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102nd Convocation 2016 Address - The Sky and Sea

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CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

The Sky and Sea: Knowing, Being and Doing in the 21st Century Academy

**Remarks by John McKnight, Dean of Institutional Equity and Inclusion
102nd Convocation at Connecticut College
August 29, 2016**

What I knew about jazz in the seventh grade was that a good trumpet player had a warm tone. That was about the extent of my knowledge, and I knew it only because I'd somehow managed to beat out the four chairs in front of me for a solo in George Gershwin's classic piece, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Now, before you get too excited or congratulatory, remember that we're talking about middle school concert band, not the Boston Pops. That said, it was a pretty big deal and I'm obviously still pretty proud.

What I knew about jazz in high school was that Miles Davis was an absolute genius, as was John Coltrane, Ella Fitzgerald, and so many others. When I found them, I fell head over heels in love. It was Miles Davis' masterpiece of a record, *Kind of Blue*, and in particular the standout track *Blue in Green*, that allowed me to experience pure joy and profound sadness, simultaneously. I'd never before reacted so strongly to instrumental music.

A few years later, in college, I discovered a rendition of *Blue in Green* with vocals from the divinely gifted Cassandra Wilson layered on top of a sinister, almost gloomy instrumental arrangement. The lyrics were at once simple and substantial:

Tossed between

the sky and sea,

we'll sail

until we find the harbor lights.

This recording gave entirely new life and meaning to the tune I'd come to love a few years earlier.

Fast forward to a graduate level elective course in Ethnomusicology, which, by the way, was supposed to be an easy and fun escape from my normal course of study, but ended up being one of the most demanding courses I've ever taken. It was in this graduate course that I learned a whole lot more about jazz and other forms of so-called "race music." I learned that social changes beginning in the 1940s and continuing throughout the rest of the 20th century were both influenced by and influential to the Afro-modernism of jazz and other race music. I also now understood that as important as George and Ira Gershwin were in the American musical canon, *Rhapsody in Blue* was not really jazz, at least not in the purest sense.

I share my jazz stories with you today for a specific reason. At the start of a new academic year, I am reflecting on human ways of knowing. I am thinking about knowledge itself. How we acquire it; how we embody it; and what we ultimately do with it, particularly in an elite academic environment, where the knowledge to be acquired is infinite.

I've gone from a very simple to a much more complex understanding of jazz throughout my lifetime, but this is a fairly inconsequential example. What about the other kinds of knowledge I've acquired over the years? What social problems was I aware of as a child? Did I think at all about inequities or oppressive systems and how they were constructed? What did the media, or church leaders, or my parents tell me about poverty – or about saving the environment? How much of what I knew was based on what I felt or directly experienced as a Black man? Can I trust what I learned from my 7th grade U.S. History teacher? A college professor said no. And books I've read since college have complicated my understanding even further.

See the thing about knowledge is that it is as vast as the sky and as deep as the sea, and it's every bit as difficult to fully acquire, behold, or even imagine. But in a community of learners, we try our best to take it all in and to knit it together into something beautiful, something useful.

In today's times, it's the usefulness of an education that stands trial in the court of public opinion, particularly the usefulness of the liberal arts. What is useful about a degree from a liberal arts college? How do you know that you've made a good choice in choosing Conn? Well, I'm so glad you asked.

First, your education here will be – at least in part – about you. There is hardly any other place you could go or any other time in your life as vital to your own self-discovery as being here in this place at this time. Of course, you've chosen the highest caliber of an academic institution, where you'll read Plato, and fall in love with James Baldwin or Rumi or C.S. Lewis or bell hooks; you'll listen to Tchaikovsky and Celia Cruz; you'll dissect Beyonce's latest visual album and its feminist overtones; you'll behold internationally acclaimed dancers; you'll travel abroad to remote places; you'll debate with friends about colonialism until the wee hours of the morning, and contemplate the complex history of war, and meditate on the musings of Audre Lorde or Paulo Freire; and speak perfect French with classmates, over baguettes; and solve impossible-to-solve math problems and run the same scientific experiments over and over and over again, until you begin seeing the results you hypothesized. You'll do all this, and you'll have acquired an amazing amount of information. That alone will bring a certain amount of fulfillment. But all of this information and more will also be in service to your own identity development.

In the process of acquiring all this information, you will learn a lot more about who *you* are. You'll cling more tightly to some of the values, beliefs and traditions you bring with you from home and discover entire new worlds and ways of being. You may realize that some of your old information is inaccurate. A disagreement with a classmate, a complex assignment from a professor, or a disappointing loss on the courts and playing fields will ultimately show you how you behave under stress or extreme pressure. Your ethics may be questioned or morals challenged. You will unlock new passions, light new fires and douse old ones.

One of you sitting out there will be like prominent Conn alum, David Carliner from the class of 82, who early on in his college career volunteered with a local center providing care to elders and later wrote a senior thesis in Psychology on aging. Mr. Carliner went on to create for himself a very

meaningful and distinguished career advocating for the safety and support of seniors in residential settings.

Perhaps someone else out there will follow in the footsteps of Debo Adegbile whose path, as you heard, took him from volunteerism and advocacy work in New London public schools all the way to arguing cases at the Supreme Court.

Whatever knowledge you may acquire here, and in whatever ways that happens, know that there will be a direct connection to your personal identity development. This is the power and the beauty of the liberal arts.

Another reason you've made a good choice is that the people here are all interested in helping you to turn your knowledge into action. You already know that we have a world class faculty and that your student peers are exceptionally bright and talented. What you may not realize, however, is that pretty much everyone else here you encounter will also play an important role in delivering a high-quality education. From dining services staff, to custodians, to librarians, to coaches – we are all here to provide for you an education that matters – an education of consequence.

Like you, I am new to this community, so I want to share a few words about how I see myself and my colleagues contributing to your education. We are diversity educators; which means we value the social differences you have brought with you to campus and see those as essential to *your* overall learning and the education of those around you. We want you to learn everything you can about this great big world – even the uncomfortable stuff. Here, you may be confronted with an –ism or a phobia of some kind that you didn't know much about before. You may learn that some aspect of who you are is an affront to someone else's political, religious, or ideological values. We see these kinds of things happening in today's college environment perhaps more vigorously than at any other time, most certainly in recent history.

As the dean who is explicitly charged with helping this community to become more equitable and inclusive of people from all backgrounds, I realize that I have my work cut out for me. I can most certainly relate to all the salmon of the world who are swimming upstream; in my case against the force of rules, norms, and behaviors that perpetuate systems of oppression and injustice that have stood the test of time. College campuses cannot exist separately from our national or international contexts, nor can we create perfect little utopian societies. But we can show up each day with a strong commitment to seek out meaningful and productive ways of working together to move our institution forward. I believe that even though Conn is already what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as a "beloved community," we can love and treasure it even more. And it may help you to know that I approach this work with the lessons I've learned from jazz over the years: have a plan, but also expect to improvise; use a warm tone; feed off of the energy of others; and always be fully present and trusting of the other players, even if you're not sure where exactly they're headed.

Here at Conn, we aspire to be more than just a safe space, but we want to be a brave space, where people courageously enter into risky or controversial territory and they do so with care and concern for this beloved community and with respect for the humanity of everyone in it. The easy route would be to take what you know from a few articles you've read or great lectures you've heard and to browbeat other people with it. And it is certainly tempting in this social and political climate to use our intellect as boxing gloves, going to blows with everyone we disagree with. That's what many of our political, business, and even spiritual leaders are modeling for us. A much more challenging, and I think,

rewarding approach for us all is to assume we don't actually know everything there is to know about most of these situations and to enter difficult conversations with an insatiable appetite for new perspectives. This is achieved by asking big questions, *and* smaller, more nuanced ones. This is what smart, well-educated, intellectually curious people do. This is the courage – the bravery we expect of you.

American media mogul Oprah Winfrey has a go-to question for interviews with prominent figures and pop culture icons. The question is simply this: What do you know for sure? Well, Oprah, I may not be famous, but here are a few things I know for sure at this point in my life:

I know for sure that jazz is an American art form that my people created and perfected, and that it has been consumed by people of all races and backgrounds; much like the blues, hip hop and other forms of art, style and culture.

I know for sure that the liberal arts teach students how to think critically and provide unparalleled access to opportunities to translate good thinking into action.

I know that our very best hope as a nation, as world citizens, as the human race, is to invest our time, energy and other precious resources into our youth. And I know I may be adding to the pressure you already feel as you launch into your college careers. But luckily for you, I also know that you already possess the intellect, the skills, and the personal qualities to rise to any challenge set before you. I know this because you're at Connecticut College, and we only admit the very best students. I know that you'll have the love and support of relatives and friends back home, thrusting you forward whenever you might feel overwhelmed or afraid.

I've already heard a few speakers throughout orientation joke that you are the class with perfect vision. I, too, have big hopes and wishes for you. We need your vision to help us see a clear path forward. The society that your generation wants is not even imaginable to most of us who are a little older. We've seen things happen in our lifetimes that we never believed possible. But your imaginations are already more vivid than ours ever were or could be. In some ways, the grown-ups have failed you. And that's why we have to do this together. Your education at Conn must be an intergenerational one, where you glean the best parts of what you've learned from your parents, grandparents, community and faith leaders, and what you'll learn from your faculty and other campus educators. And then, share with us your 2020 vision of the society we can become. You are the greatest generation in part because you have access to infinite information to help form that vision. Your challenge is to sift through it all and to knit together something beautiful, something useful – even if it can never really be complete.

Class of 2020, transfer and return to College students, trustees and alumni of the College, faculty and staff, we've all chosen to spend a significant amount of our lives here – together – at Connecticut College: an idyllic setting that quite literally is “tossed between the sky and sea.” Students, it is the place where you can acquire more knowledge and information than ever before. You'll learn and grow here. And when you need to reflect on all that you're learning, just look up at an amazing blue sky and across an endless sea and know that this is the place that gave you just what you needed.

Thank you and best wishes to all for a wonderful year at Conn.

(Remarks as prepared by John McKnight.)