

From Chicks to Chalk and Beyond

College of Visual Arts Convocation Keynote Address

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Thank you President Ledy, Board of Trustees, College of Visual Arts faculty and **most of all, students** - for allowing me to be with you today as you head into a new school year.

When I was asked by President Ledy if I would consider delivering this keynote address at your convocation my first response was one of honor and my second of trepidation. Being an introvert and speaking publicly is daunting and it certainly is not on my bucket list. And yet, I accepted the challenge for one main reason. **You, the College of Visual Arts class of 2015.**

I have had the privilege of working in arts education for Saint Paul Public Schools for some 20+ years now. When I was working in schools as a teacher, I always volunteered for morning bus duty because it was the one time I knew I would see the kids happy, smiling and looking forward to a new start – every day.

Tuesday was our district's first day for students and since my office is now located in a newly refurbished school that holds

Creative Arts High School and Open World Learning Community. That morning, I made sure I was out front, greeting students as they entered their new school.

And now, I'm here with you, close to your first day seeing your fresh energy and excitement as you enter a new school year that I guarantee will be different from all your past educational experiences.

My deadline for providing a bio and title of the keynote to the College of Visual Arts was August 22. The bio was easy; the idea for the convocation keynote address took thought. It was a bit like titling a work of art prior to executing it – I had some basic ideas for an outline and significant markers in my storyline, - “the chicks, the chalk and the beyond” - yet in between the title's nouns and adverb lay a blank keynote canvas.

As I was thinking through what profound, meaty, relevant and enlightening messages I might convey to you today, I approached writing the address as I would approach creating a new work of art. **I employed the Four Steps of Creativity or, the Creative Process.**

When I was your age and just entering college, I knew that creating art was in my soul and it was something I had to do. I knew that that it gave me a way to expressing my ideas and personal feelings in ways other than using speech something we introverts look for. It made me reach, explore and playfully embrace opportunities that made me learn from mistakes and surprises. I knew that creativity wasn't just a fleeting moment.

But I didn't know that as artists, creative people and problem solvers, either individually or collaboratively, we could employ actual steps that were a logical framework for researching, developing, and implementing ideas from beginning to end. Or, that if I experienced artist's block and couldn't get past where I was, which you will experience sometime in your four years, I could intentionally use the Four Steps of Creativity to help move me “beyond” my block.

For purposes here, **The Four Steps of Creativity** used in this keynote are:

1. Preparation,
2. Incubation
3. Illumination, and
4. Implementation

1. Step one: Preparation: Researching, collecting information and data. This is purposeful preparation.

First, I had to make sure I knew what a convocation was. I had a visual. A church-like setting *here we are* dressed in regalia *again correct*, words of spirited and inspirational welcome, and feeling of anticipation and your youthful energy emanating from you. *Am I right?*

Wikipedia let me know that Convocation was “Latin for 'calling together', *translating the Greek ecclesia*, a group of people formally assembled for a special purpose.”

It’s also the collective noun for eagles but I didn’t think that was right because I’m not back in Alaska. I did rather of like the visual I had of all of you spreading your eagle wings and soaring above CVA’s historical Summit Avenue campus however.

Next, I researched CVA on your gorgeous website and wished I was 17 and searching for a college. I’m so impressed that you will experience a first year Foundation Program that will give you a solid base for your remaining 3 years at CVA.

You will visit museums and galleries and be with artists and designers. If your interested in arts education or thinking of becoming a teacher, explore CVA’s teaching artist courses and I personally invite you into Saint Paul Public Schools where we have, in my opinion, some incredibly effective and talented arts teachers.

Attend your internship fair and take advantage of being in the work place prior to graduation. Explore your arts and design community off-campus. Your integrated liberal arts coursework will give you knowledge of the world around you and feed your art and design work. You will work in studios, could choose to travel, have internship experiences and your final capstone project will deepen your understanding of an art form and help solidify your intentionality as an artist.

After really learning more about CVA, I moved on in my research to find convocation keynotes online. I mainly found commencement keynotes on YouTube examples. I did watch a few which, I found, had similar messages like –failure and rising above it, courage, responsibility, contributing, learning and giving back. All good themes; some worth watching if not just to get a few ideas or tips.

A few of the speakers had similar responses to being asked to speak as I did.

J. K Rowling described her reaction as a win-win. She was not only honored, she simultaneously endured weeks of fear and nausea which made her lose weight.

This was encouraging to me – the weight loss part not the nausea part – only in Minnesota in August, we have an event called the State Fair and this past Sunday as I frequented the pronto pup stand outside of the Fine Arts Building all hopes of weight loss were squashed. Well okay, the onion rings and Bridgman’s hot fudge Sunday did help either.

Denzel Washington’s keynote papers were not in order and “unorganized” (those were his words). I made a mental note to staple mine together as well as number the pages.

He said that he was a little overwhelmed and was outside his comfort zone, which is why he accepted the invitation to speak. He said he came to speak because he might make a fool of himself and *"I've found that nothing in life is worthwhile unless you take risks. Nothing."*

And he also said that “Nelson Mandela said that there is no passion to be found playing small, and settling for a life that’s less than one your capable of living.” Good sentiments for a keynote speech.

Creative Process Step 2: Incubation: Percolation, milling over collected information.

So I have my title for the keynote, I understand what convocation is, what CVA is about and I’m a bit less nervous since I’m in the company of J.K. and Denzel.

Now, I take a step back and let things settle in my mind. The theories are that in the Incubation stage, your subconscious and conscious mind are working on the idea, making new connections, separating unnecessary ideas, and grabbing for other ideas. I found that sleep and sitting on my deck in the quiet were excellent for this. While I was dreaming and day dreaming, I went through information and assembled, sorted and chewed it over. I figured some things out this way – like, the J.K and Denzel introduction and a few key messages I wanted to share.

Part of Incubation is also drawing on existing knowledge - which brings me to the “chicks” in *From Chicks, to Chalk and Beyond* and the relevancy of them here.

There were 336 chicks to be exact. Mrs. Helen Woods stood at the front of the class, her cat-eye glasses looking out over our desks which were in exceptionally straight rows. Mrs. Woods handed out the purple inked mimeographed sheets with 12 purple oval outlines and explained to us, her 28 fifth graders, that we were to color each oval yellow and add a beak, legs and feet. That was it, our weekly art project, 12 yellow chicks times 28 equals 336 yellow chicks.

Go back one year - In forth grade I woke up early one morning, padded down to the basement in my white and blue flowered flannel nightgown, opened a cabinet and pulled out my tempera paint, scissors, a sponge which I cut up, brushes, tag board and manila paper. For a couple of hours I was immersed in the creative process.

I cut out organic shapes from the tag board, dry brushed around the edges, overlapping shapes and building layers of orange, vermilion and gray. I carefully sponge painted cool colors on another sheet and by 7 a.m., went back upstairs and asked my Mom if she would frame the two paintings and bring them to school so I could enter the Arts and Science fair.

I was awarded first place over Marcia Connolly’s Hobbit-like characters, which surprised Marcia, all my classmates and especially surprised me. We thought Marcia had it in the bag.

Back to the chicks. I just couldn’t color all of the chicks yellow. It was against my spirit as an artist. I chose lavender, sea green, carnation pink and other Crayola crayon colors with 1960’s names like that.

I don’t remember asking permission to deviate and I don’t remember if my picture was hung in the hallway with the other 334 chicks; it didn’t matter. It was an “art” project, not a follow the directions project. At 10 years old I was being true to myself as a developing artist.

This time at CVA is your time to have permission to be true to yourself - to purposefully “play” in the arts. Experiment, try everything, look for inspiration everywhere, travel, and learn about art history. Develop your craft, build your skills, engage, persist, practice, trust your instructors, faculty advisor and talk with your peer mentor. Find your strengths and develop those, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, use technology.

In the ‘60’s and later on in college and grad school, paint and traditional fine art materials were my norm. Today, technology pushes the boundaries. Technology would have pushed the purple outlined ovals to possibilities beyond our 5th grade imaginations. Play with technology, be intentional with technology.

Interact with other artists and as an artist, travel. Did I say travel before? I'll say it again – travel!! Explore arts education and teaching the arts, understand the intentions of your assignments and if unclear, ask for clarity. Take risks – use carnation pink or any color you choose. Remember what Denzel said? *“Nothing in life is worthwhile unless you take risks.”*

Creative Process. Step 3: Illumination

The Ah-ha moment

Earlier I said that creativity isn't just a fleeting moment. Creativity is a process. The process isn't disorganized. It follows definite steps - not always linear however - that you can apply to your everyday work to help free your mind and unleash your creative powers. Two of those steps in the creative process I talked about already – **Preparation** and **Incubation**.

In this step, **Illumination**, everything you've been percolating, experimenting with, mulling over, looking at, analyzing, playing with, comes together in surprising ways. It's intentional and unintentional. This is the stage where **ideas** come from.

Keep a journal or sketchbook handy for those ideas. I carry a journal with me at all times; I have a sketchbook next to my bed. Ideas don't always come on schedule – be prepared.

The “chalk” in my keynote’s title is my “Illumination”

In July of 1986, the air was hot, suffocating, like magnolia blossoms sticking to the skin. The sun, unquestioned master of the sky, drained all energy and allowed little movement outdoors or in. It had been like that all week since I had been home to St. Paul, after living in California and Alaska for five years.

I had forgotten the unbearable muggy days and nights which never cool, when one sweats instead of sleeps in a half-snatch of drowsy dozing, fitful and uncomfortable. I knew that when the Midwestern heat and humidity continue for days with no relief as they had that summer, only a drastic and destructive weather force would cool things off and bring change.

My makeshift studio that summer was a screened in porch. As the high-pitched beep of the National Weather Service warning sounded on the radio, I rolled down the porches wooden blinds and headed inside. I turned on the TV waiting for an update and just as I did, All My Children, was interrupted by a cameraman in a helicopter capturing an aerial view of a tornado which packed violently spinning winds estimated at 200 miles-per-hour.

I ran back to the porch, grabbed my sketchbook and chalk pastels and began sketching the tornado capturing the whirling vortex as it dipped a twisted finger from its swirling mass sucking up trees like tooth picks.

It's times like these you want your chalk and sketchbook handy! One sketch, one idea, one Illumination could lead to your capstone project's main concept.

Creative Process. Step 4: Implementation

This is the last step in The Four Steps of Creativity. Where all you have prepared in terms of your ideas becomes intentional. In short, this is the “final product” stage of the creativity process.

In this keynote address, it is just that, this address. These pieces of paper, these words, these thoughts behind the words. The sitting down and within a couple of hours hammering out this speech.

In Implementation it's the getting lost in the moment of creativity. Creating art is liberating beyond anything else you have experienced. Engaging your brain and soul in creativity and actively creating your own art is the ultimate mental boost and high that will carry over into other aspects of your life.

I'm sure you've heard of flow. Artists know flow intimately.

During a true flow experience, creativity is effortless, work moves forward at amazing speed, and time itself ceases to have meaning. This is the mindset at which you will produce your most creative, most thought provoking, and potentially most successful results. *Just think, you get to spend the next four years in an active state of flow.*

In terms of my tornado sketches, they became the basis for the body of work for my master's exhibition and thesis. I say "basis" because it really wasn't about the tornado. It was the impetus for my Creative Process and what I really discovered while immersed in that world.

Tornados became my flow. A way to explore tornado and storm related imagery, meteorology, and science. To experiment with color, paints, inks, processes, colored pencils and shapes. To learn and refine techniques, experiment with brush strokes, blending, highlights and the entire Creative Process including reflection.

Beyond my chucks and chalk I strategically found a way to marry my passion for the arts and for creating. I told you earlier I work in arts education. I work with teachers mainly, assisting them with instructional practices in and for the arts, and I work with arts and community organization partnerships with schools and students. I do this so all students are able to have strong arts experiences and arts education throughout their school years. That is my ***From Chicks, to Chalk and Beyond.***

I wish you the best in your CVA journey as you Prepare, Incubate, Illuminate, Implement and I wish you the best in what becomes your Beyond.

Thank you.