

Inauguration of Audrey Bilger as the 16th President of Reed College
October 4, 2019

Transcript of the inaugural address by President Audrey Bilger.

I am delighted to see you all here today. Thanks to the trustees, delegates, musicians, and those who have delivered such gracious words of welcome, wisdom, and verse; thanks to the faculty for your participation; thank you, students, alumni, and staff; thanks to my dear friends and beloved family members. Boundless gratitude to my amazing and incredibly supportive wife, Cheryl. Thanks, also, to everyone who has worked to make this day happen, from the presidential search committee to the inauguration planning team. It takes many hands to put together a celebration like this. Please help me show appreciation with a round of applause.

Being elected to serve as Reed College's 16th president is the honor of a lifetime, and as I stand before you, taking this all in, I am inspired. Inspired by the history of this distinctive institution, inspired by the beauty of our campus, even in the rain, inspired by the vibrancy of the city of Portland, and inspired by the grandeur of nature that surrounds us in the state of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

Most of all, I find inspiration and take enormous pride in what Reed stands for: academic excellence and a belief in freedom of inquiry as the foundation of a fully participatory democracy. Reed is a special place, and I am thrilled to be at the helm as we usher in a new chapter of this extraordinary story.

In the feminist classic *A Room of One's Own* (published 90 years ago this month), Virginia Woolf narrates a scene in which she is denied entrance into a university library because, as she is told by an official, "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction." Later in the essay, she reflects on what it means to be excluded, ". . . I thought of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in . . ."

Woolf's recognition of the closed door as having two sides, one that locks out and one that locks in, becomes an invitation to question the status quo, to challenge privilege from the outside, and ultimately to envision a different sort of future. She celebrates as essential to freedom the ability to earn money, to inhabit one's own room, and in keeping with her chosen profession, to close the door and write. She stresses the importance of receiving access to education and being aware of one's place in history as preconditions for creativity. "For masterpieces," Woolf writes, "are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."

As Reed's first woman president, I am particularly conscious of and grateful for the collective history that has made it possible for me to be here today. At the same time, I know that progress is not a straight line and that we must pay attention to doors that remain closed to so many. Above all, we must resist getting locked in to narrow and limited points of view.

At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, we see daily evidence of the dangers of locked-in thinking. Polarization plagues the nation, and education is under attack in discourse that equates intellect with elitism and that views college as just another commodity. It is important for us to remember that across time and in our present day, people have fought and died for the right to an education. We must treasure and champion this precious resource.

At Reed, we are passionate about learning. Inquiry and exploration thrive here. We know that education matters. In my conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni of the college, I am repeatedly struck by how excited people get when they talk about what they have learned or are learning. In classrooms, labs, studios, offices, on sidewalks, the canyon, and, yes, in the library, there is an energy that comes from all of this learning and creativity. If Reed is known for being intense and serious, at the root of that intensity and seriousness is a deep and abiding love for the pursuit of knowledge. We hold ourselves to high standards and talk a great deal about rigor, but rigor need not be rigid. There is no rigor without love.

When I speak of love, I am not being sentimental—or manipulative. Oscar Wilde noted that “the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.” You know what this means: Valentine's Day, commercials with puppies, phony patriotism. Let us be clear, anti-intellectualism is a form of cynicism, and the love of learning is a super power. Diffidence, disaffection, the willful denial of facts—these are enemies of democracy and freedom. Love motivates us to engage, to act, to participate. Love is the ultimate ampersand.

Anyone who has ever been caught up in the creative space at the heart of learning knows what it feels like to lose track of time, to be completely absorbed, to hunger for more and still more. Early in my educational journey, as a student in Oklahoma, I read a passage by philosopher Martin Buber that has stayed with me: “You do not attain to knowledge by remaining on the shore and watching the foaming waves, you must make the venture and cast yourself in, you must swim, alert and with all your force, even if a moment comes when you think you are losing consciousness.” Buber believed in education as a form of connection and in connection as the life force that saves humans from viewing self and other as mere objects. He wrote about the “love-deed-Yes” and the “power-deed-No” and urged us to “love powerfully.”

Loving powerfully requires courage. You must step forward and be willing to make mistakes and even fail, believing all the while that the effort matters. You jump in, immerse yourself, and if you're fortunate to be in a community of learners, you get to share with one another the illuminations and discoveries.

Something I love about Reed is the sincerity that everyone brings to the table. I have heard many students talk about how they came from places where they thought they were the only one who cared—about books, music, art, school. I know I felt like this when I was young. I stayed up late reading and wrote like a fiend. I experienced study and creativity as forms of magic, like falling into a trance. That said, finding kindred spirits was a challenge. When you think you're the only one, you might feel distinct, but you can also feel isolated. “How unpleasant it is to be locked out,” as Woolf put it. I didn't even know that places like Reed existed. I worried that I had so much to learn and feared I would never catch up. It took me a long time to figure out that there would be no catching up. The road winds on, and there are always additional doors to unlock, passageways to venture into. It is a joy to work with young people as they embark on their journeys and to let them know that they are not alone, that they are seen and heard and taken seriously.

Faculty who dedicate our lives to liberal arts education do so because we find inspiration in teaching as well as in research and creative expression. We love the classroom, and we care deeply about our students. Inspiring and being inspired by students is at the center of what we do, and we forge lifelong bonds and deeply meaningful relationships. The best teaching opens up some form of dialogue. Lectures are beginning points, not ends, and lessons from the past carry forward in relation to an ever-evolving landscape of inquiry and exploration.

In over three decades of college teaching, I have taught dozens of courses and hundreds of students. Each semester brings fresh surprises, every class has its own personality, and the students are all unique. My advice to students has always been this: explore broadly, welcome opportunities to face new challenges and experiment in areas previously unknown. The constellation of courses you will encounter at a liberal arts college will be highly individualized. You will leave with the ability to connect the dots across disciplines and to ask big questions from a variety of standpoints. You will be a passionate lifelong learner with a questing spirit and a strong sense of purpose.

Consider the words of James Baldwin: “The world is before you, and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.” Those of us who love learning do not accept the world as we find it; instead, we investigate and query, we seek to understand the hows and the whys. We do this repeatedly throughout our lives. There is no such thing as figuring it out once and for all.

On our campus, as in the world around us, there have been and there will be hard times and difficult conversations. Trust can be fragile and fleeting. If we can engage in genuine dialogue with curiosity and sincerity—something that makes our classrooms come to life and creates space for learning—we will find our way together.

Reed is not, nor should it be, a static entity. Reed is us right now, in this moment, and it stretches beyond the boundaries of this campus and gathers many lives into its sphere of influence. Reed is a high ideal. It lives in the hearts and minds of our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and extended community members. I believe in Reed, and I am mindful of our shared responsibility to sustain this college and to join together in envisioning its future.

At a gathering a few weeks ago, one of our alumni spoke about the way Reed teaches students to challenge assumptions. He offered the following illustration: Two plus two equals four, unless you're counting the rhythm of a waltz—and then two plus two is one, as in 1-2-3, 1. This kind of questioning paves the way for discovery and change. This is why the world needs more Reedies.

Waltz time is a lovely analogy for intellectual openness and engagement. The threes play off against the fours in a three-quarter pulse, circling and spinning like weathergrams on a tree branch at dusk, or like the tendrils of an ampersand, defying either/or, celebrating the improvisational “yes, and now, yes, and now, yes, and now.”

Let us waltz forth together, loving this college and imagining the possibilities. See you on the dance floor.