Authentic Identity
Baccalaureate Address, Emory University, 13 May 2012
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Good morning.

In addition to bringing members of the graduating class together to celebrate and give thanks, the baccalaureate service also provides an opportunity to engage in one last academic exercise by considering some lesson which surely you have received, perhaps even mastered, here at Emory, in spite of the fact that there will never be any record on your transcript of having learned it. In recent years baccalaureate messages have addressed our collective lessons in wisdom, wonder, uncertainty, aspiration, humility, abundance, privilege, and engagement. This year, I have chosen to speak with you about “authentic identity” and the value and courage required for being one’s self. Maybe you were not aware that you had taken this lesson. It is my intent that this message should help you to recall that, in fact, you have taken it and that you have learned. I trust also that this message will be in some ways freeing or at least helpful to you to hold on to some of the freedom that you experienced here.

To explore some of these lasting lessons and truths it is valuable to draw from wisdom literature. Histories and biographies often are wonderful sources of wisdom. And today we refer to the wisdom of Jewish and Christian scripture. Psalm 139, as you heard read by Dean Forman, is part of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament. The psalmist, presumably King David, speaking to God says that “you have known me.” He did not say in this instance that you have known my people, or that you have known my family, he says that you have known me, that I have an individual personal identity about which I may not even be fully aware but you have known. The psalmist goes on to say that God would know him or any of us wherever we would try to hide. That suggests two points: first, that God is God (all-knowing and all present) and, secondly, that we would contemplate hiding from being known as our authentic selves in spite of that—that for some reason hiding is an attractive option for us. Now this is starting to sound like something we can identify with, that there is a real us but we are not always entirely comfortable with that real us being known. In fact, we know that at times we have put more energy in hiding who we are than we have invested in the courage to be fully ourselves.

And so we hide. But before addressing the many ways that we hide and the pressures that lead us to do so, I remind you that one of the lessons and blessings of the Emory experience has been the low risk associated with openly becoming and being who you are. You came here shaped by home and childhood experiences and perhaps for some of you home is still where you feel most free to be who you are. But for others, most I hope, Emory has provided even greater freedom to be and to be known. That’s been great. But you may soon be entering a new environment where exercising the freedom further to develop and display an authentic identity may become more difficult. I urge you not to bend under the pressures either to hide or conform. Not only will doing so rob you of the freedom that you
have enjoyed thus far, but it will also rob society of the opportunity to benefit fully from an authentic you.

From the scripture written by the apostle Paul and read this morning by John Ford, a healthy community is like a healthy body requiring each of its parts not to wish to be like any of the others, but to function powerfully in their respective and authentic ways to ensure the health of the entire community.

Perhaps the best defense against losing or suppressing our authentic identity might come from considering, head-on, the several ways that we might be tempted to hide. Sometimes, we might choose almost literally to go into hiding, to become reclusive, for example, keeping to ourselves, being a loner. That would indeed protect our identity. But another, far more common and horribly insidious practice of hiding comes from doing just the opposite of seeking to be a recluse. We often hide by joining, by joining political parties, religious groups, or social movements, not because they are groups with whom we share common elements of an identity that we have already authentically developed, but because by joining these groups we believe they can give us an identity. We hear often of inner-city youths joining street gangs because it gives them a sense of identity and even family. In some ways, we are little better than those young men and women when we use membership as a lazy alternative to individual character formation. Don't get me wrong—memberships can be powerful ways to lend one's identity to a greater cause. But we should join because we have first formed an identity, not because we need one. I suppose by that logic there would be greater integrity in a situation whereby a young person would determine that they find value in running drugs and committing crimes and then would join an inner-city gang, rather than joining the gang first and being forced to adopt the gang values.

The pressures to be a joiner are even worse when, in addition to social pressure, there is financial pressure—when one’s job might depend on assuming a popular identity or membership association. It troubles me when I hear a politician say that they are “merely trying to do with the American people want.” In fact, America’s system of government—a democratically elected republic—is one whereby we trust our politicians, and their identity defined by their virtues and values, to do what it is that the American people need, not simply what we imagine that we want. Without an authentic identity, our politicians are tempted to govern by the opinion polls to best ensure that they can maintain their membership that gives them access to the clubhouse on Capitol Hill.

So how do you assert and even continue to grow an authentic identity without either hiding or selling out, especially as you enter a new environment where asserting identity may be more difficult than either hiding yours or borrowing another? What is meant by an authentic identity? A couple of years ago Mark Roche, former dean of Notre Dame’s College of Arts and Letters, wrote in his book Why Choose the Liberal Arts, that the value of a liberal arts education must go beyond the disciplines of the mind associated with critical thinking. It must have also a moral and social purpose with “the goal of helping students develop virtues, build character, and gain a sense of vocation.” I would like to think that at Emory the opportunity for you to have acquired and recognized a personally held set of virtues as the basis for moral principles upon which to act ethically would be somewhat higher than
is reflected in the results of the nationwide Faculty Survey of Student Engagement in 2009. In that survey 93% of faculty teaching at liberal arts institutions who responded to it said that there should be “quite a bit” or “very much” emphasis placed on “thinking critically and analytically.” That much is right and makes sense, it seems to me. But only 50% indicated that there should be “quite a bit” or “very much” emphasis on helping students develop “a personal code of values and ethics.” Yet it is in the adoption of a personal code of values and ethics that we develop the basis authentically to define ourselves and how we will set our goals and respond to the opportunities and challenges presented to us throughout life. Lacking this personal code, an authentic identity, we are relegated to making choices based on values consistent with our longing to belong, to be a member of the social scene, a political party, or for that matter the American electorate, without recognizing that in failing to bring our authentic selves to those organizations we are mostly taking from rather than contributing creatively to them.

In his book Half Time, Bob Buford challenges his readers to name that one thing or one set of virtues and values that is the central motivator in their lives. He reminds us to consider the character Curly in the 1991 movie City Slickers, starring Billy Crystal and Jack Palance. Although your parents likely have enjoyed this movie, I'm not sure how available or popular it is as a rerun, and my guess is that it will not soon be rereleased 3-D. So to review... The story is about a group of thirty-something-aged city slickers who sign up to ride on a cattle drive and use the experience to examine their lives. Billy Crystal played the lead ‘slicker,’ Mitch, and Jack Palance played Curly, the well weathered and crusty cowboy who will serve as their guide on this adventure. Billy Crystal's character describes Curly as leathery, “a saddle bag with eyes,” he says. Curly is not only weather-beaten and crusty and intimidating (Mitch: “Good morning, Curly. Killed anyone today?” Curly: “Today ain’t over yet.”), but Curly is also wise. In a moment out on the range when the conversation becomes philosophical, the following exchange takes place.

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is?
[holds up one finger]
Curly: This.
Mitch: Your finger?
Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don’t mean [anything].
Mitch: But, what is the “one thing?”
Curly: [smiles] That’s what *you* have to find out.

Again, from our Christian writer, Paul, we heard these words, “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me ... .”

Whether it’s Mark Roche, Bob Buford, Curly, or the apostle Paul, all seem to be urging us to examine our lives to ensure that we have in place the central thing that defines our identity. They seem to be challenging us to find and place just one thing in the center of our being, so that everything else is second in priority. That one thing in the center could be borrowed from those groups that we would like to join. For example, we could put and have put at
times popularity, fame, wealth, or recognition. Can you see how doing so would (or did) define your identity clearly and crisply as well as determine the nature of the decisions that you make with the opportunities and issues that present themselves? Perhaps we should put more noble things in the center like family and community and country. But the sources of wisdom that we are drawing upon today would suggest that those more noble values, as noble as they are, might better be part of as much of a ten-way tie for second place. Instead we should seek to find the absolutely most noble, incorruptible, and even holy thing to consider as the sole occupant of the center of our lives and definer of our identities. When we can do that, success is then judged by the degree to which each of us has been true to that one thing and the associated priorities that derive from it. Thus we are called to commitment rather than achievement. Achievement will follow, but it becomes a byproduct of our faithfulness to our central values, our authentic identity. Furthermore, we are freed from the hopeless trap of demanding of ourselves perfection and accomplishment measured against a set of standards set by others. We can judge instead our own success by the degree to which we are committed and faithful to our ideals.

We know that this is right. It makes sense down deep. We see it in the people whose stories inspire awe. From it comes the motivation and inspiration to take care of self, family, community, nation, and the world. Believe it or not ... No! — just believe it, you have enjoyed the kind of freedom here at Emory to be accepted for who you are, and you have shown that freedom to welcome others to express their own authentic identity. I have witnessed it and so have you. Although not perfect, this has been a special community embodied by you, a special senior class.

So ... that is the lesson about which I wanted to remind you. To keep the key points of the lesson fresh will require that you continue to perform with integrity your homework assignments of reflection, observation, honesty, and devotion. Although there is no assigned reading, wisdom literature is highly recommended. There are no scheduled exams, but there will be frequent pop quizzes, perhaps almost daily. I expect you to maintain the high grades that you have earned already.

My prayer for you is that God would bless you — bless us — with discernment to know what must be in the center of our lives and the courage to remain committed to it in order authentically to be ourselves. The psalmist said “Oh Lord, you have sought me and known me.” We are grateful for our experience of seeking here as a part of this Emory community. May we be guided always as we seek to be authentically who we are and who we are called to be. Amen.