often unheard, “Through me many long dumb voices, Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves, voices of the diseas’d and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs. . .”

Just as with insight, we have to guard against conformity and accept that vision can be disturbing. Out-of-the-box thinking is required for science to advance even as it progresses detail by detail in the experiments of the lab; art changes because artists envision in new ways; and the civic good flourishes through a commons that is constantly “re-imagined” in new ways.

Vision requires developing an imagination. Some say the problem with education is that we drum imagination out of you before you get to college. If this is the case, please “imagine.” Imagine forward, have a dream, stand with Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and foresee his beloved community in this land, tomorrow, in your world as adults. Imagine backward: imagine the world of our 80-million-year-old dinosaur egg (I hope you know about Colgate’s very own 80-million-year-old dinosaur egg!).

Imagination is about envisioning the world but it is also about seeing ourselves in the world in new ways. The movie Mr. Holland’s Opus has a wonderful scene in which Mr. Holland is teaching Gertrude, a music student, and not a very good one, to play. Imagine, he says, imagine the music in your mind. Seeing the music and seeing herself in the music, she changes: she plays in new ways. See—with your mind’s eye or with the eye of your heart—you yourself in new ways during these four years.
In conclusion, seeing—wonder, insight, vision—will make you successful no matter what you do; and seeing—wonder, insight, vision—will make you an engaged citizen. But also, and maybe even best of all, seeing, really seeing with wonder, insight and vision, is its own satisfaction, or as Emerson said, “Then Beauty is its own Excuse for being.” What Shakespeare says of love we can also say of the liberal arts: “It adds a precious seeing to the eyes.”

Several days ago we learned the word triskaidekaphobia. Remember: fear of thirteen. We also learned that it is forbidden on this campus. Fear of thirteen is a superstition, an idol of the mind, a going along with the grain, a taking the easy route, a refusal to see, a laziness to understand, a blunted imagination. No triskaidekaphobia at Colgate. So please spend the next four years seeing, really seeing, with wonder, insight and vision.

Welcome times thirteen again. Thirteen best wishes on your journey of seeing with wonder, insight and vision.

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