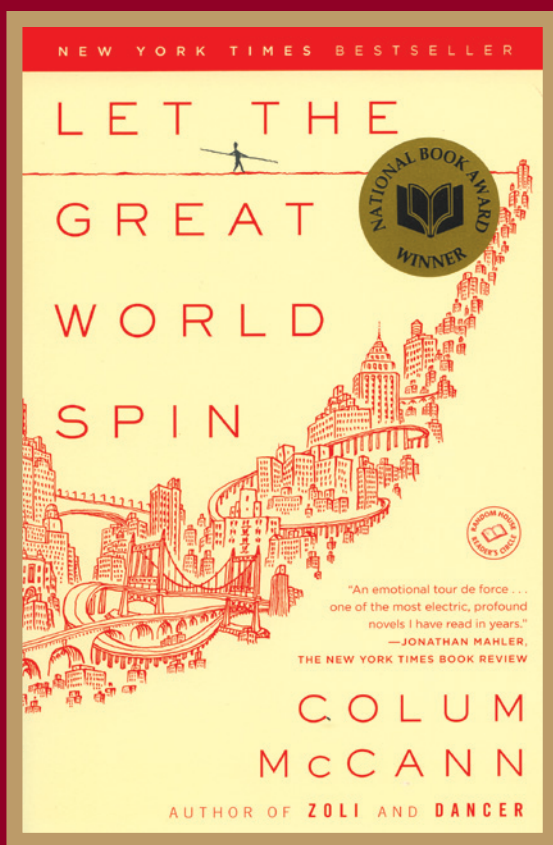


BOSTON COLLEGE

MYSTERIOUS TIES THAT BIND:

TRANSCENDENCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE



**FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION
SEPTEMBER 15, 2011
WITH AN ADDRESS BY COLUM MCCANN**

GO SET THE WORLD AFLAME!



THE JESUIT MISSION

The early Jesuits struggled to describe what they called “our way of proceeding.” Their distinctive spirituality can be seen as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on its meaning, and ends in deciding how to act. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements: being attentive, being reflective, and being loving. It results in the kind of good decision-making that St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, called discernment. Discernment enables each of us to seek the greater good before us. Having this deep interior knowledge of the heart is to communicate with God and trust that the hand of God is at work fortifying and directing us in our lives. One of the many goals of a Jesuit education is to produce men and women for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong process of exploring our experience, reflecting upon its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action that creates a harmonious community for us all. We can also think of this process as something that we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives, for example, during the four years of college or when we have to make important decisions. When we discern, we want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to do.

Through the practice of discerning, we grow in our ability to imagine how we are going to live our lives and discover our vocations. The novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner describes vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” When we arrive at this place of convergence, we understand the fit between who we are and what the world needs of us; St. Ignatius urges us to be unafraid to live with the consequences of this realization and to respond with generosity and magnanimity, because this is the way that we can love as God loves.

We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships with others, growing up in cultural, social, and political institutions that they have created for us through the wisdom of their accumulated experience. To be human is to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take responsibility for them, to contribute to nurturing and improving them, and to give something back to them. Jesuit tradition uses the Latin word *magis* or “more” to sum up this ideal, a life lived in response to the question: How can I be more, do more, give more? Having the courage to seek this wisdom is an important step in how we lead virtuous lives.

It is certainly the hope of Boston College, as a Jesuit, Catholic university, that students will feel at home here no matter what their background and beliefs. You are at Boston College because you belong here, and this place is now and shall be part of your formation. From the multitude of experiences over the next four years, it is our hope that students will grow in expanding their hearts and minds, enriching their souls, and developing their talents, so they will grow in wisdom, faith, and love. Boston College also desires that students will come to know more deeply God's profound and abiding love for them and for all men and women, and that all Boston College students will make their choices in light of that love for God.



THE PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION FOR LIFE

The goal of our life is to live with God forever.

God, who loves us, gave us life.

Our own response of love allows God's life
to flow into us without limit.

All the things in this world are gifts of God,
presented to us so that we can know God more easily
and make a return of love more readily.

As a result, we appreciate and use these gifts of God
insofar as they help us develop as loving persons.

But if any of these gifts become the center of our lives,
they displace God and so hinder our growth toward our goal.

In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance
before all of these created gifts insofar as we have a choice
and are not bound by some obligation.

We should not fix our desires on health or sickness,
wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one.
For everything has the potential of calling forth in us
a deeper response to our life in God.

Our only desire and our one choice should be this:

I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening of God's life in me.

A WAY OF PROCEEDING IN A JESUIT UNIVERSITY

Our perspective on the world affects our experience, and our experience becomes our sense of reality; therefore, this sense of reality influences how we interact with the world. If we see the world as a cynical or loving place, this perspective embodies and becomes our understanding of our surroundings. St. Ignatius of Loyola thought that the right vision comes from a trusting relationship with God, who loves us.

To think about this relationship with a loving God is a spiritual, intellectual activity that we will ask all of our students to engage in as they embark on their individual and communal journeys here at Boston College. The choices and the decisions that we make through the course of our daily lives either draw us closer or move us further away from God. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, discovered God's love through his quest for self-knowledge and personal sacrifice.

Ignatius's own spiritual growth happened in response to a difficult and painful experience. In 1521 while defending the city of Pamplona against a French attack, a cannonball struck his leg, causing a severe injury. During his subsequent recuperation from two painful leg surgeries, Ignatius had a great deal of time to consider his life and what he truly wanted and desired. While recovering, Ignatius had access to only two books: the *Vita Christi* and the *Flos Sanctorum*. These literary works examined the life of Christ and the stories of the saints. From reading these two books, one of the things that Ignatius came to understand from his conversion was that he was created by God. This conversion made something stir within Ignatius's heart. This stirring inspired him to rethink his view of the world and that of God. Ignatius realized that he was created by God for a purpose, as are all women and men.

This new orientation for his life and his new understanding of God provided Ignatius with a more authentic understanding of reality, which gave him a new vision of himself. Ignatius's vision of God was very tangible and personal. He had seen and experienced God in such a profound way that he was now able to truly find God in all places and in all things. This experience St. Ignatius describes in the Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises: "All the things in this world are also created because of God's love and they become a context of gifts, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily."

When we understand that God is love, it is foundational for us to understand that God loves us completely and fully. In order to deepen our understanding of this, Ignatius asks each of us to reflect upon and contemplate God's love, which is the concluding prayer of the Spiritual Exercises. There is great value in reflecting upon all that we have within our lives: our family, friends, talents, and gifts. Through reflecting upon our experience, expressing gratitude, and having patience, we are better able to find and retain a perspective that helps us to shape and model our lives. In many ways, a Jesuit education helps to direct each of us to continuously listen to our own heart. Being in the habit of understanding and responding to our heart is how we become transformed and grow into people who we want to be become and who we are meant to be.

As first-year students, you are embarking on a pilgrimage that has no set route but does have a clear destination. To be authentic pilgrims, each of you must engage in the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of the experience with an attentive, responsible, and loving heart. There are many roads and possibilities on this pilgrimage from which you must choose; however, to reach the destination, you need to live authentically—you must live the life that dwells within you. To reflect daily upon your authenticity enables you to discern the right direction to proceed.

Like Ignatius, you make good decisions when you examine and attend to the relationships within your lives. This discernment needs to be at the heart of your decision-making. By modeling ourselves after St. Ignatius of Loyola, who informed his reflection through reading during his convalescence, we will ask you to begin your journey into BC by examining Colum McCann's novel, *Let the Great World Spin*.



Before reading McCann's book, please reflect upon the following prayer by the late Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, S.J.:



*Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is,
than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.*

*What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out
of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings,
how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you
know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy
and gratitude.*

Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything.



To ask the right questions is to begin to experience discernment, which needs to be at the heart of all of our decision-making. We would ask each of you to ponder these key questions:

What stirs inside of you?

What are your deepest desires?

A HISTORY

The First Year Academic Convocation and First Flight Procession welcome each incoming class into the academic conversation already resounding throughout the Heights. The First Flight Procession that each student partakes in is an act of faith; faith that your classmates, the faculty, and the entire Boston College community will work together to engage a myriad of ideas that shapes your character, expands your intellect, and deepens your soul. As a student body, Jesuit community, and faculty collaboration, the event commissions all first-year students and welcomes them into Boston College. In the same way that our freshman class is welcomed into the University, our seniors follow the same route in May on their day of graduation as they are set forth into the greater community of graduates, professionals, and alumni.



Convocation and Graduation Ceremonies on Linden Lane.

First Year Academic Convocation looks to engage students intellectually, socially, and spiritually. As the tolling bells of Gasson Tower signal the start of the procession, the entire freshman class, gathered by residential halls, proceeds down Linden Lane. Each residential community arrives in front of Gasson Hall, the first building built in 1913 on the Chestnut Hill campus. It is within this storied tower that the early Boston College students were asked to discover their own voices in what was originally called the Recitation Hall. As a committed community, we will empower each of you to discover and cultivate your own unique voice here on the Heights. To begin this pursuit, each first-year student is invoked by both a Jesuit and lay educator to “Go Set the World Aflame.” St. Ignatius gave this same charge in 1542 to St. Francis Xavier, who was carrying the Gospel to the East.

Traditions and rituals draw us into the experience of our lives. They also help us feel connected to something larger than ourselves. The First Flight Procession, the blessing, and the lighting of torches are all part of how we look to connect a 2,000-year-old Judeo-Christian tradition, a nearly 500-year-old Jesuit,

Catholic order, and a 150-year-old institution, Boston College. As we feel part of something larger than ourselves, it is important to recognize the camaraderie and the companionship that we form among ourselves and how that connects to the alumni who have come before us. We also want each of you to come to realize that as members of the BC community, we believe in you. It is our hope that in the four years that pass between Convocation and Graduation, you will become attentive, intelligent, loving, and compassionate people who are committed to something greater than yourselves.

St. Ignatius attempted to model a life and provide a path alongside Jesus that would enable each of us to examine our lives in a tangible way to pursue the most profound questions. The Society of Jesus, as well as the faculty, administrators, and staff, are here to be your companions in contemplative action as you search for truths in your life and the world around you. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson asked the question, “Who am I, and how do I fit into this world?” It is through many conversations at Boston College that you will begin to answer these major questions in your life.

Boston College hosts the First Flight Procession and the Convocation address on the same day as the Mass of the Holy Spirit. It is the Mass of the Holy Spirit that expresses most profoundly our connection to our mission. We ask that each of you begin to ponder how your personal faith and beliefs are developing. We would invite each of you, regardless of your personal religious beliefs, to be open to the gifts of God’s grace, which St. Paul refers to as the fruits of the Holy Spirit. These fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As we begin each school year, we pray that the Holy Spirit continues to fill our hearts with the fire of God’s love, which can better enable each of us to “Go Set the World Aflame.”



Mass of the Holy Spirit on O'Neill Plaza and First Flight Procession.

THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR:

As the class of 2015, each of you will have the opportunity to read *Let the Great World Spin* and to welcome author Colum McCann to Boston College to discuss his work. Through this contemporary novel, you will come to see the interconnectedness of humanity through the lives of 11 seemingly unconnected New Yorkers who are mysteriously and beautifully in communion with one another. The novel suggests that God's grace and love open the lives of the characters to redemption, hope, compassion, and ultimately, love. This 9/11 novel set in 1974 revolves around the World Trade Center and a central event: a tightrope walk by Philippe Petit. Through McCann's rich description, characterization, and narrative approach, this novel invites the reader to search for inspiration within everyday life by suggesting that a personal encounter with transcendence is within the grasp of humanity every day in this complex and great world.



Photo by Brendan Bourke

Colum McCann is the author of two collections of short stories and five novels, including *This Side of Brightness*, *Dance*, and *Zoli*. His fiction has been published in 30 languages and has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *GQ*, and *Paris Review*. Colum's fifth novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, was selected as the National Book Award Winner in 2009.

In 2003, McCann was named *Esquire* magazine's "Writer of the Year." Other awards and honors include a Pushcart Prize, the Rooney Prize, the Hennessy Award for Irish Literature, the Irish Independent Hughes and Hughes/Sunday Independent Novel of the Year 2003, and the 2002 Ireland Fund of Monaco Princess Grace Memorial Literary Award. His short film *Everything in This Country Must*, directed by Gary McKendry, was nominated for an Academy Award Oscar in 2005.

It is our hope that this guide will help to ignite your passion and curiosity. Make no mistake: Boston College expects a great deal from you, its newest students, as you bring your intelligence, energy, imagination and compassion to create an even greater Boston College community.

A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic University, we will ask each of you to engage in a conversation, to live together, and to share your life with one another. As you begin to read Colum McCann's novel, it will be important that you allow yourself the freedom and ability to engage the text from a fresh vantage point; First Year Experience desires all Boston College students, in accordance with the Catholic intellectual tradition, to pursue truth, insight, and wisdom for the greater glory of God.

To be successful in this pursuit, we hope that each of you will search for truth within McCann's prose while also contemplating how it relates to your own experience. It is within McCann's intentional use of allegory and symbolism, and his empathetic depiction of the conflicts that reside within the movements of the human heart that we can each come to a fuller appreciation of God's unconditional love. Through your careful reading of the novel, we hope that you will strive for a union of heart and mind, so that your intellectual inquiry meets the emotions that emerge within you.

The gritty world that McCann depicts within this novel is filled with cynicism, dejection, addiction, self-absorption, cruelty, and loss; however, amid this seemingly more powerful world of despair, *Let the Great World Spin* provides a wellspring of hope that emerges through individual acts of compassion and redemption. It is within these individual acts of generosity that the themes of forgiveness, empathy, faith, and hope emerge. By bearing witness to life's hardships and tragedies along with acts of tenderness and kindness, this novel reflects upon many aspects of the human condition. The novel's triumphant quality resides within the moments of tragedy or the exhilarating experiences of joyful inspiration, for it is through these events that the reader can come to a better understanding of God's grace. Through this novel, we can begin to grow in our capacity to be open to the possibility of how God's grace quietly and gently connects people and experiences in ways that we cannot possibly comprehend.

Within the novel, there are also many moments that revive, enlighten, and inspire different characters; these moments are experiences of transcendence. Transcendence is a way of describing those moments in which a person encounters a Holy Mystery that provides interconnectedness and communion beyond oneself. Often we have difficulty talking about transcendent moments, which can come in surprising ways—through quiet prayer or church services, an experience of hardship or grief, conversations with friends, being touched by the beauty of art or music, or simply noticing the grandeur of nature.

Experiences of transcendence enable us to expand our understanding of self, saving us from preoccupation. The gift of such an experience is that it removes the

blindness, allowing us to recognize the goodness of ourselves, other people, and God's creation. Through these encounters, we are suddenly reminded that we are immersed in the love of God and never alone. This sense of communion means that transcendent experiences inevitably overflow into love and the service of others. When we experience God's love, it encourages us to share that love with others through generosity.

Loving and inspirational acts both large and small, like those that occur in *Let the Great World Spin*, connect us in mysterious, transcendent ways. Like the characters, every one of us desperately desires a similar kind of sincere, vulnerable encounter with others. As you read the novel, pay attention to the moments when characters experience consolation and thus, a feeling of deep affinity with God. Ponder how you have come to self-understanding and have encountered the Holy Mystery within your life. It is the ability to recognize your openness to transcendence that leads toward a deeper intimacy with yourself and God.

One important dimension of a Jesuit education is the pursuit of the *magis*. The word *magis* is derived from the Latin phrase *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, the motto of the Society of Jesus. It means that we live everything in the earthly life for the greater glory of God by actively pursuing the "more" or the "greater" in our lives. A place like Boston College is striving every day in this pursuit of a more universal good, a more universal truth. Like these 11 characters, we need to discover and pursue our passions through active engagement. *Magis* is not a quest for perfection but one of magnanimity and humility. As you find yourself here at Boston College, we will ask you to discover and pursue your "more." In the Jesuit tradition, we encourage each of you to strive to do great things for God, which requires you to search out your deepest desires and reflect upon them.

As you move forward in Colum McCann's writing, pay attention to the moments of grace and the experience of transcendence, for it is within these encounters that we can begin to recognize the true beauty and wonder of God's love and belief in us.

In order to help you to be attentive while reading this work, we have provided some questions to reflect upon:

How does McCann's novel help us to come to terms with tragedy and the horror that occurred ten years ago on September 11, 2001? How does his novel allow us to reflect upon the meaning of these events and reconcile them? In what ways does McCann use allegory in his writing to address the impacts that 9/11 had on the lives of everyday Americans? Which characters represent the fallen towers?

In reflecting upon a photo of the tightrope walk, Jaslyn considers the enduring inspiration of a “man against scale, still capable of myth in the face of all other evidence” (p. 325). How does this event lift up the everyday people within the city? What is so enduring about this image?

While the tightrope walk is a central motif within the novel, in what ways are each of the characters walking a similar path? What guides the characters? Which characters fall and which are redeemed?

After the death of Osama bin Laden and the subsequent rejoicing that occurred, the Pope released the following statement: “In the face of a person’s death, a Christian never rejoices, but reflects on the serious responsibilities of each person before God and before humanity, and hopes and works so that every event may be the occasion for the further growth of peace and not of hatred.” How does one come to reconcile the horror that bin Laden produced within the spectrum of our Christian beliefs and our cultural perspective?

How does the Holy Mystery move within the context of this novel? Can you identify any moments of transcendence? How are characters’ lives and perspectives fundamentally changed from these encounters? When have you experienced similar moments within your life?

Faith is an important theme within this novel. Many characters struggle with their own faith, including the flawed Irish monk John Corrigan. Corrigan, who is reminiscent of a Graham Greene creation, consorts and ministers to sinners and cares nothing for the rich, yet struggles with his own faith right up until his death. In what capacity does Corrigan struggle with his faith? How does his isolation contribute to it? How does his death impact the lives and faith of the other characters? How do you communicate with God and share the burden of your own sorrows?

“He believed in walking beautifully, elegantly. It had to work as a kind of faith that he would get to the other side. He had fallen only once while training—once exactly, so he felt it couldn’t happen again, it was beyond possibility. A single flaw was necessary anyway. In any work of beauty there had to be one small thread left hanging” (p. 160). How is the tightrope walker an image of the faithful life?

“Christ was quite easy to understand...He never rejected the world. If He had rejected it, He would have been rejecting mystery. And if He rejected mystery, He would have been rejecting faith” (p. 20). How is the experi-

ence of faith addressed within the novel? Where are you within your understanding of faith? How does one's faithful life impact the capacity to experience transcendence?

"When he looked into the darkness he might find the presence of a light, damaged, and bruised, but a little light all the same...out of that came some sort of triumph that went beyond theological proof, a cause for optimism against all evidence" (p.20). Through whom does the presence of light shine brightest within the novel?

"You know, when you are young, God sweeps you up. He holds you there. The real snag is to stay there and to know how to fall...when you tumble, the test is being able to climb up again. That's what I'm looking for" (p. 50). How has your faith been tested? How have you learned to "climb up"?

"Sometimes, you've got to go up to a very high floor to see what the past has done to the present" (p. 306). What set of circumstances led Gloria to this perspective? How does this epiphany inspire her to act with such compassionate, generous love?

"It had never occurred to me before but everything in New York is built upon another thing, nothing is entirely by itself, each thing as strange as the last, and connected" (p. 306). How are people connected in the novel through God's grace? In what ways have you reflected upon the multitude of connections that exist in your own life?

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic, liberal arts university, you must consider how we live in the 21st century and how the world is growing rapidly and changing in unforeseen ways. In the midst of this globalized and technologically driven world, we ask you to critically evaluate all that has come before us. To enter into the University core curriculum is to enter into a foundation of knowledge and experiences that will better equip each of you to synthesize and adapt to the ever-changing world that you are part of each day. Being able to read, write, and think critically will be important building blocks within your academic journey here at Boston College.

To fully embrace your Jesuit, Catholic education, you also need to consider how you will grow in your own understanding of faith. There are many conversation partners, including the Jesuit community, that are here to aid you within this journey and quest for understanding. Boston College hopes that each student will deepen their individual faith over the course of their years here. There are a num-

ber of sacred places within our community where you can go to contemplate and recognize God in all things.

We would encourage you to seek out these sacred places on our campus:

www.bc.edu/prayermap.



There is one place in particular, given the subject of McCann's novel, that we believe would be important to your understanding of *Let the Great World Spin* and the events of 9/11: the Memorial Labyrinth, which was dedicated to the BC alumni who were lost on September 11, 2001. For centuries, pilgrims had followed the singular path within labyrinths to represent their desire to walk through life with truthful purpose and to symbolize a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Boston College's Memorial Labyrinth is a place for you to reflect upon the pilgrimage that you are currently undertaking. The labyrinth is a sacred space on our campus that was designed to represent the intersection between the human and the divine.

The 11 characters in this novel are all linked in mysterious ways through God's love; we, too, are connected through God's love. Taking time to open your heart, contemplate your dreams, reflect upon a loss, ponder questions, or to pray are all ways in which we can understand our individual relationships with God and experience transcendence. The labyrinth is a physical and spiritual way to begin this process. The eleven concentric circles within the labyrinth are linked by a single path that leads to a center that is bisected by a cross representing Christ within our world. As you arrive on campus, please walk this blessed path and contemplate the essential questions that stir your heart.

We would ask that you begin this path by reflecting on the following two poems—

A Future Not Our Own

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession
brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of
liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's
grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the
difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

In memory of Oscar Romero (1917–1980)
by Bishop Ken Untener

The Summer Day

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean—

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

by Mary Oliver



What do you plan to do with the opportunity that awaits you here at Boston College?



As you enter into your first year of college, it is important to examine the decisions that you make while here at BC. Taking time to reflect upon your motivations, your desires, and your fears will give you a better perspective on your life—where you came from, where you are presently, and where you are heading. Boston College hopes to partner with you during this journey through the careful discernment of the intellectual, spiritual, and social components that affect you during your undergraduate journey.



Go Set the World Aflame!





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**CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:
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