

## What Are We Here For, Anyway?

Madam President:

We are called together today at Rollins for the 115<sup>th</sup> time. In spite of our long history, Rollins being the oldest institution of higher education in Florida, it is still a new beginning for Rollins. But, it is especially a new beginning for you, in this important transition from high school to college. You are starting new chapter of your life. We are engage in one of the few rituals of transition that our culture has, and it marks a period of the beginnings of adulthood, where you will have new freedoms and new responsibilities. This is a time for you to reevaluate your life and to make new goals and commitments. As you face this important transition in your life, are there any words of advice I can offer you? From the perspective of having studied philosophy intensely for almost four decades, trying to discern the meaning of life, having written reams on the great philosophies of the Western world, and having lived in two indigenous cultures, I have come to the conclusion that the most profound advice I can give you at this important transition in your life is this: enjoy yourselves.

Now, lest there be misunderstanding about what I am saying, let me tell you that these words have profound bearing on every aspect of our existence. This advice goes to the heart of what I understand it means to be a human being.

What I am suggesting is not new. It goes all the way back to the Greeks and their conception of what it means to be human, and it forms the basis of the vision of the liberal arts, for the Greeks thought that if we could discern what human nature is, then we would know how we should live this life. As humans, we should live out of and fulfill

our nature. Therefore, the question became: what is human nature. One person suggested that what made humans unique was that we were featherless bipeds. That sounded pretty good until someone plucked a chicken and threw it into the midst of those thoughtful philosophers. So much for that definition!

The Greeks came to the conclusion that we are rational animals, that we share with other animals basic survival needs and sensual enjoyments, but that what is unique about us is that we live the life of the mind. I don't pretend that there are no difficulties inherent in this vision of the human, that too often we overly narrow our view of what rationality is, that we denigrate animals, or that we split mind and body too much, but this view that we fulfill ourselves as humans through the life of the mind is a profound one and forms the basis of the liberal arts. We are committed not to job training or simple certification. Our goal during these four years is nothing less than to make you more human, so that you can better fulfill your nature.

Let me explain this point by zeroing in on what I said earlier about the aim of liberal arts education: it is to teach you to enjoy life. Now, I am sure that this sounds like a radical statement—you have perhaps felt that you have suffered through a math class in high school, or been forced to learn one too many dates in a history class. What I am suggesting is that the liberal arts has a vision of human nature going back to the Greeks, and it is in the fulfillment of this nature that we find real enjoyment, that is, real and deep satisfaction as human beings. No one pretends that it is easy to become human. Sure, we are homo sapiens by species, but it takes work and effort to become human, to fulfill the potential in our nature.

And the liberal arts curriculum that we have at Rollins is based on this ideal. There are a myriad of ways to engage in the life of the mind, and the general education requirements ask you to engage in those approaches, to experience those perspectives of understanding and living in the world, and in so doing, the possibilities as to how you can experience and enjoy the world will be expanded. The idea is that you will no longer be narrow in the ways that you can meaningfully and joyfully live in the world.

And really, is that not what a liberal arts education is all about—the opening of possibilities for enjoyment? We are no longer limited by our particular class or time in history or culture, but education is liberating in that we are opened to a whole range of possibilities that we may have never conceived before. We can fulfill our nature, we can enjoy ourselves in more ways and more deeply than we ever could have otherwise. And in so doing, we will see ourselves as participating in the Grand Conversation of Life. Don't think of your writing that history paper for Gary Williams as an isolated event; that critical analysis of Eudora Welty is not simply for Barbara Carson. Rather, your words become part of the human enterprise, that Grand Conversation, which goes back thousands of years, in which we are trying to understand and elucidate our experience, to make our lives fuller and richer, to enjoy ourselves more deeply and profoundly.

There is a second vision that the Greeks had about human nature, not just that we live the life of the mind, but that we are inextricably part of the human community. Aristotle put it this way: if you are not part of a community, you are either a beast or a god, but you are not a human. In a more pessimistic vein, the Existentialist, Albert Camus, said: "We are all condemned to live together." However you express it, we are social beings. So, as I told you in the letter I sent you this summer, a primary mission of

Rollins College is to educate “students for active citizenship in a global society.”

Citizenship is not something we choose, but it is part of our nature. So, learning to live together in ways that promote and affirm the highest characteristics of humanness is fundamental.

This is the reason that we must face squarely the issues of racism and injustice in our society, for if any of our citizens are denied the right to fulfill their highest natures, we fail as a community, and all of us fail as human beings. And so the questions raised by Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown about integration are important ones. Have we, in fact, failed at our ideal of integration, as they argue? Should we give it up? Is desegregation enough? Can we achieve racial integration in America, as they suggest, only at the price of surrendering self-determination and individual rights? Most importantly, we need to ask what realistic goal we can set that will promote the integrity and humanness of all of our citizens.

Race, of course, is not the only divide in our community. Any kind of bigotry or prejudice undercuts others as humans. As you join this college community, we ask that you keep all of the rest of us honest, that we not let ethnicity or class or gender or any other factor separate us. Let us honestly confront these issues, because they are at the heart of what it means to be human, and, in turn, how we can fulfill ourselves as humans.

So, now we have come full circle to my original advice. Why are we here, committed to a liberal arts education? It is to fulfill a vision of who we are as human beings. Look around you—there is abundance and we can enjoy. Liberal education has as its goal the enhancement of the number and quality of possibilities for living as human beings in the highest sense. Where you stand now in life, because you have come to

Rollins, offers you possibilities for enjoyment than you otherwise would not have had. So, if there is any advice I can give you for your life at Rollins, it is simply this: enjoy yourselves, and may that enjoyment be deeper and greater and more profound because of what we do here together at Rollins.