President Gerhart’s Convocation Speech, 2015

Good afternoon, new students, parents, families, and loved ones. I hope that by now you all feel welcome. Students, you have no idea how honored we are that you have entrusted your future to our hands. We take our responsibilities to you, and to the world that you will someday shape, very seriously. We are excited to work with you, to inspire you, and to watch you grow into a Lake Erie College graduate.

You and I will always share a special and unique relationship – we arrived at Lake Erie College at the same time and we will share this first year together. Let’s make it a great one. But you are the lucky ones – you get to stay on at Lake Erie College, while I will give way to a new President and climb back up the stairs to my ivory tower. But I can assure you that I will be a different and better person because of our year together, and I can assure you that you will be too. We have a great deal to look forward to, for there is no experience like the first year of any endeavor.

I want to share some reflections on the experience you are about to have. Consider my advice to be a kind of tool kit for thriving in our environment.

I want to begin by drawing on an old Walt Disney film to tell you the tale of the two crickets. Before the days of pixel, back in the day when animated films were made by painting page after page of illustrations, Disney told the story of Pinocchio by creating a tiny cricket, named Jiminy Cricket, who served as Pinocchio’s conscience. Jiminy Cricket would sit on Pinocchio’s shoulder, give homespun advice, and sing songs like: “When you wish upon a star.”

Well, I can tell you that when you come to Lake Erie College you come with not one, but with two crickets on your shoulders. They are invisible – no one can see them and you can’t see anyone else’s crickets. But they are real.
One of your crickets is the cricket of doubt – that is the one that sits on your shoulders and whispers in your ear: “You may not be good enough” or “You aren’t as good as the other students”. Or, “you might screw up.” Or even, “when you wish upon a star nothing happens.” The cricket of doubt is evil and will not serve you well here. I would like you to do me a favor when this ceremony is over; please take the cricket of doubt off your shoulder, put it on the ground, and stomp on it. We don’t allow the cricket of doubt on our campus; the cricket will just get in your way. If you see the cricket of doubt back on campus, stomp on that cricket again. You are here because we want you here; you are here because we have faith in your intelligence, determination, and creativity. We have no doubts and you should not either.

The second cricket, and the one I want you to get to know, is the cricket of reflection. This is the cricket that sits down with you and reflects on the experience you are having. The cricket of reflection is not judgmental; it does not tell you that you are good or bad. But that cricket does allow you to develop the most important intellectual and emotional skill – the skill of reflecting on your experience and learning from it. That cricket allows you to stand aside from what you are doing and to understand what you are doing in terms of your larger environment, in terms of who you are, and in terms of how you are processing the information about your world. Feed that cricket, relish that cricket, and allow that cricket to chase away the cricket of doubt.

Here are some ways in which the cricket of reflection will help you. Your professors are experts in their field, of course. But they are experts in something else as well – they are experts in thinking about their field and in how they want you to think about their field. Each faculty member has a very large cricket of reflection on his or her shoulders. So listen attentively to the faculty; take good notes. And after class, turn to your cricket of reflection and ask yourself: why did the professor approach the material that way? What does the professor think is important and why? What lessons can I learn from my learning? As you will soon see, we are no longer learning stuff; we are learning about how to reflect about stuff.
And if the professor says something that you do not understand or that seems to you to be wrongheaded, let the cricket of reflection help you go up to the professor and say: “well here is my understanding of the world.” “What different assumptions or beliefs do we have”? “How should I understand what you have said in light of my own experience and world view?”

And when the pressure of class preparation, student activities, and your social life begins to build up and you want to say: “I can’t take it any more” – remember….that is the dead cricket of doubt speaking. Don’t talk to dead crickets. Talk to the cricket of reflection: why do I feel this way? How do I relieve the pressure? How might I change my priorities or balance? Where can I turn for help? What can I learn from this disappointment? What can I learn from this triumph?

Nourish the cricket of reflection; banish the cricket of doubt. And by all means, if you need help do what I do: get help.

My other piece of advice is about the attitude you might adopt when you think about your role here. We believe in you and we want you to succeed in every way possible. But in a real way your education here is not just about you. We challenge you to develop your intellect, your determination, and your creativity not just to help you lead a fuller, more rewarding life. We challenge you because we know that one day other people will depend on your intellect, and your determination, and your creativity. You can expect to be in a position of importance some day in which the well-being of other people depends on the hard work you have done during your four years at Lake Erie College. No matter where your career takes you, other people will trust you to be intelligent, determined, and creative.

In fact, all that we do here is for you, but not for you alone. Our hard work is really about the people that you will one day work with, boss around, or serve. Each of you, whatever your role in life, will have people who depend on you – your employees, your students, your patients, your clients, or your colleagues at work. How we support other people will determine the value of their lives and whether we flourish as a community. So think of them – those who will depend on
you to be intelligent, determined, and creative – when you think about your goals and the kind of investment you want to put into achieving your goals.

When we ask you to work hard, as I do now, it is only because we expect you to be doing important things with your life. When we ask you to put in extra effort, as I do now, it is only because we know that your preparation will help the lives of others. If we ask you to be deliberate about developing your skills of writing and thinking and communicating, it is only because others will benefit from those skills.

In the end, our work together at Lake Erie College depends on the commitments that we make to each other. Parents and families, we know how precious your kids are to you; we will harness the energy and ingenuity of a great many people who play different roles but have a common goal – to support your student’s educational and social growth. Students, we will hold you to high standards of intellectual and social conduct… but we will provide you with the support to meet those standards. Faculty, we recognize your work as the heart and soul of the college, and know that we will not flourish as a group if you do not flourish individually. Staff, never underestimate how important is the work that we do to create the environment and find the resources that allow these students and these faculty to be able to harness their potential.

Our family is committed to the well-being of each other member of the family – and to the institution that is Lake Erie College.

Welcome aboard … welcome to our family, and let’s make it a great year.