

CLOSING WORDS
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Thank you, Darron for asking me to speak these brief closing words at your inauguration. Like you, I am an alumnus of this college, and I share your feelings about all that has taken place here over the years. My own memories go back to the flickering, marvelous beginnings of the school, and the enthralling, utopian idealism of those days. But like you, Darron, I also want to move forward into our future. Years ago I had an older friend who advised me that whenever you are faced with a really difficult decision, choose the way of the future. Over the years I have taken this advice seriously, which has not always been easy since by nature I want to hold onto everything. In fact I believe that active memory of the past represents a kind of intellectual humility—and a recognition that there are others who came before us. As my father often reminded me, each generation should stand on the shoulders of the one before it. Even the mistakes of the past need to be carefully understood, lest we, as Santayana famously warned, be doomed to repeat them. So we should reject purely futuristic thinking that advocates change for change's sake. There are some things worth conserving, and refusing to forget.

But it was Abraham Lincoln who wrote, in late 1862, that “the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. . . . As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves.”

Even as today we head into exciting new opportunities, our world has dangerous and difficult problems: old demons continue to haunt in the form of ethnic hatreds and divisive ideologies; there is the seemingly intractable issue of human selfishness and inequity; there is our species' careening, out-of-control exploitation of earth's resources. We must disenthrall ourselves, and think anew...

A decade ago, after the attacks of 9/11, there was high anxiety in our country, but also an upwelling of authentic kindness. For a while the whole world seemed united with us in sympathy, before we squandered that unique moment in history. In December of that year, even as the United States was crafting its war on terror, paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould challenged the growing tendency to see a Manichean struggle at large between good and evil. A thousand times more significant than this singular act of destruction, he wrote, was the underlying solidarity of the human family, where kindness and creativity are salient hallmarks, slowly helping to build up the future. Referring to this as “The Great Asymmetry,” he wrote that “complex systems can only be built up step by step, whereas destruction requires but an instant. . . . We [therefore] have a duty, almost a holy responsibility, to record and honor the victorious weight of these innumerable little kindnesses.”

So I invoke the spirit of kindness and solidarity as we share in this proud day in the life of College of the Atlantic. We are people who deeply care about the natural world, and each of us, I dare say, has his or her special places in the out-of-doors. For the past twenty years my special place has been a lake near my home in New York State—a magical, velvety body of water where I swim six months of the year, often with my wife Margie, and sometimes alone. There have been times for me swimming into the sun-sparkling waters when I have felt transported into a realm of pure communion. Amidst primary elements—water, light, sky, and ancient rocks rising out of the deep—it is as if my consciousness were merging with the dancing elements themselves. I have felt I could swim into the very heart of the universe.

We get so caught up in our worries and daily problems—and those are important because they show how much we care about our world. But from time to time we need to recapture a primal vision.

I was so glad when I heard that our new president joined the Bar Island swimmers last month. Two autumns ago my son Philip persuaded me to take part in this crazy COA tradition, spearheaded by Ken Cline and others. The day was windy and cold, and the water slate-gray as we leapt into it, all one hundred of us, to begin our long swim. As we made our way through the almost scarily cold water, I remember experiencing the odd feeling of being part of a pod of human cetaceans, bobbing along toward our common destination. And then someone began to sing... and then we all joined in.... And I began to feel the joy. It was the communal, shared experience of it that touched me most, all of us enthralled, and disenthralled—past, present, and future for once united in the shining moment.

I want to thank our distinguished speaker, Carter Roberts, and all of you who have made today's ceremony so memorable. On behalf of the Board of Trustees and the entire College of the Atlantic community, I extend heartiest congratulations to Darron Collins, COA's seventh president. We look forward to greeting you and your families, friends and guests at the reception in the Newlin Gardens." Please follow our new president as we recess out to the Gardens to this piece Darron chose, John Coltrane's *Acknowledgement*.