

OPENING CONVOCATION

for New Students in the Residential College for Women

Friday, August 26, 2005
First Presbyterian Church, 9:30 a.m.

Remarks by President Pamela Fox

GOOD MORNING

Class of 2009, welcome to the community of Mary Baldwin College.

Being a part of this community has many dimensions. There is the dimension of place, the spirit of place in this beautiful campus framed by mountain vistas. The spirit of our place conveys our proud and long sense of history since our founding in 1842. We sit this morning in historic First Presbyterian Church — which gave our college the first land to build the Administration Building across the Street, and with whom we stay closely associated.

We proudly and humbly stand on the shoulders of all who have come before us. We prepare the future for those who will come after us. The motto on our seal, our college motto, reads:

Non Pro Tempore sed Aeternitate.
Not for the present but for eternity.

Baldwin women are women of integrity. As we will sing in the Hymn to Mary Baldwin at the conclusion of convocation, “Friendship, honor, sorrow, laughter / Are the ways by which we learn.”

The dedicated faculty, all the student leaders here with us today, and every member of the staff and the administration of this college promise to take your achievements personally. We promise to offer you multiple paths to achievement. At Mary Baldwin College we place extraordinary value on human relationships. This means that personal transformation is our priority.

I ask each of you to dream big. Little dreams have little magic. I ask each of you to remember that choices matter. Each choice makes a difference — classes, majors, internships, international opportunities, club involvement, community service, spending time with your professors, your friends, your healthy choices in what you eat and how you live, fitness, exploring your spirituality. Choices matter and must be kept in balance.

Our extraordinary value on human relationships also embraces our collective relationship. We are the community of Mary Baldwin College. Class of 2009, student leaders, you join the other 750 women on our historic campus within the Residential College for Women. You may in addition be part of VWIL, or have entered as a PEG, or be in Ida B. Wells, but we are all united citizens of the Residential College for Women. In addition, our community includes about another 1400 members whom you may not frequently see. At commencement we are all together. Our community includes more than 1200 women and men in the Adult Degree Program, taking classes here in Staunton and in our five regional centers or campuses in Roanoke, Richmond, Piedmont Virginia Community College, and Blue Ridge Community College. Our community includes about 200 graduate students in two programs: the Master of Arts in Teaching Program and the Master of Letters/Master of Fine Arts Program in Shakespeare, which we offer in conjunction with the American Shakespeare Center and the Blackfriars Playhouse where we will all see *Comedy of Errors* together this afternoon. We are one college community.

In a few moments I will ask you to join voices together as we accept the Mary Baldwin College statement of inclusivity. Before we do so, I would like to offer some comments about the powerful beauty of these four simple sentences. The statement is printed in your program.

“We, the community of Mary Baldwin College” — Residential College for Women, Adult Degree Program, Graduate Students — “strive to celebrate humanity in all its wondrous and complex variation.”

We are a rich symphony of voices here at Mary Baldwin. Women of 2009, you are a richly-woven quilt. You are wondrous — amazing, striking, and extraordinary. Class of 2009 and the Mary Baldwin community, and most certainly our entire global society are complex. We have many interwoven facets.

So when we pledge that we value diversity, we do not and cannot list all the variations we possess. We understand that not all differences are neutral. Some differences mark people positively or negatively. Above all, no one is defined by or lives in a single identity category. We all live multiple roles: through racial identities and gendered ones; through religious affiliations and ethnic legacies; through socioeconomic attributes and sexual orientations. Each of us both inherits identities through our cultural roots and affiliates with new communities throughout our lives. These differences are not static, but fluid and ever-changing. One or the other of our identities may be more or less prominent in different contexts.

I bring you inspiration from the great scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., from an essay titled “The Ethics of Identity.” Gates states: “I’m uncomfortable with the notion of adulthood being founded on a stated, laminated sense of self, the notion that finding yourself, that self-fashioning and refashioning, is another of those adolescent maladies, like acne, that you’re supposed to outgrow. What if, instead, we saw this kind of refashioning as one of the ethical tasks of our lives?”

As a community, we must cross boundaries to connect through differences, and, in so doing, to discover what we share in common as human beings and as the community of Mary Baldwin College. This involves knowledge — as the Hymn to Mary Baldwin states — “Knowledge first, then wisdom after” — knowledge about our variations in history, cultures, psychologies, and aesthetics. This is one of our highest obligations to ourselves: to our world at Mary Baldwin lived in common.

To live in common we must “sustain a community where all may flourish.” How do we do this? We must feel safe. We must feel comfortable to express ourselves fully. We must listen and absorb.

We must embrace our shared experiences. We have such rich history here. This convocation is deeply rooted in the history of Mary Baldwin College, from its earliest days as a seminary. This is the 76th year of student government at Mary Baldwin. Next week you will sign the honor code on Charter Day. In so doing, you accept the responsibility and the privilege of student governance as you live together. In early October we will celebrate Founders Day, observed in our community since 1898 to honor Mary Julia Baldwin’s birthday. Apple Day, Junior Dads, Kwanza, Christmas Cheer, intercollegiate athletics, Signature Ball, VWIL parades, squirrels and class colors (yours of lavender and white as planted in the mums outside Grafton Library), Commencement Ball — these and many other traditions, some throughout our 164 years of distinguished history and some more recently adopted, are a vital part of our shared experiences.

Above all, we treat all with respect and compassion. We seek respect first within ourselves, and, respecting ourselves we extend our regard, compassion, and kindness to others. I ask you to adopt a tone of good will.

So, “We, the community of Mary Baldwin College, strive to celebrate humanity in all its wondrous and complex variation. Because we value diversity, it is our mission to sustain a community where all may flourish. We are safe to embrace our shared experiences and our differences. To this end, we treat all with respect and compassion.”

Class of 2009, student leaders, and all community members present, will you please stand and state with me our commitment to inclusive community:

We, the community of Mary Baldwin College, strive to celebrate humanity in all its wondrous and complex variation. Because we value diversity, it is our mission to sustain a community where all may flourish. We are safe to embrace our shared experiences and our differences. To this end, we treat all with respect and compassion.

Thank you. Please be seated.

Welcome to the community of Mary Baldwin College. Enjoy yourself. Go confidently in the direction of your dreams and live the life you have imagined for yourself.