Inaugural Address
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Inaugural addresses always start with thank yous. I thank all of you for coming, regardless of your affiliation. But I extend a special thanks to my wife Karen, the first lady of the College of the Atlantic, who agreed to join me on this wild adventure.

I'm proud and I'm humbled and above all I'm excited to be the seventh president of the College of the Atlantic, the greatest educational experiment in recent history.

You might say "wow, he's really caught up in the moment, but it's cute that he thinks that," but I'm looking you all in the eye and telling you that I truly and honestly believe that. And, for better or worse, there is no more powerful force than belief.

The origins of our beloved educational experiment are very close-by; we can reach back and touch them. The idea crystalized on a Monday morning in the summer of 1968 when a local businessman and a Catholic priest met on the sidewalk at 26 Cottage Street—that's Cadillac Mountain Sports today. The guy in the collar turned to the guy in the tie and in the lengthy, oblong vowels of a Maine accent said, "Les, I want to improve the community outside of my priestly duties…"

That was the melting glacial snow, the river's origins—Father Jim Gower and Les Brewer hatching the idea 1.1 miles to the southeast of this tent; 43 years ago. That melting snow gathered momentum to form a river that cut deep channels as people and buildings and ideas coalesced.

Our river, where the water was so recently frozen ice, has so many interesting cross sections, so many artifacts—Ed Kaelber's hiring, Ann Peach's first desk; a burning building, the cornerstone of a new building; a dying trustee, a new faculty member; and today, the inauguration of a bald president, once a pimply-faced COA student with very long hair who stood face-to-face with a fin whale skull warmed by an immediate sense of home and of magic.

This first part to this inaugural address decodes the nature of that magic.

Our college emerged as a mechanism to change a world that was splitting apart at the seams. In the weeks before Father Gower took his walk to 26 Cottage Street, he had buried three boys that came home from Vietnam in a box and bag. Crisis was the driving force.

Sam Elliot, another leader at the college, suggested early on that, "If we are successful, we will be out of business in five years because our graduates will have shifted the paradigm."

Yet here we are, still swimming in crises economic and political; social and ecological.

Learning from our past, I'd suggest that crisis doesn't get you very far as a motivating force. Haven't we learned this? Look at the US climate change "movement"—it would be hard to call it much more than a failure. That's because crisis is a splitting rather than a unifying force. Crisis moves some through fear, but causes most to entrench.

Now crisis has helped many move over or through high hurdles and crisis certainly spawned the idea of this college, but it is not what makes COA great, it was not the buzz and energy I felt standing face to face with the fin whale skull.

What about hope? Hope has helped survive storms and elect presidents and is indeed a powerful force. But in many cases hope fails because it's too close to Hallmark moments, too close to sappy inaction. We could hope all we want and still find ourselves pinned to a very uncomfortable rock in a very unforgiving river. Hope is quaint.

On July 25, 1983 the heart of the COA campus burned to the ground. The next day a group of trustees, staff, faculty and students stood on the porch of the Turrets building to decide whether or not to go on. Hope helped them say yes, but hope alone would never have gotten us to where we are today.

So, if it's something beyond crisis and hope, what is the stuff of this college? What is that elemental buzz I felt at the skull, what got us past fire, what is the thing we all feel under this tent?

I think the best way to describe it is value-laden and inspired creativity and it seeps out of the pores of every faculty, staff and student. It's what you have a lot of when you're "in the zone," when there's perfect synchronization between your brain and body. It's the intensity an expedition team feels launching a summit attempt or a first descent down a river.

It's what a startup business must feel like—not as physical as mountain climbing, but still requiring thought and action. It's what a potter imparts upon a lump of clay on a potters wheel. A blacksmith at a forge. A writer at a desk. A scientist in a new landscape or at the controls of a laboratory.

It's the acquisition and application of inspired creativity. The acquisition comes from both mental and physical learning. The application, toward problems that range from the personal to the global. How do we talk about this acquisition and application of inspired creativity? We call it Human Ecology.

It was the practice of Human Ecology. That's the energy I felt when I first stepped on campus, that's what every student that has come and succeeded here has lived. And because COA is a veritable petri dish of this acquisition and application of inspired creativity, that's why I can look you all in the eye and say that this College is the greatest educational experiment in modern history.

The second part of this inaugural address will describe how I came to truly internalize human ecology and what that process says about the college's core elements.

This story doesn't start at the whale skull but at Brooklawn Junior High School in Morris Plains, New Jersey. In seventh grade, as my friend Eric knows, you had to take wood shop; eighth grade you had to take metal shop. I loved wood shop and metal shop and it wasn't only because I got my first kiss behind the ban saw.

But enter high school and you had choice. Take it or don't take it. Confronting that choice I got one of the worst pieces of advice ever: for God's sake, don't even think about taking wood shop or metal shop or any of those "vo-tech" classes—those classes are for losers and colleges don't give a damn whether you can weld or use a drill press.

I was impressionable and that advice made a huge dent. I took only academic classes and saw knowledge as something acquired by the brain on primarily its left side. I scoffed at those who chose otherwise. I took it to the extreme and developed a complex about my stepfather the auto mechanic, about my machinist grandfather, and about the fact that neither of my parents attended college and instead chose what I thought were less intellectual pursuits.

Even as a college student at COA I was brain-focused, and still left brain-focused. But as we proceed out of this tent, you'll see a red Toyota Land Cruiser in the parking lot—that's my truck. I'm not ashamed that I've given the truck a name and a gender. Her name is Scarlett. Have a look at the front, passenger side quadrant. You'll notice

it's red, but not quite the same red as the rest of the truck; you'll see the paint is chipped in some spots and bubbled up in others. And you'll see some really pathetically poor metalwork and patching and fiberglass.

Yet I'm proud to say I did all of that with mostly my own hands—my stepfather walked me through the process and my grandfather, Asher the machinist, looked down from above and had to feel a little proud at my attempts.

I've finally shed the effects of that terrible advice. But it took way too long. There are things from that experience that are useful for quickening the pace and quality of learning here at COA.

> A: it took getting past the fear of failure. Today we live in a rule dominated, helicopter parenting society where getting something wrong is considered the most terrible offense. We have also legislated and scared kids to death when it comes to risk taking.
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> Some of you may have heard of the Nordstrom personnel manual. It's written on an index card as there is just one rule: use your best judgement. At COA we will push smart risk taking and impart trust through best judgments rather than rules.
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> Then there's B: we live in a world where the raw material of knowledge is increasingly available to all and this egalitarianism has fostered a very powerful do-it-yourself culture. Anyone with an internet connection and enough hutzpah can learn the basic mechanics of calculus, French or auto repair. It's not what or how much you know but how you creatively put your own twist on and apply that knowledge.
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> You'll notice that we're not wearing academic regalia today. That is in recognition that COA was founded on egalitarianism. There were and are no high priests of human ecology. We're a perfect cauldron for egalitarian, do-it-yourself learning.
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> And then there's C: knowledge acquired through physical and mental exertion is most powerful. At COA this has always been a core belief. In our classes: You read, you write. You study a drawing, you draw. You consider the problems of fossil fuels, you build your own better fuel. You design an experiment, you execute an experiment. You know a mountain, you climb a mountain.

I imagine a future where no one graduates from COA without having demonstrated a degree of comfort with building, with drawing and with pushing individual physical limitations in addition to the more standard metrics of human ecological success.

The third and final part of this inaugural address looks downstream. Remember Sam Elliot's five-year exit strategy for the college? What happened?

The minute we fail to think of the college as a continued experiment, there will be an exit, but it won't be strategic. That's because there will always be brand new problems and new spins on old problems that require COA to embrace constant experimentation. We were born an experiment. If we start thinking we've arrived or succeeded we run the risk of becoming an interesting but ineffective flash in the pan. Ed Kaleber, our founding president, said it best: "Any college that is not constantly seeking new ways of doing things is only half alive." In today's educational and academic climate, a half-alive institution will die.

What kind of vision will ensure a culture of experimentation?

I've been asked about my "vision" dozens of times over the past two months and I have emphasized the need to listen and learn before visioning. I still believe that's the way to go.

But I'm starting to see and understand the college in a new way. I'm starting to see the economic, cultural and pedagogical pins that hold it together. I'm landing on the idea that making College of the Atlantic a tuition-free school, along the lines of a Cooper Union in New York City, would allow us to tie down an entire string of issues related to the size of the student body, the makeup of the faculty, the needs of our physical plant, and, most importantly, to ensure long-term human ecological excellence.

Now, let's balance idealism with realism:

I also recognize that hitting such a number in no way solves all financial and structural issues.

But, that said, a tuition-free situation would provide such a sense of certainty in one realm where we could focus laser like on our mission, radically changing the way we do higher education in this country.

Is there risk of failure? I would certainly hope so. It's a stretch goal that will demand the flexibility of an Olympic gymnast. But our college, the greatest educational experiment in recent history, is an Olympic-caliber athlete.

So, that's it in three parts.

Part 1: the special sauce of this college is the acquisition and application of creative inspiration, what we here call Human Ecology;

Part 2: Getting the most out of a Human Ecological Education requires losing the fear of failure; taking advantage of an egalitarian, do-it-yourself educational landscape; and learning to excel through thinking, doing and building; and

Part 3: Continue our greatest educational experiment in recent history by building a tuition-free institution.

This talk started with thank yous, it's appropriate to end it on the same note. Thank you all for entrusting me with the responsibilities of being your college's president. I love my new job.