At the end of the classic novel *The Color Purple*, Mr._____ comes to a stunning realization about why we exist. He had lived most of his life bitter and cruel, inflicting his pain onto others, particularly onto Celie, his wife. Because he lived an unexamined life for much of his own life, he settled for less and made sure those around him did the same. But after Celie somehow makes a slit in her own life for the possibility of joy to enter, she finds the courage to leave Mr._____ and cut her own path. Years later, she returns, now unafraid of him, and that changes his relationship to her and others.

As they are sitting on the front porch sewing, he begins to voice an amazing observation:

“Anyhow, he say, you know how it is. You ast yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer…. It didn’t take long to realize I didn’t know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or a man or a woman or a bush it don’t mean nothing if you don’t ast why you here, period.”

Celie asks him what he thinks, and his reply is extraordinary:
“I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ast. And that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, he say, the more I love” (The Color Purple 247).

While Mr.______ did not have the opportunity to attend a liberal arts college, he nevertheless teaches us that the mission of our university really rests in our capacity to wonder and to ask the one question that will lead to fifteen or fifteen hundred. Wisdom begins with wonder. And that is the reason why we are here.

Socrates informs us that an unexamined life is not worth living, but such inquiry causes discomfort and even pain—so why should we put ourselves through all this? Isn’t it easier not to ask the questions? Thomas Gray, an eighteenth century British poet, states, “...where ignorance is bliss, ’Tis folly to be wise” (“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”). Yet seemingly to juxtapose this, William Blake, another British poet, a harbinger of the Romantic movement, avers, “If a fool would persist in his folly he would become wise” (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell). So what is it to be? Should we be blissfully ignorant or should we persist in our folly until we become wise?
Ultimately, I do not believe that Thomas Gray and William Blake are at odds with each other, as both poets are really calling us to be teased by their premises. At the bottom of each statement is really a sense of wonder. Shall we commit ourselves to the folly of becoming wise and if we do, what is the cost?

It is the mission of a strong liberal arts college or university to make us wonder, and to this end, we need to learn how to ask the questions that will lead to other questions that will lead to even more questions still. This is not for the faint of heart because the art and act of learning how to ask the questions that move us, that change us, that break us open requires a deep down belief that the questions themselves are worthwhile, irrespective of the answers. That is why students need the time and space not to come up with the answers, but to surrender to the questions. For instance, if we ask ourselves what it would take to become a real student, we would have to place ourselves in a position to have to make some extraordinary changes.

We might, for example, have to open ourselves to the possibility that courses outside our major are worth the effort—not because they might help us get a job, but because they might make us better people (and, oddly enough, by becoming a better person, we might actually get the job). We might learn that learning for the sake of learning has
a value that cannot be placed on the altar of utilitarianism. We might come to believe that education is not the same thing as training. Because I wonder about what words really mean, I looked up the etymology of the words “train” and “educate.” Interestingly enough, the word “train” comes from the Old French for “to drag.” The word “education” is derived from the Latin for “to lead out.” Further, it has something to do with “bringing children up from childhood as to form their habits, manners, intellectual and physical aptitudes” (Compact Edition of the OED, 833).

This is not to say that training does not have a place in the conversation. In truth, everything has a place, but it is the person who has persisted in his or her folly who comes to understand what belongs where. A “trained” person might not really know this because s/he has been encouraged not to ask seemingly irrelevant questions, as doing so might be seen as unimportant, but an educated person can ask the questions because s/he has been given a wide berth. Ask the silly question. Ask the question that has no definitive answer. Ask the question because you have the ability to create the question in the first place.

What I am suggesting is that education, real education, is a formative event. It shapes us so we can look up. This might sound quaint, but
what I have noticed over the last few years is how many people do not look up because they are literally looking down at their phones. While I realize that this is a product of our times, I would be remiss if I did not voice a certain sadness about our diminished capacity literally to look up, to greet others whom we pass, to engage in the simple civility of acknowledging that other people share the space with us. By looking up, we come to know that we are a small part of a larger reality, and if we extend that metaphor, we share the space with all those who have gone before us. A real and deep education puts us in touch with the great minds of those who have created thoughts worthy of our time and devotion. We get to become friends with authors and their characters, even with lines of poetry or prose. We get to have conversations with Othello, Ahab, Hester Prynne, and Siddhartha and learn from their lives how we might live our own. Of course, to do this means that we have to ask the questions that require our sacrifice. Would we have the strength, as J. Alfred Prufrock asks, “to force the moment to its crisis?” Or would we see that Prufrock has opted for the hell of polite and trivialized life to ask questions without trying to live into their answers? Would we see that he is clever without ever becoming wise? Might we think that his education did not do right by him, and would we then have the guts to ask ourselves whether our education has done right by us?
These are great questions to ask because they demand our attention, our devotion, and our humility. One of the questions I often ask my students is “what risk do they take if they enter the world of the poem, the play, the novel they are reading?” Could they allow themselves to be shaped and even transformed by a work of literature—is it something that might help them build the foundation of their lives?

Mr.____ arrives at the deep understanding that the more he wonders, the more he loves. His capacity to wonder makes him human, and by becoming more fully human, he touches the spark of divinity within us all.

Mary Oliver, a wonderful American poet, voices a similar calling in her poem, “When Death Comes”:

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder

If I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened.

Or full of argument.
I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

Our Dominican tradition has a motto: “contemplata aliis tradere,” to contemplate and to give to others the fruit of one’s contemplation. It all begins, however, with the ability to wonder, which will lead to love, which will lead to living in this world, not just visiting it. And if we can actually begin to wonder, we can make a more just world for everyone. Might we have the courage to ask this of ourselves?—Good question.