

**St. Andrews University**  
**Opening Convocation**  
**August 21, 2018**  
**Convocation Address**

*Challenge, Change and Call*

**Introduction.** Mary McDonald--The first Convocation. On the Sunday afternoon following new student Orientation and my first few days of classes in September 1973, I stood in the hallway on the second floor of Mecklenburg Dorm patiently waiting my turn to use the rotary pay phone at the end of my suite behind two fellow freshman ahead of me. When my turn came, I called my parents collect, they accepted the call, and after the initial "hellos" and "great to hear your voice" conversation and "everything okay" questions, my mother immediately started saying all the things one says when it's time to end the call. The reason? In those days it was expensive to make a long-distance call and usually the charge was less for the first 3 minutes and then more per minute thereafter! To be mindful of the cost of regular long distance telephone calls, I resorted to snail mail—handwritten letters-- that I would send from time to time to limit the number of phone calls I would make during the semester.

I bring up this story to highlight a simple challenge that all students at that time who went away to college had to overcome in order to stay in touch with their families, be comforted if they were initially a bit homesick, and keep that modest allowance money coming in when things got tight before the end of the semester! But so many fast-paced technological advances made by "outside the box" thinkers over the last 40 years have radically changed the way we stay in touch with one another—faster than we could have imagined—from pay phones in the 70s, to flip phones and the internet in the early 90s, Blackberry phones with little keyboards at the turn of the new century, and then the first truly smart, internet connected iPhone in 2007. And of course, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter all within three years of one another between 2009 and 2012. The pace of change is fast and relentless, and it will be for all of us in the years ahead.

**Students.** As new students and for you returners as well, these years at St. Andrews are going to be filled with challenges—some simple and others at times quite difficult. One of your biggest challenges will be academically when you discover after your first mid-term that college is not high school. The amount of academic work in order to do well is much greater and more demanding intellectually than you've experienced before. You can't simply breeze through the semester without reading, thinking deeply, or expressing yourself in the classroom and in written assignments in order to do well.

And during the course of your first year, you're likely to end up with some grades that you know could have been better had you tried harder, planned better, been more persistent in studying, attended class more regularly, balanced time spent on

your social life and your athletic endeavors more productively with your studies. You can do this if you're willing to step outside the very small box of your own self and open yourself up to other ways of doing things, other ways of organizing your life, exploring new ideas with a sense of curiosity, and experimenting with the advice given by mentors and new friends about how they handle similar challenges.

If you only do what you've been accustomed to doing in high school, surround yourself only with others who are just like you, and never push yourself to experience something new, you'll grow and change very little while you're here at St. Andrews. The trick is to step outside the confines of your own self-interest, old habits and ways of thinking. If you engage with others who are different from you and engage with material that's new to you, and engage with the larger world around you, you will not only excel and change, but you'll be transformed in ways that will serve you well for the rest of your life in every job and relationship and experience that you will have.

**St. Andrews History.** In our culture today and certainly over the years, there's been tremendous pressure to separate us from one another, to build protective walls around our communities, to weaponize personal, identity differences. It's difficult to resist those forces. But it may interest you to know that these same cultural challenges are not unique to individuals but also to institutions. St. Andrews has responded to many challenges during its history and helped change higher education in interesting ways. When it was being formed in the late 1950s from the merger of two small, Presbyterian colleges, a board of trustees was formed by the Presbyterian Church to develop a new and innovative college in the face of challenge and change in the post-WWII era.

In the late 1950s early 1960s segregation in higher education was shockingly common and colleges and universities in NC were no exception.

- Because the trustees and the newly hired faculty at St. Andrews believed this was wrong and unjust, they broke down the false wall of "separate but equal" and made it clear in the earliest board meetings of the new college that St. Andrews would be open to all students regardless of race, gender or ethnicity;
- At a time when there were only 2 schools in the US where disabled students could attend—both public universities, the SA campus was designed and built from its beginning to be widely accessible to students with physical disability so that there would not be walls and stairs and doors that prevented these students from being full participants in the SA community;
- While many schools in the 70s and 80s only required their students to study Western civilization, St. Andrews hired faculty who could teach about the world and its history beyond their own cultural heritage, and they developed a core

curriculum, still a part of a SA education today, that introduces students to other cultures, religious traditions, political systems, artistic movements, the histories of both winners and losers;

- In the late 1970s, when scientists and great universities around the country built their own science programs, they built separate laboratories for biology, chemistry and physics. St Andrews, on the other hand, turned science education on its head by building a science center with a wide-open laboratory without walls so students in biology could see the experiments that students in chemistry and physics were doing and come to see the inter-relationships that bind all science together;
- In the 90s, when a few schools were offering equestrian programs as a PE activity or a competitive sport, St. Andrews added a program that focused on therapeutic horsemanship integrating equestrian studies into our academic program AND our athletic program so students could move seamlessly from sport to academics without artificial borders between them.

So for St. Andrews University and for the more than 15,000 students who have studied here over nearly 60 years, our history has been one of responding to challenge by changing the way higher education is delivered on our campus with policies of inclusion, of openness, of commitments to teach and learn outside the box of our own narrow self-interest and cultural background.

**St. Andrews Going Forward.** But we can't rest on the laurels of the past. Like you, St. Andrews has to respond to new challenges and rapid changes if we're going to continue to offer you the quality education that we want to deliver and that we believe you will need in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. I'm pleased to tell you that we're in the beginning stages of a comprehensive review of our academic and co-curricular programs to figure out how we can creatively refocus some current programs, add new majors, and strengthen our general education core to better meet the needs of students and remain relevant in the rapidly changing and competitive higher education environment in which we operate. So this coming year and over the next several years, you'll have more academic programs available to explore, more internship possibilities to consider, more opportunities to engage in community outreach with a social justice focus, and more ways to engage in community with other students and faculty. In short, while you are responding to your own personal challenge and changes, we will be doing the very same thing institutionally so we can support one another while we're on this journey together.

**Student Reflection.** Okay, you may be thinking. This all sounds good. I'm going to be challenged at a place that has been challenged in the past and is going through changes of its own. I'm going to gain new insights and engage with other students who have different backgrounds and experiences than I have had. I have the opportunity to gain new skills and get better at thinking, communicating, and working with others, and I'm going to change in important ways as a person during my years at St. Andrews. But the real questions you may be asking yourself are: What am I going to do when I graduate? How will all this help me find a job? Why

should I change? Do I really want to become another kind of person? At this point, what I really care about is making sure I have a nice car, a cool place to live, good friends, and a job that will pay me the bucks I need to enjoy my life.

**Vocation.** Well my friends, if job preparation is your only concern when you leave here, then we will have done only part of what we are committed to do. I can assure you, you will be well prepared for the world of work with a liberal arts and science education from St. Andrews. We do that really well and even with the changes that we are undertaking as an institution, providing students with a solid foundation in the liberal arts and science will continue to be one of our highest priorities.

Listen to billionaire businessman and NBA team owner, Mark Cuban, who noted recently that in the future job market, employees will need one critical skill: the ability to think creatively. I personally think, he said, that there's going to be a greater demand in 10 years for liberal arts majors than for computer programmers." And Elon Musk of Tesla car fame, added companies will want employees who are "freer thinkers" who can bring "a different perspective to the information and challenges that confront us" now and in the future.

At the heart of St. Andrews has always been, and will continue to be a commitment to delivering a high quality liberal arts and sciences education in which students are taught to think critically, communicate effectively, and learn to solve problems productively by working with others who have different talents, perspectives and ideas. You will be better prepared for the world of work than many of your generation who will enter the work force at the same time you do. But with all that, we've made another commitment to you that is equally important to preparing you to make a living. We're committed to preparing you to make a meaningful, purposeful life for yourself. Without that, the work you do day in, day out can become a meaningless drudgery and leave you deeply unfulfilled.

At many religiously-affiliated colleges and universities, and in particular at Christian colleges like St. Andrews, finding meaning and purpose in a one's life is sometimes referred to as discerning one's vocation, or another way of expressing it "searching for one's calling" – what does a person feel "called" to do beyond pursuing his or her own self-serving pleasures. In other words, how do you listen for and respond to what the Hebrew prophet Elijah characterized as that "still, small voice" deep within you that challenges you, that demands that you live your life in ways small and large to make a difference in the lives and futures of others. Vocation is a lifelong process of discovery and renewal. It's an irresistible response to an invitation to devote yourself to something larger than yourself with all of your heart, strength, mind and soul.

For you students, I hope in your classes you'll be inspired to think about your own calling:

- When you learn about historical and contemporary individuals who lived purpose-driven lives;
- When you open yourself up to suggestions from your advisor to take a few courses outside your comfort zone that may just stretch your imagination;
- When you realize that your behavior on the field or the court or in the residence halls says something important about the quality of your character; and
- When throughout your time at St. Andrews you use your many talents to do something for the common good, for the benefit of others.

In this time of challenge and change for you, we plan to help you think through what motivates your actions and animates you to change, to live outside the narrow confines of your own self-interest, and to find a direction in your life that leads to meaning and purpose. How will the work you do here and the life you begin when you leave lead you to focus on something larger than yourself, something that holds meaning for you beyond your own comfort and self-satisfaction.

We don't know what that will be for you, nor can we tell you what it ought to be, but we can help you wrestle with this important question, provide you with tools to analyze for yourself, and give you opportunities to explore new, sometimes hidden, passions in your life that will long outlive your last days playing intercollegiate athletics, your last days as a college student, your last days at your first job.

We all have doubts from time to time about our own purpose in this world and even about the mission and identity of this university and its place in higher education. I can assure you, however, that to a person, the faculty and staff at St. Andrews are here in response to their own calling to work in education and to support young men and women just like you. We want to help you engage this community in ways that will raise questions in your hearts and minds about what you are truly passionate about and how your passion and drive can make a difference in the lives of others and the world around you.

**Conclusion.** The speaker at the first Opening Convocation at St. Andrews in September 1961 was Dr. Daniel Rhodes, Professor of Religion & Philosophy at Davidson College. He summed up the challenge for St. Andrews and its students by saying, the challenge is "to become involved—to be an active participant in the educational process and in life itself. Let this be an orientation of your whole person at a new [and deeper] depth." He went on to say the risk of engagement is to become confused, to become dis—oriented. "You risk the loss of yourself as it is now, but with intense thought and work and searching you will find the self which you will become."

So, are you ready as students to begin the search, face the challenges, make changes and respond to your own personal calling in ways that lead you beyond the walls that separate you from each other and from the larger community?

And are we as a university prepared to take a few risks and act with a sense of urgency to introduce a new era of innovation and change that will make this good place even better and more responsive to the needs of our students and one another?

I think you are, and I think we are. So, let the journey begin on this day, the first day of the new academic year!