



**President Susan Traverso, Ph.D.**

Opening Convocation Speech

*August 29, 2019*

Greetings, faculty, staff, and students. We gather here today to welcome new students to Thiel and to celebrate the start of the academic year.

We call this ritual “Opening Convocation.”

It’s a rather old-fashioned term, but it is an important tradition at colleges and universities across the country.

A Convocation is an assembly of people OR the action of calling people together.

In the case of today, it is both. Tradition calls us together AND we are gathered here.

Each year at Thiel, we have three important academic gatherings: Opening Convocation; Honors Convocation (in February); and Commencement.

Opening Convocation at Thiel is the first Common Hour of the fall. And the first-year students ask, “What’s Common Hour?”

Each Thursday from 11:00 to noon, we have the chance to gather for a variety of events, speakers, and activities. There are no classes, athletic practices or meetings during that time slot (and none can be scheduled).

On many of those Thursdays, like today, campus offices will be closed so staff can also join us to explore new ideas and learn more about Thiel.

I encourage all of you to check out the Common Hour schedule and plan to attend. You’ll see that, upon the recommendation of students, we have added more active events each month this fall.

Is Common Hour mandatory? Yes, if your professor or supervisor asks you to attend. And even if they don’t require you, there is much to gain from attending Common Hour.

Common Hour each Thursday helps to make us a community of learners—students, faculty and staff. It is also a chance to learn about topics and ideas that you may be less familiar with—that is what college is really all about—and not just for students, but for all of us.

Tuesday’s schedule also includes a mid-day break that we call Community Hour at Thiel. There are no classes scheduled during community hour, making it possible for campus organizations, departments and committees to meet or host events. New on Tuesdays this year will be a different type of Religious Life gathering. Our new campus pastor, Brian Riddle, will be working with students from the rich array of Christian backgrounds and



beliefs to gather at 11:15 each Tuesday. He will be sending out more information about his ideas for Tuesdays as well as other religious life programs.

Common Hour on Thursdays and Community Hour and Chapel on Tuesday are distinctive ways we come together as a community.

It is that strong sense of community that distinguishes Thiel and inspires students, faculty and staff to join Thiel College. Twice a week, and in so many other ways, we are living our values of curiosity, inquiry, truth, and fellowship.

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Since I joined the Thiel community three years ago, we have seen distinctive annual themes emerge each year. During my first year at the College, **philanthropy** stood out as an important theme. That year, the College celebrated the conclusion of its \$65 million capital campaign. In May of that year, the president of the Dietrich Foundation, the philanthropic organization in Pittsburgh that funds Thiel's Honors program, delivered the Commencement address. As a capstone of the year, his speech urged the graduates (and all of us) to give back to their community with talent, time, and treasure.

During my second year at Thiel, we engaged around the theme of **interfaith understanding**. That year, the College hosted a series of speakers that expanded our understanding of different religious traditions. In May, Dr. Donald Kraybill, a preeminent scholar of the Amish, spoke at Commencement. He encouraged us to remain open to other **faith traditions**, to avoid the **sin of certainty**, as we frame our own sense of meaning and purpose. We may, he suggested, gain an even deeper sense of our own beliefs by appreciating the values that others hold dear.

Last year, the theme of **community** emerged. In the fall, we dedicated the Fred Rogers' room in the Pedas Center, a reminder of the Thiel connection with this "visionary educator" who was awarded his first honorary degree by Thiel College and a recognition of the scholarship support that his family foundation provides to students at Thiel.

Living, as it were, Mr. Rogers' values, Thiel opened a pre-school classroom on campus that serves children and families in our region. The Pre-K Counts classroom is good for our region and good for our education majors.

In February, the inaugural Criminal Justice Fellow, Dr. Ruth Peterson, shared her research on neighbor communities, and we learned that neighbor crime is not correlated with the "type of people" in a neighborhood but, rather the level of investment and jobs in a neighborhood.

Then in April, Thiel's inaugural Woodrow Wilson Fellow, Callie Crossley, taught us about the digital communities created by the internet, and she asked us to reflect on how we interact with those communities and the impact of those communities on our lives.



The capstone of last year's focus on community was the Commencement Address by Bill Strickland. A Pittsburgh luminary, Bill Strickland received an honorary degree in recognition of his 50 years of work building Manchester Bidwell, an innovative community center in the Manchester neighborhood in Pittsburgh. Manchester Bidwell provides afternoon arts programs to high schools students and workforce development programs during the day.

In his speech, Mr. Strickland inspired the graduating class (and all of us) to go out into the world as community builders, as people committed to making the world a better place. Such advice is common at graduations, but it was profound coming from Bill Strickland, a man who dedicated his life to creating opportunities for others.

Over the summer, I had the opportunity to read Bill Strickland's autobiography. It's titled "Make the Impossible Possible." I recommend his book to everyone.

In this wonderful book, Bill Strickland reflects on his life. As he did during his Commencement speech, he wonders in his book:

"What explains the path I have taken in life?" and he asks, "How was it possible for a young African-American man from a very poor neighborhood in Pittsburgh to see life unfold with great meaning and success—a life rich with experiences, opportunity, accomplishments, and recognitions, including being awarded a MacArthur Genius award."

In other words:

How did I become who I am?

That is an interesting question—and the title of my comments today: "Becoming who you are."

The concept of "becoming who you are" is, in fact, an idea that German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche explores.

It would be a much longer talk today if we began down the path of discussing Nietzsche. Now we know our colleagues in Philosophy, Professors White and Morgan, would welcome a full dissertation on this complex figure in European thought.

Sorry, gentlemen, just can't do that here (and likely, at all)

Still, let's think about this concept of becoming who we are.

Typically, we associate "becoming" with changing, becoming something different than we are.

Our first-year students, likely have been thinking all last year and certainly this past week about "becoming college students."



In most cases, you have probably thought that becoming a college student means no longer being a high school student. No longer living at home. No longer being the person you were in high school.

Well, I am here to suggest that authentic “becoming” is more about self-discovery than it is about change.

This is the essence of Bill Strickland’s autobiography. In reflecting back on his life, he comes to realize that the person who he is—a luminary in Pittsburgh, a national and international expert on social change, a genius of community development—grew out of who he was as a young man, his values, his passions.

For Strickland, and for all of us, becoming who we are is about understanding what we value, what we find meaningful, what gives us joy.

And how do we do this?

By being open to new ideas, people, and experiences. These experiences, new ideas, new friends can help us as we become who we are.

In some instances, they will confirm our values and beliefs, and in other instances, they will challenge our beliefs and values, helping us better understand who we are.

This journey of becoming who we are is easier to see from the perspective of someone Bill Strickland’s age. Looking back is easier than looking forward earlier in one’s life when so much seems yet unknown.

Still, let’s take Bill Strickland’s advice. If you want to be successful—in the classroom, on the playing field, in your career, and most importantly, in your life—figure out what gives you **deep gladness** and then pursue that with an open and curious mind, and do good for others.

As this year begins, a theme is starting to emerge. It’s about finding how our beliefs and values can give us **purpose**, how in knowing ourselves/our stories we become who we are. This is true for the College as well. For 153 years, Thiel has become who it is, over and over again, through its mission— “to prepare students for **careers** and **lives** of meaning and purpose.”

As we together, and especially our new students, strive to understand what is most meaningful to each of us, we will become who we are. Embarking on that journey with an openness to others will make it a journey of joy.

And so, I say, let’s have a wonderful and joyful year, becoming who we are.

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