Remarks by Rebecca S. Chopp  
Inauguration  
September 29, 2002

On July 1, I walked into my office, greeted my new office mates — my wonderful assistant Claudia Caraher (who has served five presidents!), the excellent Jim Leach, and the fantastic Deb Barnes — and wandered on into my office. An old battered book sat alone on the shelf of the president’s bookcase. My desk was clear, my files empty, the book sat as the only “to do” on this new president’s list. I picked it up and read words that I would sing to myself as I walk the Colgate hills:

Old Colgate is the place for me; Her life is full of jollity; Her sons are many, brave, and true; Oh, how I love my Colgate U; Her profs, they are the proper stuff; They give us lessons long and tough; And yet they’re loved by ev’ryone; Who is a loyal Colgate son. [J. W. Many, ’94]

How delighted I am to become the fifteenth president of Colgate. Many have observed that the original thirteen men and most of my predecessors would need to stretch their imaginations a bit to see a woman inaugurated in this office! But all of them would understand my words of appreciation for those I see here today, my abounding sense of excitement
about this institution, my delight in your love for this place, and my feeling of absolute privilege in serving this institution.

I want to express my thanks to the Board of Trustees, chaired by John Golden, in selecting me for this honor and opportunity. Board members love this place, and like Colgate itself, they represent different views, different parts of this community, and different facets of this jewel. I also want to express my gratitude to the members of the search committee, led by Howard Ellins, who were tough, smart, and lots of fun.

Thank you former presidents who are here, even if only in spirit. I know only the strong and kind Neil Grabois, and since I know he is an indicator of the quality of the former presidents, I have large shoes to fill as I hike up and down these hills and take cross-country ski lessons!

Spread sheets galore, more meetings than I want to imagine, a zillion details, worker bees, and a great deal of effort to make this right: All that belongs to the inauguration committee, chaired by Jack Dovidio. Special thanks to the organizational genius of Patty Caprio: From tents to urns to beads in the bushes, you have thought of everything. Thank you to all who have made this weekend possible, and a special thanks to our marvelous building and grounds crew, who once again have the campus so beautiful that we are all saying, “Colgate is the most beautiful campus in America.”
It is a precious moment to thank my friends and family who have traveled to be with us today. Many of my friends are from Emory: with you I share great adventures, hours and hours of working hard, and pushing the envelope to move that fine university forward by making great leaps of creativity buttressed by hours of attending to details. I will always miss you but I welcome you to my new home. For Jim Laney, who speaks today, a special thanks. You are my ultimate model of a moral leader and a president.

And for my family present today: Ed and Kathy, Pat and Peggy, and Gail: late I came into your lives, but you accepted me with open arms, open hearts, and great family dinners at Kathy’s. For Nate, my handsome and wonderful son, Lisa, whom I now proudly call daughter: your presence means all to me: you know this for you know how I love both of you. And for Fred, friend of many years, beloved spouse, who joins me in life’s little delights, great adventures, and rocky roads: Thanks!

I have been reading through speeches and reports of past inaugurations thanks to the kind and good efforts of our archivist, Carl Peterson. Nearly every inaugural speaker at Colgate has described a crisis in liberal arts. President Gilman of Johns Hopkins University, the orator of the day at President Smith’s inauguration in 1895, talked about the *strum* and *drang* of education, and his list included problems such as the notion of
educating women, the very idea of any elective courses, the recognition of science and laboratories, and the growth of athletic sports.

Each induction also celebrates — in larger-than-life form I fear — the incoming president. Harry Emerson Fosdick, class of 1900, who was responsible for the remarks by the alumni during the inauguration of Everett Needham Case, noted that such a time brought self-congratulations and happy self-satisfaction. Fosdick observed, “At a meeting of a genealogical society in New York, where everyone was rejoicing that he was the descendent of his ancestors, the chaplain offered this prayer, ‘O Lord, justify, if it be possible, the high esteem in which we hold ourselves.’” (46).

As Fosdick knew, such ceremonies are certain to be celebrations. But they also enact a beginning of a new chapter in the long narrative of an institution’s life. As Neil Grabois noted at his inauguration, “We come together to delight in the past, generate confidence in the present, and hope for the future.”

I want to comment about what was, is, and will be through tracing the slight differences in meanings of three terms used for this occasion: inauguration, investment, and installation. For all three words describe our days present and still to come. I want to use each word to suggest where we pause this moment, between a past of promise and a future of hope.
Today is an installation, a putting in place, of a new president. We gather together in this splendid place knowing this new president today joins much in place! Colgate has many things in place already and for that I -- and you -- give great thanks. I join a wonderful faculty whose members join together in teaching and research in what appears to be the best of the world of liberal arts and the best of research institutions. The intimacy of faculty teaching students links with the adventure of discovery across the fields of the world’s disciplines of research. While colleges and universities around the country permit and even encourage their students to spend time abroad, our faculty go with our students: teaching, mentoring, serving as a safety net and a nudge to get out and explore. While faculty at too many colleges and nearly all universities simply let students take what they want, our faculty hold fast to the hard work of an interdisciplinary core that provides a common conversation, a common focus of knowledge, and ongoing spaces of connection and intersection. I unite with what has already been installed at Colgate: a wonderful faculty who provide an education that will gain in value even as it lasts a lifetime of experiencing the world.

I am also installed into a community to which people belong. Colgate students and parents love this place. Colgate staff, the finest staff in the world, have a stake in this place and in the success of the students. Colgate
alumni are amazing: They belong; they love this place; they love to return to play golf, to see our new buildings, especially our new downtown, to visit each other, or to see faculty. Contemporary theorists tell us that Americans are desperate to belong to community. As Adam Weinberg, our interim dean of college says, we should invite them all to Colgate. What better symbol of community than that of the Hamilton Initiative, which brings together the partnership of Colgate and Hamilton with the support of parents, staff, alumni, board, and friends. Colgate community provides us bonds of loyalty, connection, love that support us in difficult times, as witnessed so powerfully this year and last on September 11. Colgate resonates when we have times of success and joy. Learning to build and live in this special community with integrity and hope is one of our greatest responses to and resources for the immense needs in our world today.

Of course, as often is the case, a really great community is made up of smaller groups to which persons have identity and interpretations of community. I have enjoyed meeting the alumni board; tennis alumni at our opening game; the ’86,’87, and ’88 football teams at the Fred Dunlap Golf Tournament; the geology field students fresh from their summer excursion to the Adirondacks, Arizona, and Wyoming; and students vigorously debating the ethics of genetic research in the undergraduate research
program this summer. All belong to Community with a capital C through
their smaller communities.

Communities birth traditions, and some hold fast while others change.
This year we retrieved the “hello” tradition and focused a great deal on
triskaidekaphobia! I witnessed the torches lead the class of 2006 to the
Chapel for Convocation and look forward to carrying a torch with the class
of 2003 at their commencement. But we no longer celebrate the cane rush as
they did in 1880; we no longer celebrate the cremation of Livy (students
burning their books at the end of the class after a march, a bonfire, an
oration, and a dance!). Colgate has added traditions: the addition of women
in 1970 must have seemed a great challenge to the tradition; now it is our
tradition. Last year we added COVE — the Center for Outreach,
Volunteerism and Education: new, but hopefully quickly part of our
traditions. The traditions old and new have inspired me just as I know they
hold dear memories to the Colgate community.

Today also invests me as president, with the powers of authority (be
that as they are!). In a very real sense, we celebrate today that education is,
at its heart, an investment, a willingness to take what is most sacred and dear
and let it grow, develop, lead. I debated whether or not to bring up the word
since our markets make us, or almost all of us, quake and quiver at the word
right now. But education is our investment in democracy and our investment in our children and this, too, must be celebrated and renewed at this time. The most important investment we make for our future, the future of our country, and our children’s future is education. Or, as Chesterton noted, “Education is simply the soul of society as it passes from one generation to another.”

Thomas Bender, noted historian of American Education, narrates how liberal arts understood itself to be shaping local citizens: men with honor and virtues who could lead local communities in democratic practices. Recall that Colgate was founded as the “western” seminary to train men for Baptist ministry! By the turn of the next century, education needed to produce citizens who could deal with industrialization, immigration, printing presses, and a national identity that framed or impacted daily views. Now, in the 21st century we must educate world citizens who can move within the world, not because they have all languages, but because in their imaginations they can be what Maria Lagones calls world travelers. Frances D. Ferguson describes our task at hand as we continue our tradition by reinterpreting the liberal arts: “A liberal arts education emphasizes the creative thinking needed to produce new technologies and marketing strategies, the global perspective that explains the cultural differences costing America its competitive edge,
and the ethical responsibility that will help companies produce products to meet human needs.” Or, in the simpler words of Hannah Arendt, we must invest in our children, our students, so that they may renew a common world.

We invest in our students so that they will be informed world citizens and ensure the future; we also invest in them so they can lead successful lives as they define success (in a reflective manner of course). One tradition we must never change: our alumni are highly successful, be it on Wall Street, in the Peace Corps, in publishing and writing, or in the theater; in the professions of medicine, law, and teaching; or as mothers and fathers raising future Colgate students! Liberal arts colleges carry these two obligations: to invest in students so they can live a life worth living and to invest in students so they can create a world worth living in. Plato was correct when he observed, “The directions in which education starts a man will determine his future life.”

Finally, today is an inauguration: a time to foretell the future. The word inauguration, from augur, means to read the omens. It is a time to mark a bold new embrace of the future from the loving, strong traditions of the past and present. Emily Dickinson’s insightful line: “The possible’s slow fuse is lit by the imagination,” reminds us that this event is about the courage
to claim new possibilities. Helen Keller’s lovely line, “One can never be content to creep when one feels an impulse to soar,” reminds us that this event is about our aspirations and our aims.

Over the course of the next year, we will read the signs and imagine our future together as we craft a planning document for our work together. As I have said before, Colgate will be a leader of the liberal arts in the twenty-first century, for we have the imagination, the tools, the traditions, and the ambition to define what it means to shape world citizens and produce successful men and women. The world needs Colgate to form an education where values of justice and practices of excellence reign supreme; where common bonds are nurtured and differences are respected and utilized; where information is creatively managed and where the arts are cherished. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to Everett Case upon his inauguration, sending his felicitations to Mr. Case and to Colgate. After urging the new president to devote all energies to winning the war, Roosevelt talked about the task at hand in preparing the world to go forward to its destiny. Roosevelt noted that the voice of the United States would have to lead and that its voice “must represent the aspirations of a people determined that mankind everywhere shall go forward to its destiny. The soul of that destiny is the maximum freedom of the human spirit.”
I invite you to join with me in a partnership for promoting Colgate in the twenty-first century. Alumni, faculty, staff, students, parents, citizens of Hamilton: Let us work together to continue our traditions revised, renewed, reclaimed for the twenty-first century. As those who followed before, let us build Colgate with imagination, investment, creativity, ambition, and hard work. Our school is strong and robust: let us use our resources to provide an education for engagement and fulfillment, for service and success, for responsibility, and for freedom.

Each of you has traveled many miles along our roadway of life to come together for this moment of installation, investment, and inauguration. Just as I am grateful to each of you for your role in celebrating this form of new beginning, so too am I committed to doing all I can to make your Colgate, now more formally our Colgate, the best it can be.

I end not with my words but with the concluding words of President George Merrill at his inauguration in June 1899, some 103 years ago.

True to its past, Colgate University will advance to even higher ideals and larger work. Many years ago I was climbing the steep ascent from the little town of Eisenach to the castle of Wartburg, in which Luther wrote his German Bible. Wearied with the climb, at the steepest place I asked a little girl by the
roadside if I was on the right path, “Immer hinuas und hinauf” was her reply. “Always straight onward and upward.” At many difficult places in life’s way, the words of the child have rung in my ears. I hear them today again for myself and for our University. The way has been marked out before us and the steeps ahead have been pointed out. It is ours to attain them. Just because good men and true have labored here so long and gained so much, the obligation is upon us to go higher still.

As Colgate’s fifteenth president, I say to you: We will do so.