

2023–24 Convocation Remarks

By Carmen Welton, Head of the Modern and Classical Languages Department

¡Buenos días! I greet you, in my mother’s tongue, hoping the context is enough to make clear words that might arrive to your ears as foreign. I want to welcome you in Spanish because, for me, Spanish is not only a language but also a comforting sense of belonging. And belonging is what I hope each of you, new to CA or returning for your 40th academic year, will feel as this year gets underway. I want to welcome you into belonging, by sharing with you how I’ve discerned my own place in the world.

Belonging takes me first to the cinnamon and cumin warmth of my grandparents’ home, the *molcajete* full of fresh jalapeños balanced precariously atop a stack of Pedro Infante CDs. My grandfather, who moved to Wisconsin from his native Jalisco, Mexico, once his children had all immigrated, spoke several languages fluently, but found it convenient to feign a lack of understanding when it served his purpose. Belonging is Ito’s mock confusion as we protest his surreptitiously placed Spanglish halfway through a Scrabble game at the kitchen table.

Belonging is a stuffy fourth floor flat a stone’s throw from the rolling Alpujarras of southern Spain, with my feet tucked under the tablecloth but well away from the electric heater hidden underneath, watching dubbed reality television with friends as we share a paella, and cheap Rioja. I’ve just gotten back from a long day of classes, tired but content after unknitting the subtle connotations of “root beer” for my Spanish classmates, who wanted to translate the phrase as “cerveza,” which just doesn’t tell us about sticky summer afternoons by the lakeshore the way root beer does.

My sense of belonging was born of word play with my grandfather, and grew as that play became my job in young adulthood. And now, belonging is walking the short path from Hobson’s back door to the Main School, exchanging “*buenos días*” with Diego as he heads into the Bailey Commons, then dropping my son off at the bus stop, before popping into Sara and Enrique’s office, to see if Sara has brought a freshly baked *merienda* for our department meeting that afternoon.

For me, belonging is the way home and work now blend together so seamlessly some days, as I search for Kleenex during chapel when someone thanks their mother for something my own mother always did for me, for something I always try to do for my own children. When the opening exercise in my Spanish 3 class is to listen to that song that I discovered while prepping tamales for Thanksgiving dinner a few years ago. It seems that life eventually *provokes* the opportunity to find belonging; I can trace my own back to many interactions—some comforting, some challenging, all invaluable as the relationships in my life have coalesced in kinship.

We have a word in Spanish, *la querencia*, which as American nature writer Barry Lopez explains in his essay *The Rediscovery of North America*¹, “refers to a place on the ground where one feels

¹ Lopez, Barry Holstun. *The Rediscovery of North America*. Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., 1992.

secure, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn. It comes from the verb, *querer*, to desire." The verb *querer* can also mean "to love," depending on the context. When we love, when we desire, it is beholden upon us to be caretakers of the object of our affection. The security a sense of belonging can endow also asks of us a stewardship, to honor the *querencia*.

And so I insist here, with Lopez, upon an intimacy with our environment so as to, and I quote him again now, "enclose [the land] in the same moral universe we occupy, to include it in the meaning of the word community." I hope all of us will find our *querencia* here at CA this year, in communion with the place and the people that make this campus our home. Belonging and *querencia*.

This land that we gather on today, these fields and meadows that now comprise the town of Concord, Massachusetts, are the ancestral lands of the Nipmuc, Pawtucket and Massachusett peoples. Before this region was colonized and renamed *Concord*, it was known as *Musquetaquid*, which means "grassy plain," or "place where the waters flow through the grasses." I invite you to find a quiet half hour some upcoming morning or afternoon to explore the fields just outside this building we are gathered in now, and I think you will quickly understand how that ancient name came to be. If you are adventurous, or if you are on the cross-country team, you will continue your amble onto the trails across the river, just off Musquetaquid Street, and you will quite possibly bump into me there, as those muddy paths are my favorite spot to process and plan and ponder as I lope along under the shadows of the arching pines and oak trees.

This building that we gather in today, with its sturdy wooden pews and towering hand-carved verses from Corinthians, was originally a Christian house of worship. Before a group of faculty and students disassembled it and relocated it to this spot, it was the place people would go to commune with a very particular God, to ask for forgiveness or a miracle or give thanks for a welcome change to their circumstances. I have complicated feelings about spaces like this one—they bring me solace and stir up decades-old baggage; it's never uncomplicated to enter a chapel, and yet this one undoubtedly evokes our collective *querencia*, invokes a rite of passage that cements your belonging.

I think it is imperative upon us that we ground our—CA's—sense of belonging alongside the many and often untold stories of all those who have called these lands and these spaces their own, as well as alongside the many and untold stories of all those who have just arrived here—the most recent immigrants to this *place where the waters flow through the grasses*.

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When I was asked to offer remarks at this Convocation ceremony, my heart started pounding. How could I have anything of merit to say that could set the tone for this school year? I've spent my summer indulging simple pleasures: reading *Goodnight Gorilla* a record-setting number of times to our toddler, teaching our oldest son how to make the perfect frittata. My deepest thinking revolved around attempts to remember the names and birthdates of all our middle child's stuffed animals.

However, I think the real reason my internal organs started doing backflips when the request appeared in my inbox, was because I have a hard time seeing myself as singular here at CA. By which I mean, I feel so deeply intertwined not only with the place, but also with my colleagues and my students and the *relationships* that define who I am in this community. How could I stand, alone, at a lectern, and proclaim wisdom at the very people from whom I constantly find myself learning? I wasn't sure I *belonged* up here, alone—I belong in a dialogue, I belong in a debate, I belong on a team.

It is in the dynamic of exchange, with the iterative and collaborative nature of my work with students set to the background cadence of the changing seasons, that I have discovered purpose. Which is why my second instinct, after I overcame the initial reaction of “I can't do this!,” was to reach out to colleagues and friends to solicit their ideas and feedback on what I wanted to say to you all today.

The question that I kept circling back to in those conversations was, why is a *convocation* the right way for CA to mark this annual inflection point in the cycle of our collective learning journey? How is this yearly ritual distinct from our daily practice of Chapel speeches? How does a *convocation* contribute to the aspiration of *belonging* that undergirds our school's mission?

At its origin, convocate means “to call or summon together; to assemble or bring together by summons”—in other words, you have to be here, your attendance is required. But we discover more when we take the word apart: The verb comes to us from the Latin prefix *con*, meaning “together,” and *vocāre*, “to call.” *Vocāre* is the root of another word that we often associate with my chosen professions—vocation. A vocation is a calling, a task or responsibility or job we take on because we believe it is our duty or our destiny to do so. Ideally, I believe, we all find belonging in vocation. And so perhaps we begin each academic year by calling together our community to define a joining of intentionalities—literally, we hope to *convocate*.

Nevertheless, I recall how it took a while for me to fathom my place here; I still don't always feel like I belong in these spaces, and I occasionally find myself yearning for the belonging I've experienced elsewhere, when things get tough where I am now. I often hear people at CA—students, faculty, staff alike—talk about the feeling of being an impostor. Impostor is another word that a quick etymology illuminates in new ways. From the past participle of the Latin *imponere*, to place upon, an impostor does not look to summon disparate voices together in community but rather to deceive, to cover up, one identity with another. I don't think anyone here is actually an impostor—although I empathize with the feeling. *But I do think* that many of us experience so many moments when our belonging feels called into question, or out of reach, and our many identities crash together in an uncomfortable or perhaps even painful way. This pain comes from the instability of having lost our *querencia*, from the unmooring that sets us adrift when we cannot locate the place “from which we speak our deepest beliefs,” as Lopez says.

At the end of his essay, Lopez exhorts us to reconnect with our *querencia*, and to “discover the difference between the kind of independence that is a desire to be responsible to no one but the self ... and the independence that means the assumption of responsibility in society, the

independence of people who no longer need to be supervised.” Once we elucidate that difference, according to Lopez, the *querencia* “hinges on the perfection of a sense of place”—by which I understand him to be saying the establishment of belonging, in harmony with the environment and its inhabitants. Perhaps, too, Lopez is pointing us toward the *work* of the *querencia*, the effort it takes to receive and make good use of the vocation it illuminates.

And so we are assembled here this morning, convoked, to decide how we will invoke our shared understanding of the elusive *querencia*. Animated by our love of learning, diverse and striving for equity, with common trust as our foundation. Honoring each individual, challenging and expanding our understanding of ourselves and the world, through purposeful collaboration and creative engagement. Cultivating empathy, integrity and responsibility, building a more just and sustainable future.

We cannot force a sense of belonging, but we can—and should—be attentive to the moments that might be signaling its presence. For me, I know I will feel the *querencia* when I step outside this Chapel and see everyone mingling together, when my advisees gather around me with their palpable first-day jitters, and we take a moment, to perceive a steadying force in the shade of our beloved copper beech, before heading off to classes. In that brief communion with *querencia*, I know I will feel grounded in my vocation, ready for the nascent year.

And so, *bienvenides*, Concord Academy! Welcome, all!