Opening Convocation
September 1, 2013

_Discovering the Unexpected_
By Judith Pointer Jia

Good evening. I’m speaking to you as someone who never expected to be a professor. Growing up I had many interests. I enjoyed riding horses and drawing, loved animals and also enjoyed dissecting them. Science and art were my favorite classes in school. In fact my biology research project on _E. coli_ placed second in the state science competition while a charcoal drawing of my dog took first in the art contest.

I began my college career “undecided,” but leaned toward biology because it seemed practical. While living in the limbo of undecided, I longed for an “impressive” label—pre-vet, pre-med, pre-law—they all seemed so confident. But eventually I chose to become an “art major,” a label that unfortunately doesn’t cut it in the label department, at least not when relatives ask what you expect to do for a living. And yet, here I am. It all worked out—not quickly or smoothly, as you will hear. But, have faith. Don’t worry about your label. Do worry about not making the most of this opportunity.

I grew up in the middle of nowhere. Some of you think you did. But I win—Holcomb, Kansas, population 400. It’s the little town in Southwestern Kansas immortalized by Truman Capote in his book _In Cold Blood_. It’s on the Great Plains. It’s flat and desolate; the wind blows incessantly, day in and day out. The largest city for 200 miles is the size of Danville. I couldn’t wait to get out.

College. The University of Kansas offered sweet relief and entree into exciting stuff—live music, art museums, a theater that showed films instead of movies, not to mention all of the hills, trees and water of eastern Kansas. While at KU, I remember spending a lot of time observing: the cool Victorian houses, people from all over the world, the Natural History Museum. There was just so much more of everything than in Southwestern Kansas.

It took leaving that flat place though, to realize that growing up there had trained my eye to be highly observant of detail. When there isn’t much to see, you look harder and deeper to find the interesting. I can find beauty in a field of wheat. The subtle, myriad shades of yellow and gold are captivating, if you look. I can enjoy the slow suspense of a grain elevator coming into view, first as a speck on the horizon at 20 miles away, growing to a looming 12-story silo up close. Mind you, this was pre-electronic devices—I mean, we had TV—but not on our person. Looking at fields was what there was. And I hated it but got something out of it.
My father, who had made his own way in life, didn’t offer much advice beyond, “do something you like but you’ve got to support yourself.” Okay, good advice, but not very specific. Had my folks pushed me into a profession, it could have worked out, or it could have just delayed my path to art longer.

As it was, I graduated in 1989, stayed in green eastern Kansas, got a job as a secretary, bought my first car—a ’73 Dodge Dart Swinger, slant 6, and dated a Kansas City jazz musician. I lived life, supported myself, and continued to make art. The next several years I held a variety of jobs—physical therapy aide, inventory specialist, studio assistant. But I wanted to go further with my art—to broaden my horizons for working in that field.

At the age of 29 I went to graduate school. Becoming a professor was not the goal but after being awarded teaching assistantships, I found teaching rewarding. In hindsight, I see that just living life in my 20s—the ups and downs of false starts and mistakes made, and small successes, all laid a solid foundation for becoming an artist and teacher. As an undergrad, I couldn’t have known I’d end up a professor. I simply trudged forward, pursuing what I liked to do, testing the waters as I went.

And that’s what I encourage you to do here at Centre—test the waters. All of them. That testing, not the kind with a #2 pencil, is the core of a liberal arts education. Embrace the twists and turns, and explore. Whether you know your label or are searching for one, you need to throw yourself fully into your education. The quotation on our Lincoln statue says, “I will study and be ready.” Remember that line from Honest Abe. Be ready. You’ve got to be prepared for when opportunity comes knocking.

While I’m impressed that some of you can write a paper overnight that’s due the next day, try to avoid it. I like the adrenaline rush of a deadline as much as the next procrastinator but you’ve got to lay the groundwork for that paper before the night before. Let things mingle in your mind to get the most out of each assignment. You never know what will catch you by surprise. Chances are it will be something that requires a lot of you. And if you don’t put some of yourself into each assignment, you’re denying yourself the possibility for life-changing experience.

The Centre phenomenon of “transformative education” doesn’t happen unless you throw yourself into it. We as teachers can’t give you a transformative experience. It’s not a gift; it’s an ongoing exchange. We set up boundaries to work within, and it’s up to you to push those boundaries. Risk pushing too hard—or not hard enough—or in the wrong direction. The greatest advances in your own education—as well as in human discovery—
are made through risking failure. Along those lines…the social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote, “Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties.”

Take some classes you’re not certain of. I like that I rarely can tell which students are taking my classes pass/fail. Regardless, they put themselves into it fully. They want to get something out of it and they rise to the challenges of the material. Whether they ever touch clay again they are adding dimension to themselves. Henry Moore, the great British sculptor once said, “We don’t teach people to draw so they can all be artists, just like we don’t teach people to write, expecting them all to be Shakespeares.”

It may surprise you when I say that art is about problem solving. Every discipline is about problem solving. Problem solving is challenging. It is hard, but ultimately satisfying. Taking an art class won’t make you an artist but I guarantee it will give you a different way to solve problems—and that may inform you when you are studying biology or economics or anything else.

Contrary to popular belief, art isn’t “fun.” You don’t know how it pains an artist to hear someone exclaim, “You’re an artist? How fun! I wish I had talent.” Why don’t people say that to a philosopher or chemist? Like every discipline, it’s enjoyable at times and gratifying—hunkering down, discerning the elements at hand, and persevering toward a new set of problems to be solved. Talent helps but isn’t a prerequisite. Hard work and persistence—those are the necessary skills in any discipline.

Beyond the classes you take, a transformative experience requires you to LOOK AROUND. BE AWARE. SEE DIFFERENTLY. How to do this? Well, you start by looking around. I discovered during graduate school that those endless hours of looking at fields while growing up, had honed in me an attention to detail that informed my artwork. What you observe now will surely feed into your future self and your ability to problem solve. So, look around.

Those of you who have grown up in beautiful, lush, Kentucky, or some other place with great natural beauty may take it for granted. The beauty is just so easy here. It may be harder for you to look deeply at that beauty, but do it. Look so long that you see past the beauty, into the functions of nature. The simplest way to look but see differently, is to put your smart phone away and look around you. Now, don’t get me wrong, technology is fantastic but devices can distract—from using and honing this (point @ head) device.

So, I repeat, first, turn off your smart phone. The vibrate, too. Practice doing this when walking to class but also when you’re just in your room. This is called “experiencing your
surroundings.” It will seem boring at first, but give it time and trust your brain. Second, you have to observe. Be aware with all of your senses, of exactly where you are in space.

Use your eyes but also your body—to see, touch, smell, hear everything around you in a closer way. If you’re walking across campus, look at the other people; say “good morning.” Observe the variety of architecture surrounding you, from the Italianate detailing of Old Carnegie to Chowan, with its vernacular functionality. Look at the incredible variety of flora, from the Japanese Dogwoods behind Old Centre to the Kentucky coffee tree in front of Sutcliffe; the variety of fantastical seedpods on our trees alone invites wonder. Look closer at those seedpods, dissect them, and you’ll discover that their form is defined by their function—how best to release their seeds. The unexpected is all around you.

One of the conundrums of education is that as we try to “learn” facts and details—as we cram for a test or organize a term paper we may lose our capacity to wonder. There’s no time! Can’t wonder about that now! I have to keep a handle on this “set” of information! But the essence of a well-educated, productive individual is the DISCIPLINE to wonder, to allow our vast stores of seemingly incongruent information to ferment, to percolate, to make connections—creativity is launched here. Turn off the device and make time for wonder. Practice wonder.

Perhaps you’ll find yourself sitting in an audience on campus, wanting to leave but you can’t. This is a perfect opportunity to really examine what is around you. What can you discover? Start with the seat you’re in—is it comfy or not? If it’s uncomfortable, wonder, what was that designer thinking? Then design the improvements. Do the same for the carpet, lighting, and walls. It’s more productive than fuming and fidgeting.

Sitting in a movie theater this summer with my children, watching Despicable Me 2, with its so-so plot and dialogue, I found myself wishing the writers had attended a liberal arts college. I wish they had learned that you’ve got to go deeper than superficial good guys and bad guys. The good writers go way back. Back to Homer and then further back to the I Ching. It’s all in there. Life is stranger than fiction and more exciting.

Going back to the basics is important for a strong foundation. If you want to write good novels or a good screenplay, you need to know the language of Shakespeare and the plot lines of the Bible. And—going back to nature—you’ve got to know what a cocklebur really looks like if you’re going to invent Velcro. Remember, “Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties.”

Life is full of uncertainty. Get used to it; even better, get comfortable with it. And be prepared to receive the unexpected. I am arguing that it often rests within the phenomena of
nature and of our human interface within it. Not just the pretty parts but the repellant parts, the violence and death in addition to the beauty and growth. You may even find what I’ve found, as it relates to art—beyond beauty, interest is often found in the imperfect…the tiny flaw that enhances its beauty.

If you take on your education here by expecting the unexpected and even looking for it, you may take some twists and turns, but you will have a glorious ride.