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Thoughts on the Investiture of Our New President: New Beginnings, Crossroads

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This week, the Winthrop University family will celebrate an event almost as rare as the reappearance of a comet: the inauguration of a new president. Winthrop was founded in 1886, and Dr. Jamie Comstock is only our tenth president. This event will be especially meaningful for Dr. Comstock, and I am sure she is undergoing all kinds of reflection this week about her life and career. But her investiture is also meaningful for all of us at Winthrop, and calls for a pause and some thought.

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I have written before about how lucky we are to work on a college calendar, with the opportunity for new beginnings with the start of each school year, and then again with the start of each new semester. How much better we have it than workers in most settings, who experience an unbroken chain of endless years. We get the chance to start over, to start afresh, to learn from our mistakes, to build on our successes, to reach out and try new things.

And now, as a semester and a school year begin winding down to another ending, we have this momentous occasion of a presidential inauguration before us. As a university, we get to start over, to hit the refresh button, to move confidently into a new era.

What should we keep? Certainly our dedication to our students, both individually and as a group, our attention to their needs, but also our commitment to challenge them and help them grow intellectually. In addition, our sense of family, the cohesiveness that Winthrop has developed over time, a cohesiveness that is all too rare on college campuses. We need to keep our high expectations for ourselves as well as for our students: having just finished another year on the University Personnel Committee, I am once again awed by the accomplishments of our faculty. And we certainly need to keep our knowledge of and appreciation for our past, the past that has brought us to this big moment in our history.

What should we change? That is where the crossroad idea merges with the new beginning. The crossroad can be a scary place, but it can also be very exhilarating, very exciting. We look to President Comstock to flesh out this vision for the future, to point us in the new directions she thinks we need to go. That is what a leader is supposed to do.

The same thing happens in our classrooms every day, or in our contacts with students as we interact with them in the jobs other than teaching that also make up a vital part of the university. Our students look to us for a plan, for a vision, in the
same way that we look to our leadership.

What has impressed me most about President Comstock’s first year is the amount of time she has spent listening. In town halls and focus groups on the important issues that face us, she has asked us for our ideas, and then, instead of telling us why our ideas were impossible or impractical, she has written down all the ideas. Clearly, she is a leader who listens. What a valuable leadership trait that is, and how rare!

As an English professor, I almost always relate everything to a work of literature. I am reminded of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” the longest portion of his lifelong work, Leaves of Grass. “Song of Myself” is divided into 52 sections, and in the exact middle, section 26, he proclaims,

“Now I will do nothing but listen, To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it.”

That is what President Comstock seems to have been doing with her first year in office. Like Whitman, she has been listening, absorbing the Winthrop culture, our ways, our issues, our concerns, our values.

In “Song of Myself,” a voice says, “Walt, you contain so much. Why don’t you let it out, then?” I suspect President Comstock is ready to move to that next step, to process what she has heard and learned and to lay out for us her vision of Winthrop’s future, to tell us where she thinks we should go. We will gather in our regalia this week to hear her begin to do that. As I sit here writing, I imagine her sitting somewhere writing too, drafting the words that are in some ways the result of the past year, but in a larger way, the result of her whole life in academia, a culmination, of course, but actually a new beginning, a crossroad.

We live in interesting times for academia, and in many ways, troubling times. The same South Carolina college that is being admonished and fined by the state legislature for assigning what they consider to be controversial reading to their students is welcoming its new president, a career politician who has no teaching experience, no experience with faculty and students other than his own undergraduate days, and with political views that seem at odds with free academic inquiry and discourse. Many of the faculty and students there are in an uproar, understandably so. I wish them well.

Winthrop is fortunate to be inaugurating a president who began as a faculty member, who has worked her way up the academic ranks, but who has never forgotten what it is like to stand in the classroom, to teach students, to grade papers, to be a professor. We will gather this week in our regalia, regalia that usually comes out of our closets at beginnings and endings, at convocation and commencement, to mark, in the middle of a semester, a new beginning. It is exciting to witness this moment in our history, and it will be exciting to take our next steps into our mutual future.
Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/ Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu

The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

**XXITE 2.0 ——— The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)**

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The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop

See you there!

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**Thought For the Week**

"You may have noticed that the less I know about a subject the more confidence I have, and the more new light I throw on it."

--Mark Twain

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