



The Year of Celebration and Community
Fall Convocation 2010
August 25, 2010

Gratitude Trumps Remorse

Last March I turned sixty. I remember (“all those years ago” to quote George Harrison), listening to Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. In those days nothing was more important to me than the latest album from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, or the Byrds. I’d sit in my dorm room listening to the latest-greatest rock while perusing the Whole Earth Catalog. As a fan of the Beatles, I knew all their songs and played most of them on the guitar. There was one song, “When I’m 64” that was surely cute, but it didn’t seem even remotely relevant to me. Now it does.

I’ve started a little project in celebration of turning 60. It’s “60 Tips for Turning 60.” It’s a collection of pithy aphorisms that help me stay balanced, grounded, and creative.

There’s one I’d like to share with you.

“Gratitude trumps remorse”

I find that I need to recite this mantra daily, especially as I get older. For me aging presents the challenge of expanding opportunities, taking more risks, doing things differently, exploring the great wide world, and doing so with a sense of gratitude and thankfulness.

Gratitude requires mindfulness, discretion, awareness, and reciprocity. It leads to celebration and community. It reminds us to be thankful for what we have, not we are missing. To take pleasure in the present moment, while preparing for an uncertain future.

An Interlude of Thanks

I’d like to express gratitude for the following:

Thank You to the Dining Service staff for their extraordinary hard-work and dedication this summer, serving the Maine Arts Camp patrons.

Thank You to the Facilities Maintenance staff for keeping the campus sparkly and beautiful, making some notable improvements in our buildings, and cooperating so well with the sustainability agenda.

Thank You to Human Resources for managing all of the personnel changes and caring so much about improving the quality of work life at Unity College.

Thank You to the Business Office for making it so much easier for us to track our expenses.

Thank You to Financial Aid for finding ways of helping students attend Unity College in these difficult times.

Thank You to the Admissions Staff for bringing us such an excellent group of new students.

Thank You to the Faculty for moving ahead with an excellent Academic Master Plan that will serve the college for many years to come.

Thank You to College Advancement for securing the biggest gift in the history of the college, and for working tirelessly to build the profile of fundraising and summer activities at Unity.

Thank You to our Board of Trustees for their extraordinary support and encouragement, and for their understanding of mobilizing college resources in support of improvements for salary, infrastructure, fundraising and financial viability.

Thank You to Student Life for continuing the wonderful NOVA program and for all of the great activities that keep the campus vibrant and interesting. I, for one, can't wait to try out the Frisbee Golf course!

Thank You to the Resident Advisers for making campus dormitory life welcoming, warm and friendly.

Thank You to all the Students who've chosen to attend Unity College.

Thank You to all Unity College Employees for their role in helping the college attain a retention rate of approximately 80% for the second consecutive year.

Leaving Home, Coming Home

Those of us who have college age kids have all been through the bittersweet day when we drop them off at their new digs. Everyone who works at Unity College experiences these mixed emotions first hand at the start of the semester. It's a tender time and we all must be fully equipped to provide guidance, support, and nourishment for both the students and the parents. We welcome the students to their new homes. We gently guide the parents back to theirs.

I particularly enjoyed last weekend when the families from a distance arrived. We welcome them at the Unity House and I savor the opportunity to find out who the new students are and why they've chosen to come to Unity.

Here are some of the things I heard from students and parents alike:

“Everyone is so helpful, friendly and accessible. What a beautiful campus”

“I applied to nine schools, including the University of Vermont, Colorado State, Oregon State, Warren Wilson, Green Mountain, College of the Atlantic, and I got into all of them. I chose to come to Unity.”

By the way I spoke to at least a dozen students who cited the many choices that were available to them.

“I came to Unity because of the specificity of the programs. I could get into what I really want to study at an early stage compared to other schools. I’m not just a number here.”

Most of the students I spoke with were articulate, personable, and directed. Of course, some are still shy and apprehensive, but it won’t take long (maybe this week’s NOVA trip) to get them launched.

I spoke to parents who reflected an amazing array of professions—lawyers, social workers, software engineers, and international pharmaceutical sales—well educated folks who really did their homework while investigating Unity. They liked what they saw.

There were transfers from a range of different colleges, students who were delighted to discover what Unity has to offer.

Many of the students already had established strong social networks through Facebook. One transfer student told me (he’s originally from South Africa) that what he most appreciates about the facebook communications are the number of returning students who express how excited they are to return to school.

I’m sure that most parents who left here feel very confident about the educational and life experiences that await their sons and daughters.

Their expectations are high. And they should be. And we will deliver on those expectations.

Do I Make This Point Too Often?

I told the students the same thing I’ll tell you. I say it wherever I go and whenever I have an opportunity to speak in a public venue.

We are experiencing a planetary emergency. Climate change, threats to biodiversity, species extinctions, human dislocations, the global economic recession, population and resource pressures, and environmental disasters are increasing in their severity, their interconnectedness, and their impact on the biosphere.

It was a rough summer. The floods in Pakistan, the wildfires in Russia, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the extraordinary melting of polar ice caps—add your environmental catastrophe du jour—are inextricably linked.

As an environmental college, we are in the right place at the right time. Sustainability is a response to the planetary emergency. How we respond matters. We are one of thousands of respondents.

Our task remains to train a new generation of sustainability leadership that incorporates a deep understanding of ecology, green economics, citizenship, the arts, and service. We are one of hundreds of colleges doing similar work. Our voices are important. What we do has impact.

Unity College and the Green Honor Roll

What do the following colleges have in common?

Arizona State University	Northland College	University of Maine
College of the Atlantic	SUNY Binghamton	University of Maryland
Evergreen State College	Unity College	Warren Wilson College
Georgia Institute of Technology	University of California (Berkeley, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz)	West Virginia University
Harvard College		Yale University
Northeastern University	University of Georgia	

We all made the Princeton Review Green Honor Roll. This is a wonderful achievement for us, and certainly a reason for celebration.

I am not a fan of these rating systems, and I look forward to the day (coming soon) when the AASHE STARS system becomes the transcendent, peer-reviewed approach to ratings. Still, I am delighted that Unity has finally gotten the recognition that it long has deserved.

What's important to note is that these rating systems are not entirely objective and that an institution's ubiquity, name recognition, and prestige count for a lot. All of the following activities, engagements, and commitments have prepared us for this honor roll achievement and reflect the increasing national reputation and prestige of the college. It's important that I share with you a list of some of these activities. They are another expression of gratitude and celebration.

[Council of Environmental Deans and Directors \(CEDD\)](#)

We have been active players in this organization since 2006. Mick Womersley, John Zavodny, and Kevin Spigel have all been engaged in CEDD activities at one time or another. We are the only small environmental college that participates in the national CEDD curriculum conversation. Amy Knisley serves on the Executive Committee. We send students and faculty to the outstanding NCSE (National Council for Science and the Environment) conference.

[Andy Revkin's Dot Earth Blog](#)

This is arguably the most influential and interesting environmental journalism blog in the world, perhaps sharing that honor with the great reporting that comes from Guardian Environment. Several weeks ago, Mick Womersley had an excerpt from his own excellent blog prominently featured on Dot Earth. It was a discussion of some of the projects that he and his students are involved with at Unity College. Revkin has 11,674 followers on Twitter.

[Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education \(AASHE\)](#)

This great organization has grown leaps and bounds in the last few years. It has a dynamic national conference, the new STARS sustainability rating system (of which Unity College is a charter member),

and a fine weekly newsletter. It is one of the only college and university associations that includes staff, faculty, and administrators in equal measure. I am on their Board of Directors. I will be moderating this year's keynote address.

[American College and University President's Climate Commitment \(ACUPCC\)](#)

Founded late in 2006, the ACUPCC has rapidly grown to include over 700 colleges and universities that have made public commitments to climate neutrality. Unity College was a charter signatory, we were featured in the 2009 Annual Report, and we are active at their annual conference. I serve on the Steering Committee and I take an active and prominent role in the national summit.

The Jimmy Carter Solar Panels

Bringing these solar panels to Unity College was a stroke of brilliance. Thanks again to Peter Marbach and President Wilson Hess for having the vision to make this happen. Yet they sat idle on the cafeteria for years. I express my gratitude to Mick for understanding the social, educational, and fundraising potential of this remarkable asset. From the excellent movie *The Road Not Taken* to the various gifts and exhibits that have showcased the panels, and in conjunction with The Unity House, our college has received remarkable press attention.

As a result of Mick's contacts with Professor Julian Cheng of Columbia University, and Rob Constantine's follow-up work, we made contact with Huang Ming, the Chairman of the [Himin Corporation](#) in Solar Valley, China, one of the most extraordinary solar production and laboratory facilities in the world. We made a gift of one of these panels to Huang Ming (who was on campus several weeks ago). As a result Cindy Thomashow and I have been invited (all expenses paid) to Solar Valley to participate in several international events and to tour the facilities. Rob Constantine has had conversations that provide some confidence that we might be able to leverage this visit into philanthropic opportunities for a sustainability lab building. I am told that the solar panel has already arrived in China and that Huang Ming is utterly delighted.

Meanwhile [Bill McKibben](#), the well know environmental writer and advocate, good friend of Unity College, and a good personal friend, is organizing an event in Washington challenging President Obama to put one of these panels back on the White House. Bill will be leading an entourage of three Unity students, accompanying the panels on a road trip to Washington. Bill will arrive at Unity on Labor Day, we'll hold an event at The Unity House, and then send Bill, our students, and the panel on the road, with several strategic stops along the way.

These events and accomplishments taken together tell a remarkable story. Unity College has an emerging narrative of sustainability excellence that is engaging a broader audience. We have a modest, but important role to play on the national stage. Ultimately that will be a boon for attracting more resources to the college as well as interesting students.

And this is just a sample. I can tell an equally engaging story about the impact of Hawk and Handsaw, the fine responses we get to the Unity Magazine, our outstanding regional presence with the Maine Campus Compact, our role in regional sustainability efforts, continued press coverage of the Unity House, our increasing presence as community players in the arts and sustainability, our strong service learning and internship outreach, and our growing list of interesting partnerships and affiliations. We take an active role in many higher education organizations, including the Council for Independent Colleges, the Association of Governing Boards, the National Association of College and University and Business Officers, the Clinton Global Initiative University, and many more that I am neglecting to mention!

I am convinced that we made the Princeton Review Green Honor Roll not only because we scored well in their rating system, but also because of the cumulative, synergistic impact of these activities. We are a national player, voice, contributor, and collaborator in raising the stakes for sustainability and environmental learning. This is a cause for celebration and confidence. It takes a community to make this happen.

The Three ESSES: Sustainability, Service, and Stewardship

None of these things matter if they don't reflect what we actually do on campus.

Real-time frugal sustainability means that we grow more food, we mow less lawns, we serve local food in the cafeteria, we plant wildflower gardens, we have solar panels, wind turbines, and wood chip boilers on campus, we take recycling seriously, we develop interpretive signage that calls attention to these activities, we construct public art projects that call attention to our work and vision, we make ends meet with innovative cost-cutting measures that are economical and sustainable. Anyone who visits campus gets a lesson in living sustainably. All of our students are fully immersed in studying and living a sustainable life style. Every new building we construct is smartly designed, considering cost, energy savings, ecological landscaping, and healthy living.

Are we there yet? Of course not. It will take ten or fifteen more years (at least) before our campus fully exemplifies a living laboratory of sustainable thinking. But we are paving the way with the work that we do today. We are setting the course for moving the college onto an irreversible path of engagement and excellence.

What matters most is the progress we make from one year to the next. Our sustainability objectives and accomplishments are a cause for celebration, and a result of a hard-working, visionary community.

I continue to be daunted by the sheer number of high quality service activities that happen at Unity College.

To name just a few:

Lois Ongley and her students performing important arsenic studies for local communities.

Nancy Ross winning the Maine Campus Compact award for her role in teaching about and getting students involved in local food and sustainable agriculture.

Mick Womersley and his students constructing windmills and performing community wind assessments.

Kate Miles and Ben Potter publishing the fine Hawk and Handsaw, sending Unity's message of creative sustainability to hundreds of environmental movers and shakers nationwide.

Jen Olin, Sara Trunzo, and Doug Fox's various teaching and service related to food, horticulture, and awareness of hunger and poverty.

Tim Peabody, Holly Hein and Tom Mullin working tirelessly to implement National Park Service training program.

The entire Unity Experience instructor group—which this year has adopted “Living a Sustainable Life” as its theme—running environmentally-related service projects in each and every section, reaching the entire entering class.

Every faculty member at Unity College is involved in some kind of teaching that involves students in the local community.

Few colleges anywhere can make such a claim to excellence. We can! I can't think of a better cause for celebration and community than to honor such exemplary work.

I hope it's not too bold for me to suggest that I think it's time Unity College take more pride in its accomplishments and have more confidence in itself.

Consider this:

The Kendeda Fund awarded Unity College \$389,000 to build a state-of-the-art- ecologically sound, student cottage style residence. Students and faculty will work with GO Logic in Belfast to make this happen. This is the largest gift from a living donor in the history of the college. Why did we get it? Because the Kendeda fund has confidence in Unity College.

The original funders moved Veggies for All to the college? Why did we get it? Because they have confidence in us.

The Bernard Osher Foundation awarded Unity College a significant grant to support non-traditional students. Why did they do this? Because the Bernard Osher Foundation has confidence in us.

Rob Constantine will tell you more about the emerging fundraising successes of the college. There is no better barometer for assessing confidence than knowing that external supporters are beginning to invest in this college. Why? Because they like what they see. We have a product and vision that is attracting investors.

Sustainability is the New Liberal Arts

Tom Kelly, the Chief Sustainability Officer at the University of New Hampshire describes sustainability as the new liberal arts. I think he's right. What Tom suggests is that every college curriculum must have a basic foundation in the principles of sustainability. That's the ground floor for all of the disciplines.

One of the reasons I'm so enthusiastic about the Academic Master Planning Process is that sustainability is a core component of the curriculum. We don't always call it that but if you read between the lines there's some pretty robust learning around some of the core principles of sustainability.

Although many colleges are beginning to think this way, few have the same opportunity as Unity to thoroughly incorporate systems thinking, sustainability principles, and core ecological concepts into the basic curriculum. We have a great opportunity to conceive of sustainability as the new liberal arts, and thereby lend meaning, relevance, and pertinence to our liberal learning objectives. I believe the faculty is well on its way to making this happen.

Our newly reconfigured centers and majors are forward looking and vital. It is not easy to make these kinds of structural and curricular changes. I am so grateful to all of the Center Directors, the Faculty Planning Committee, and the Liberal Learning Group for their efforts.

Our programs in Captive Wildlife Care and Education, Marine Biology, and Conservation Law continue to attract great interest and high quality students. I remain confident that the sustainability

majors are on the verge of growing dynamically and that the Center for Environmental Arts and Humanities will develop a wonderful suite of courses with a new conception of art and sustainability. I challenge any small college to match our expertise in environmental science, field ecology, and earth system science. We have an exceptional blend of first-rate scientists who teach well, do interesting research, and provide the foundation for a great college. We will do everything we can to improve your laboratory spaces.

All of this coincides neatly with the forthcoming New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) review process. Amy Knisley will speak more about NEASC later. There's a neat correspondence between accountability, standards, accreditation, and sustainability. Here's where our three ESSES (sustainability, service, and stewardship) can become the core of our assessment process, the means by which we portray ourselves, and the prominent challenge that lends meaning to the NEASC review process. I look forward to the NEASC review as a way for us to celebrate what we are good at, to better understand how we need to improve, and to generate community-wide thinking on assessment and accountability.

Change is Now

Unity College is in the midst of a profound process of institutional change. I am convinced this change is not only virtuous, but it is the essence of the long-term viability and survival of the college.

This change process is happening at the right pace—you can't move faster than an institution's resources will allow, but if you move too slowly the world will pass you by. I often discuss the leadership challenge of balancing urgency and change.

It might seem daunting to consider this, but I think we are still in the early days of the transformation of Unity College—the first wave of the new Unity. Future administrations will continue the change process. We are building the irreversible foundation for a narrative arc that represents an inter-generational legacy. Unity is only 45 years old. Let's assume the college has a lifetime of several hundred years. If you allow for a legacy perspective, then we are clearly still in the early days. We build on the vision of our staff and faculty who were here in the beginning and we steward the college for its next generations.

I never underestimate the uncertainty that accompanies change. Our senior leadership makes every effort to communicate with the entire campus. We aspire to build trust, transparency, and accountability. Sometimes we have different views about matters of policy and direction. We may not all agree. A certain measure of controversy and difference is healthy. We don't fear disagreement. But we strongly discourage misinformation. When there is misinformation, accountability retreats, rumors surface, and misperceptions flourish. This is especially true during times of change.

As the President of Unity College I will insist on open communication, but I will also insist on accountability, discretion, respect, and due process. In the months to come we will strive to improve the working life at Unity College. As we do so we will work as a community to gather extraordinary insights just as we make some unintended mistakes. Insights and mistakes coexist in an open community.

There will be many changes in the months and years to come—changes in policy, personnel, curriculum, student body, and programs. It is inevitable. It is fun. I think it's crucial that we learn to celebrate these changes, that we work together to build confidence in Unity College, both internally and externally, that we take great pleasure in what we have accomplished and in how much we still have to do.

As I have written in the summer monthly perspectives, the Senior Leadership and the Board of Trustees are firmly committed to four major goals—improving salary, addressing infrastructure, increasing financial viability, and growing our fundraising culture. We will balance these objectives as they are derived from the college’s mission.

Why is this, the Year of Celebration and Community? Because it is the right approach for Unity College in this place and time. Unity College is ascending, and we are travelling the narrative arc with purpose, vitality, and vision. These are hard times economically and ecologically. But here in the remote hills of rural Maine, we have a vision that is vibrant and meaningful. This year we will look for opportunities to celebrate our accomplishments, build community, and challenge each other to make this the best possible working and learning environment.