I’d like to welcome you to the 131st academic year in the illustrious history of Bryn Mawr. I’m so excited to be gathered with all of you today! This community would not be what it is and would not be what it will become without each and every one of you.

In the course of my travels on behalf of the College, I’m often asked, “What’s so special about Bryn Mawr?” Because we have such incredible people, resources, and history here, I have many answers to this question. But one that I often think about is engagement. Our students, faculty, and staff are deeply engaged with their work, with the Bryn Mawr community, and with the world beyond Bryn Mawr. For obvious reasons, the most fundamental kind of engagement at Bryn Mawr is academic engagement.

As you might know, my own field is Psychology. A colleague in my field, Stephen Asher, has done important research showing a strong correlation between academic engagement and positive psychological outcomes: He has shown that when college students are academically engaged, they feel better about themselves and their abilities. And they feel more of a sense of belonging to their college or university. Now, this sounds great, but it also sounds a little too easy: “Just study hard and you’ll be happy!”

We know this isn’t always the case because if it were, Bryn Mawr would be the happiest place on the planet. But Asher’s definition of engagement isn’t studying hard and performing well.

For Asher, engagement means studying what truly interests you and sparks your passions. It means getting excited about learning new things. It means talking about course material with your friends and with faculty, both in and out of class. It means taking pleasure in your academic work. And it also means taking risks, embracing challenges, and being open to struggle because that’s what gives you the opportunity to learn and grow, as a scholar and a human being.

Let me illustrate with an analogy. The 2016 Summer Olympics ended just a couple of weeks ago, and I’m kind of an Olympic-watching junkie. I was particularly intrigued by something I learned about Katie Ledecky, the world record-breaking American swimmer who won several gold medals and has been known to outpace world-class male swimmers in practice. Her coach, Bruce Gemmell, told a reporter that, “Katie fails in the practice environment more than anyone in the group: sometimes she fails spectacularly.” In other words, Katie Ledecky achieves excellence not only by succeeding, but also by failing.

This is the great lesson of engagement. Like Ledecky at the Olympics, you’re at Bryn Mawr because you’re talented. You’re way above average, and your achievements stand out from those of most of your peers, wherever you have come from. But you are not here because we expect you to know all the answers or to be perfect. That’s not it. You’re here to explore what you don’t know, to learn about the gaps in both your and
others’ awareness. You’re here to ask questions and to teach others. You’re here to test your limits in a challenging but supportive environment.

That means sometimes you will struggle. Sometimes you’ll fail. But this kind of failure through engagement can be valuable because it comes from testing your limits and because it leads to growth. Resilience is far more important than perfection. And studies show that women in particular need to learn how to fail, how to stop judging ourselves so harshly, and how instead to see failure for what it really is: an essential part of developing strength and wisdom. You are not here because we want to judge you to see if you’re worthy. You’re here because we already know you’re worthy, and we’re excited to benefit from your presence and contributions.

So today my heart is filled with joy and anticipation of the year of academic engagement ahead of us. And yet, the challenges of the broader world are never far from my mind. Environmental threats, political violence, economic inequality, human rights violations both across the globe and on our streets, and a civil society strained close to the breaking point, weigh upon us. Closer to home, we are an institution that continues to contend with its own history of fighting some injustices while having perpetuated others. Sometimes we feel a deep connection to these events and feel compelled to try to do something about them. Other times we feel disconnected and helpless or guilty for enjoying the privileges of this place while others suffer. Either way, these problems do not stop at Merion Avenue. They impact us all.

So what do we do with this tension between the demands of the academic environment, and those of a global society that desperately needs our involvement? The first thing we do is recognize that academic engagement is crucial to informed, effective activism. In your fellow students, professors, and course materials, you have some of the best resources in the world for understanding and addressing the social, economic, humanistic and scientific dimensions of whatever issue concerns you or motivates you to action. And when you engage with your academic work and colleagues, you build strong social ties. When you engage with ideas and with people around you, you become part of social groups that can be powerful forces for change. You become part of the larger Bryn Mawr community, an institution committed to improving itself and the world.

This place is filled with people, at all levels and in all aspects, who are here to support you in acting and exploring. You will find others here who are inspired, appalled, and motivated by the same things as you are. And we support your efforts to follow your convictions. Activism is a powerful form of engagement.

Now, I have to be honest with you: for all its benefits, engaging and becoming part of a community can be hard work. As people from diverse backgrounds, with diverse experiences, we are likely to make mistakes borne of ignorance as we get to know each other, despite the work we have done to learn. And by the same token we might end up on the receiving end of such mistakes. We cannot entirely prevent this from happening. But, we can remember that everyone here is both a learner and a teacher. As a campus we can take responsibility for these moments and use them as an opportunity for
increased understanding, to help spread a higher consciousness and create a better community.

This approach, and this aim, are what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently called “The Beloved Community.” The concept derived from an idealistic notion of a utopian afterlife, but King used it to refer to the here and now, to the fact that the goal of protest, discussion, and debate no matter how fractious or painful is a better world with greater understanding. In his words, “The nonviolent resister must often express his protest through noncooperation or boycotts, but noncooperation and boycotts are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, so that when the battle is over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor.”

A half-century later, the Black Lives Matter movement references the same concept in its Guiding Principles. They state, “We are committed collectively, lovingly, and courageously to working vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, for all people. As we forge our path, we intentionally build and nurture a beloved community that is bonded together through a beautiful struggle that is restorative, not depleting.”

So as we embark upon the 131st year of our wonderful, still-unfolding story, let us seek engagement with each other and all facets of our community. Let us find excitement and joy in our work. Let us pursue understanding, meaning, fulfillment and reconciliation in our academic pursuits, our activism, and our social interactions.

Let us commit, and recommit, ourselves to building the Beloved Community at Bryn Mawr.

Thank you.