



# GEORGIAN COURT UNIVERSITY

THE MERCY UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

## GCU Convocation Address

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Recipient of the Virginia Graham '31 Award for Teaching Excellence**

**August 30, 2018**

Good afternoon, Sisters of Mercy, President Marbach, provosts, deans, my fellow faculty, students and their families, and friends.

On this hot summer day, I'd like to take you to another place, a much cooler one. Let's go back to February . . .

You are walking across a carpet, you reach for something, and suddenly, you feel a shock of static electricity; you may even have seen it in the dark.

You just got close to something, you didn't touch it, but you created an arc to it, a palpable one.

Have you ever thought about that space? The space between?

What a fascinating space that can be!

Don't believe me?

Let me take you on a journey to a few...



This is a very famous detail from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michaelangelo's masterpiece. This powerful and compelling image, the Creation of Adam, shows the Hand of God reaching out to the hand of Adam. Where do you see the power in this image? In the fingers of God? Adam? No! It's in what you cannot see. It's in the space between them—that is where the true power lies. You can sense it though, can't you? After all, Michaelangelo did not paint them touching for a reason.

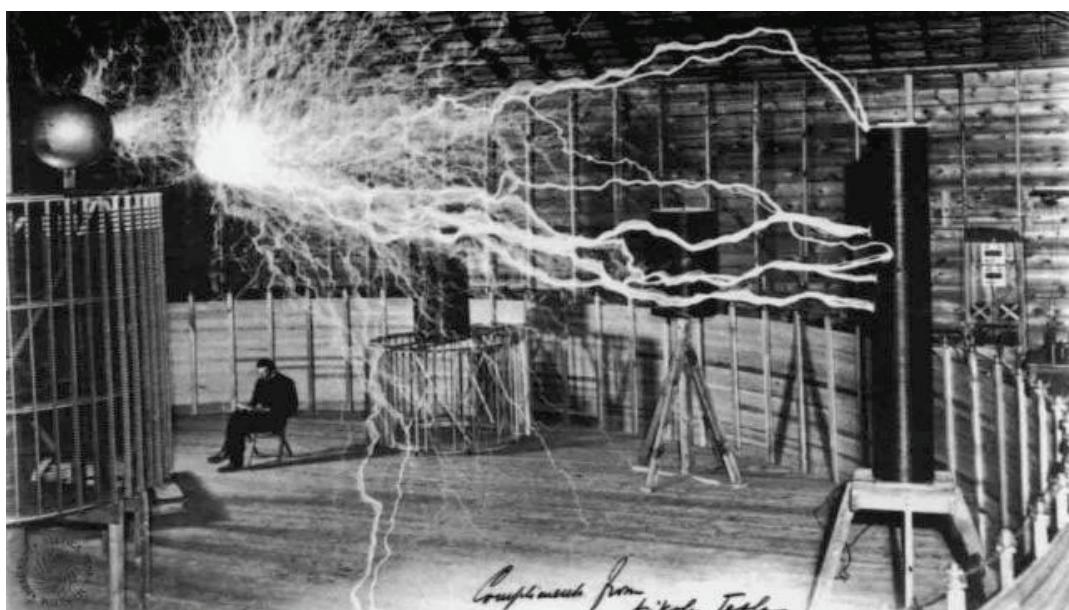
This type of space can be between two people, two ideas, two objects, two experiences, or maybe even two classes you take here at Georgian Court. The two things can be totally unrelated! And that is what makes it so exciting!

I have lived my life in this magical space between. When President Marbach was announcing the recipient of this year's Virginia Graham '31 Award, he began with a description of the academic path of the individual: A Bachelor of Science in Marine Biology, a Master of Arts in Teaching in Secondary Science Education, a Master of Architecture, and a Doctorate in Arts Education. It occurred to me halfway through that I might be the recipient, but when the train jumped the

tracks from the sciences to the arts, I knew it was I. What an honor this is. I am grateful, to those who saw fit to grant it to me, to those who have enlivened my intellectual life here at Georgian Court, and to those of you whom I have yet to meet.

Each one of you has created opportunities for me to make connections with things I could not have anticipated when I came to Georgian Court 20 years ago. So much energy has passed between us!

So today, I'd like to expand on that energy and share some examples in that space with the hope that I will inspire you. Maybe something I say in this brief address, an example I am using, or an image I am projecting will catch your attention or connect with something in your life and experience. That spark might lead you to a new thought or direction. That is my sincere hope. The secret is to be aware of the arc that two things create and to capture it in order to create something new.



Here is a well-known image of the scientist, Nikola Tesla, where he is absorbed in his thoughts while energy soars above him. This could be an analogy for missed opportunity at the expense of

distraction or self-absorption. The message? The space between requires attention and humility. If we are not open to receiving ideas, will they **find** us?

**Let's cool off again . . .**



Imagine standing on a diving board, maybe even a really high one! You are excited to jump but a little nervous. . . . The power of the experience is not on the board, or in the water, which will certainly be refreshing. . . . It is in the space between the two of them! Isn't that where you feel like giggling?

Where children squeal with delight?

We're in one of the best places to find spaces between things, a university! Georgian Court! It's the joy of being in a university and teaching here that enlivens and energizes me. I seek opportunities to be with people from different disciplines in order to create new combinations or possibilities. Why?

There are no sparks in a silo, other than destructive ones.

In seeking opportunities for inspiration, I have been set in new directions by the ideas and work of my colleagues at Georgian Court:

For example, Dr. Paul Cappucci from the English department, with whom I have explored ideas of architecture and poetry; visual art, photography and poetry; and the lives and work of the poet William Carlos Williams, and of his brother Edgar, an architect.

I have worked with Dr. Louise Wootton in the biology department, whose expertise in invasive species was brought close enough to **my** interest in design thinking to create a space in which an elementary school curriculum was born. Then a casual conversation with my former Georgian Court student, Beth Topinka, connected this work with her Grades 3 to 5 students in her STEAM lab at Millstone Elementary School. She and her students took the idea and ran, winning an international problem-solvers award in the process.

Another example occurred during a lecture about the progressive school designs of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century architect, Julia Morgan, that I gave as part of a faculty research forum at GCU. Dr. Scott Bennett, from the history department, asked me a question about the comparison of Julia Morgan's work to that of Frank Lloyd Wright, who was her contemporary. This arc created my next research trajectory, a comparison of the early educations and school designs of Morgan and Wright.

A lively conversation among friends—Dr. Kathryn Quinn-Sanchez, Heather Sultz, Dr. Pamela Rader, and me—about the meaning and importance of space in dance, design, literature, and world language revealed a myriad of connections among disciplines that resulted in a performance piece through which we explored our ideas at a GCU Faculty Scholarship Day.

These are some of **my** personal experiences, but this opportunity is surrounding each one of you.

Some of you are just starting your university experiences. I can assure you that you will be surrounded by people who can offer opinions and knowledge about subject matter that might be completely new to you. Not just your professors but your classmates, friends, teammates, and all the people you will meet; classes you will take, experiences you will have, books and articles you will read, and many other possibilities.



In a 2016 article in *The Atlantic* magazine, Teller, the **silent** member of the magic duo Penn and Teller, discusses teaching and learning in the context of his years as a Latin teacher. He sees a direct connection between magic and creating opportunities for learning. In fact, he says that "Teaching is performing magic," and describes numerous ways that the sleight of hand creates a space between things that the **learner** fills with wonder and new connections. The desire to explain what you **could not see** compels you to ask more questions and to continue to learn; and **not** being able to immediately explain something can be uncomfortable.

The American contemporary choreographer and performer Elizabeth Streb describes the feeling well when she says, “It’s necessary to put yourself in harm’s way . . . out of your comfort zone . . . to discover new territory.”

Being open to becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable, and seeking out those opportunities is the key.

Even right here, right now.

For example, I bet each one of you can think of something you could help someone else to learn. (I could, for example, help someone to learn to make **chocolate-covered buttercream Easter eggs or to knit.**) Attempting any one of these new things might be awkward and even embarrassing at first. But imagine all the connections among all of the people here today! All the things you could learn! But without the proximity to those people and ideas, and the humility to seek them out, you will never know, there will be no arcs, no chances to be in a generative and perhaps uncomfortable space.

It is similar to a synapse in a nervous system. The neurons must be close enough for the energy to pass from one to the other.

Or like sound, when someone is saying something but you are just not close enough to hear it. You move closer and the sound reaches your ear.

**It's the proximity.**

## **It changes everything.**

In her book, *Space, Place, and Gender*, geographer of space and power Doreen Massey talks about social space, which could include a university, as being similar to a network of social relationships that are like threads in a fabric. And these fabrics are like nets that have been woven among people in that place,

fabrics that have been overlaid one on another,

have interacted with one another,

sometimes have disappeared,

and then maybe have been renewed.

Think of yourself within this concept: you have friends, professors, teammates, and other individuals with whom you come in contact here. Some result in lasting social relationships, some end when you graduate or your class ends, some become dormant but are renewed at a later time.

However, all are threads in the fabric that includes you and Georgian Court.

A number of these relationships will be contained within this university, others will stretch beyond it, and will tie you and Georgian Court into wider relationships, larger fabrics, and processes, through which other places are connected, too.

Thinking of places in this way implies that they are not so much bounded areas, like a university campus, a school or department, but they're as open and porous networks of social relationships; stretching from you, sitting here right now.

**AND** you take the potential to make these connections everywhere you go, maybe through random encounters, well beyond Georgian Court. Imagine the fabric of threads this could create.

There are buildings that have been designed to encourage this kind of random encounter and fabric between and among people.



The Salk Institute for Biological Sciences in La Jolla, California, **is** such a place. It was designed by the American architect Louis Kahn for the scientist Dr. Jonas Salk, the discoverer of the vaccine for polio, who approached Kahn in 1959 and asked him to design a facility that should “explore the implications of the sciences for humanity.”

The campus was designed around a courtyard facing the Pacific Ocean, across which scientists cross paths constantly, and an open laboratory system that connects to the courtyard, thereby creating even more opportunities for random encounters during which scientists can talk, and discuss their work.

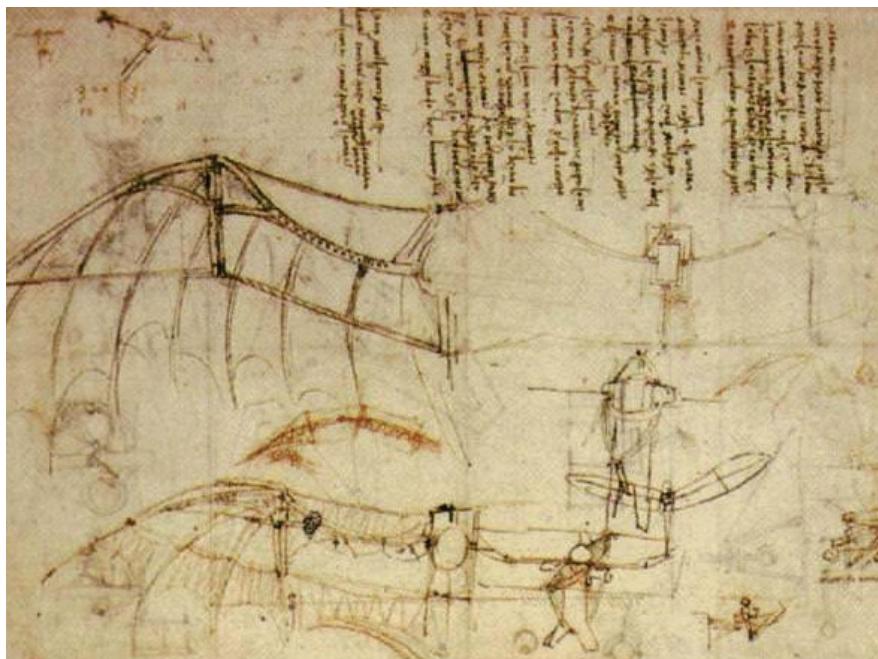
A walk across this plaza can result in a conversation between a neuroscientist and a phytochemical engineer, an architect, or a psychosocial researcher. To this day, the Salk Institute has created amazing connections and new disciplines and organizations such as Neuroarchitecture and the

Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture, and the study of the effects of designed space on healing, spiritual experiences, learning, and even prison recidivism.

Random encounters, humility, and intellectual generosity result in great things.

That's the process of invention!

Who comes to mind when you think of an inventor?

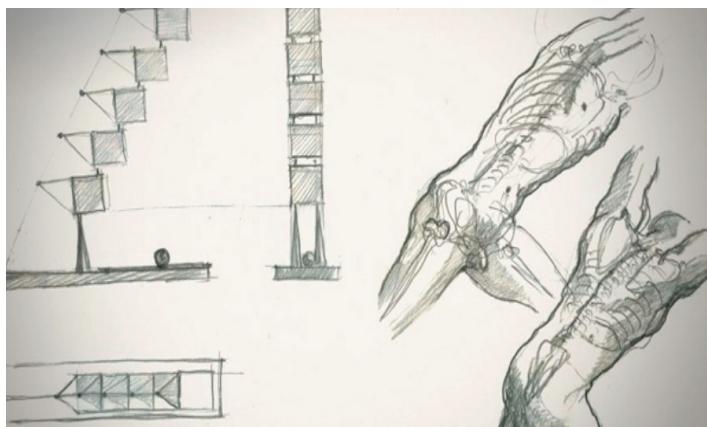


Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps? He is a wonderful example of someone who constantly sought proximity to unfamiliar things and recognized the potential between them. He is famous for his insatiable curiosity, analytical and artistic skills, and imagination.

For example, the result of his analyses of the human body and things that fly? Fantastic inventions! A parachute? A helicopter? In 1500? Just think about how incredible that is.

A modern-day example of da Vinci is the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, whose analytical drawings of animals and their skeletons brought close to the structure of buildings has created sparks that have resulted in designs such as

an apartment building on the east side of Manhattan that is derived from an analysis of the human spine,

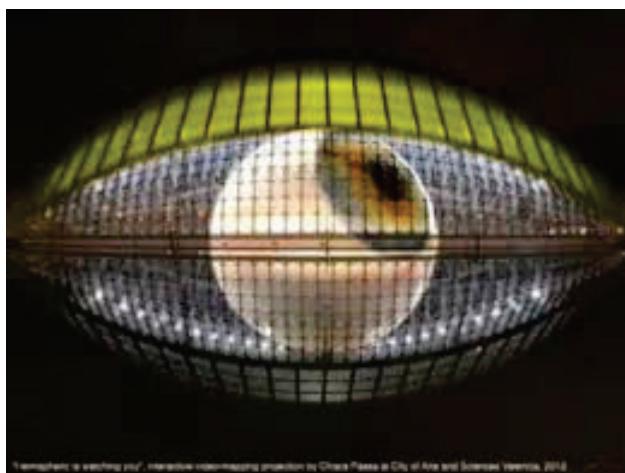


the new World Trade Center Oculus, based on an analysis of a bird, which was designed to open its wings to the sky each year on 9/11,





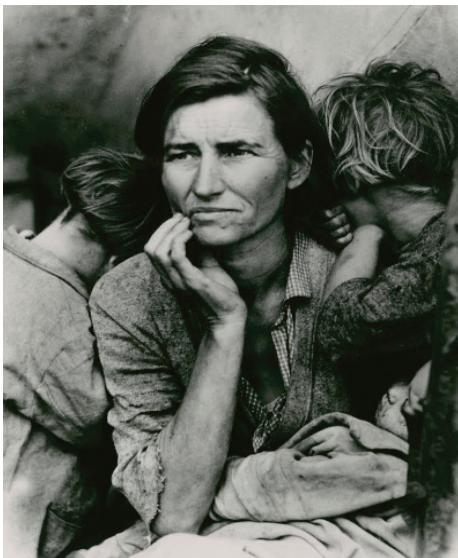
the Milwaukee Museum of Art, which looks like a giant eye that opens and closes with the light,



and the velodrome for the Athens Olympic Games, which looks like a giant insect, its armored spine soaring into the sky.



The American photographer and photojournalist, Dorothea Lange, whose photographs of the Great Depression are familiar to many of you,



particularly this one from 1936 entitled *The Migrant Mother*, said it well. In this iconic image, she documents a mother and her children, the mother's face a study in misery but resolve, and her children facing away from the camera, their heads on her shoulders.

In the final years of her life, Lange was asked by the Museum of Modern Art in New York to prepare a retrospective of her photography. This involved combing through thousands of negatives and photographs in order to choose those she felt created a narrative of her work. She enlisted the help of a young graduate student with whom she discussed the photographs, and the pairs of images she was creating. She would hang each pair on the wall and wait for her instinctive response to them, sometimes keeping the pair, sometimes changing one image, sometimes discarding one or both.

She said of the process and the photos:

"sometimes they are in balance;  
sometimes one is subservient to the other  
and sometimes they come together (**CLAP**) and make a loud noise."

As this new school year begins, I encourage you to seek out the spaces between things,  
pay attention, listen for that loud noise,  
and see where it takes you.

Thank you.