

INAUGURATION ADDRESS FOR DARRON COLLINS
BY CARTER ROBERTS
OCTOBER 9, 2011

Good afternoon and thank you for including me in this moment to honor your new president and my good friend Darron Collins.

Beginnings are essential things. Much more interesting than endings.

Beginnings are full of uncertainty, hope, and call on us to use our wits to learn anew and apply our judgment and our creativity to navigate new challenges and settings.

It takes me back to a day last summer when I had a chance with my family to spend an afternoon with an expert in front of what is probably the most famous sculpture in the world.

It was commissioned by the upstart town in Italy in defiance of its far bigger and more prosperous rivals to the South (sound familiar?).

The city elders commissioned this work, one of the earliest forms of propaganda, from the most famous artist of the day, to depict a legendary story - that of a young kid who emerged out of nowhere to defeat the most legendary warrior of his time.

You all know the story of David. A shepherd's kid, who stuffed his flock in the mountains, played hooky by joining his brothers who belonged in the army, and set off to watch the epic standoff between the Philistines chosen warrior and the Hebrews' best. The problem was, the giant on the other side so terrified the competition that they fled the field of battle.

And what few people remember is that when the only person who offered to fight was this shepherd's kid, who didn't belong there in the first place, they insisted on dressing him in heavy armor - a sword and a helmet - and they were all too big for him so he shrugged them off and went into battle with a weapon never before used - a simple sling and a stone. He buried the stone in Goliath's head, and you know the rest of the story: he became king and became famous and all that.

Most depictions of David show him at his moment of triumph - standing with one foot atop Goliath's head, just after decapitating his rival. What makes Michelangelo's depiction so unique and powerful it is shows the moment just before the battle. Far more interesting.

There he stands, buck naked, gazing over his left-hand shoulder (towards Rome), with the stone in one hand and the simple slingshot in the other, and with that look that's a combination of fear, anticipation and courage. Steeling his nerves for battle, gathering his wits, framing his strategy and putting on his game face in facing a huge terrifying adversary...

We certainly have plenty of Goliaths in our movement.

Our world is full of jeremiads - terrible portents about the future.

The world's fisheries collapsing by the middle of this century if we don't change our ways

Diminishment of forests

Climate catastrophes

Extinction of species like tigers and rhinos and more

The loss of water from those places that need it most

All of these seem just beyond the reach of our current political will and resources.

We certainly have plans to address each one of these and busy at work raising the resources to put them to use.

But I don't care whether I am standing on the edge of the Amazon, or diving in Pacific reefs, or standing nose to nose with Polar Bears in the Arctic, I know that our ability to succeed or fail rests on one singular thing:

Leadership.

If we have the right person in the right place - and by right person I mean someone with a nose for opportunity, someone with the ability to face extraordinary challenges and not flinch. Someone who can knit together the various disciplines of science, economics, politics, indigenous voices, culture, civil society, and business - what I call incandescent personalities who can connect the dots between disciplines. Or cross the aisle in political settings. These people are like gold by the way. The rarest and most precious commodity in our work.

If we have someone like that - then I know we will succeed in our work.

I had a chance to read the original prospectus for College of the Atlantic, and the words, smudged and hand-typed by Ed Kaelber, ring true today. If I could write the prospectus for a college to face our great challenges it wouldn't be too different. And when I look at your curriculum I only wish I had courses like Marine Mammals and Acoustics, and Human Ecology, and the rest when I was in college.

And I had a chance to reflect on your new president, who embodies these qualities I describe.

You all know Darron's story. First member of his family to graduate from college. PhD anthropologist who worked with the Q'eqchi in Guatemala, went on to devise solutions for saving the Amazon with indigenous groups there. Worked for WWF in linking together the economy of forests and pine nuts in the Russian Far East with saving the habitat of the shaggiest tigers and leopards in the world. A gifted storyteller and someone who naturally moves between disciplines and builds bridges where none existed before.

You know he loves this school. After working with Darron for seven years I cannot tell you how sick I was of hearing about how great College of the Atlantic was. And when he told me he had this offer, I initially had that sick feeling when your best people tell you they have other tempting opportunities. But in the end I could only concede that he had to go, and take on this role, which is full of so much promise - for him and for you.

I can't think of a better choice to lead this college, and to work with all of you on imagining the solutions to the problems of our day.

Today is his beginning - and all of ours in a sense as well. It is a day in which we should celebrate his leadership and the leadership of this school, and the pursuit of the kind of innovation, and knowledge, and invention and courage that we need.

Its gives me hope that together we can, and will, face and overcome the giant challenges of our day.