

# BOSTON COLLEGE

## DISCERNMENT:

UNDERSTANDING OUR VOCATIONAL CALLING  
BY REFLECTING UPON THE PATTERNS AND  
INTERCONNECTEDNESS WITHIN OUR LIVES



**FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION**  
**SEPTEMBER 17, 2009**  
**WITH AN ADDRESS BY ANN PATCHETT**

**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.” One of the many goals of 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—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 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 and 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 others have created for us. 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?

It is certainly the hope of Boston College, as a Jesuit University, that students will feel welcome here no matter what their background and beliefs, and will know they have a place here. From the multitude of experiences over the next four years, it is our hope that students will grow in expanding their minds, deepening their souls, and developing their talents, so they will grow in intellect, wisdom, faith, and love.

Boston College also desires that students will know more deeply God's profound and abiding love for them and for all of the world, and that they will make their choices in light of that love. Boston College hopes that students will choose to become men and women for others: people convinced that their faith in God leads them to stand with the poor and marginalized of the world.



## 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.*

From the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius  
Paraphrased by David L. Fleming, S.J.

## A HISTORY

The First Year Academic Convocation began as a call for a new ritual called First Flight; whereby, members of the Boston College community might best welcome each incoming class into the academic conversation already resounding throughout the Heights. Begun as an effort of student and faculty collaboration, the event has grown from a commissioning of first year students to a bracketing procession—seniors now follow the same route as you will follow in September on their day of graduation as they too are welcomed into the greater community of graduates, professionals, and alumni.



Convocation and Graduation ceremonies on campus.

It is our hope that in the four years that pass between the Convocation and Graduation, our young men and women will, with a thoughtful, informed, and loving gaze, look more closely at the world around them. Ultimately, we hope that they will have begun to ask, as developmental psychologist Erik Erikson did, “Who am I, and how do I fit into this world?” The best way to get to that point of discernment is to engage in the act of conversation. The First Year Academic Convocation is an event, but it is also a discussion, a literary experience centered on the vital issues put forth in a program facilitated by the Office of First Year Experience called Conversations in the First Year. All incoming students have been issued a book and the charge to begin engaging in conversations with faculty, staff, and their fellow classmates, that we might struggle together to be active and to be loving as a community of learners. We have been fortunate to have been inspired by a litany of wonderful people.

Paul Farmer, through Tracy Kidder’s work *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, asked students to examine how our commitment to educational excellence can allow us to better form a true vocational life, centered in service by looking beyond the comforts of wealth and basic health care to those who enjoy neither luxury. President Barack Obama addressed students in the context of his memoir *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, wondering aloud just how we

might close the “empathy gap” present in American society today particularly surrounding questions of race and identity. Senator John McCain addressed students on the topic of service and leadership in both the public and private sphere through Robert Coles’s *Lives of Moral Leadership*. Jeannette Walls shared her astonishing memoir *The Glass Castle*, detailing her nomadic childhood. In this remarkable book, Jeannette Walls illustrated the power of love and redemption. Through the memoir *The Tender Bar*, J.R. Moehringer exemplified the Jesuit ideals of discernment through his reflective, loving, and honest depiction of his life and his search for self-understanding.

As a class, each of you will have the opportunity this year to prepare for this conversation by reading the acclaimed book *Run*. Author Ann Patchett weaves together a story of family that asks each of us to think about love, our vocational calling, our duty to others, and our larger society as a whole.

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. You will bring your intelligence, energy, imagination, and compassion to create an even greater Boston College community and realize the fruits of your education to your life and work. You are vital to the mission of this university. Our task is to support you in the realization of your goals and dreams with us and beyond Boston College.



Photo by Melissa Ann Pinney

Ann Patchett, a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, has written a number of critically acclaimed novels. Her work *Bel Canto* won both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Patchett’s memoir *Truth & Beauty*, which chronicled her friendship with Lucy Grealy, was named one of the Best Books of the Year by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. *Truth & Beauty* was also a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and won the *Chicago Tribune*’s Heartland Prize, the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award from the American Academy of Arts and

Letters, and the Alex Award from the American Library Association.

## A WAY OF PROCEEDING IN A JESUIT UNIVERSITY:

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

Thinking about this relationship is a working partnership that we will ask of all of our students as they embark on their individual journey 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, believed that God is love. St. Ignatius' path to self-understanding was not easy and took a great deal of time and effort.

Ignatius' growth happened in response to a difficult and painful experience. In 1521 while defending the city of Pamplona against a French attack, Ignatius suffered a severe leg injury caused by a cannonball. 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 these readings, he felt something stir within his heart that 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 people.

This new vision for his life and his new understanding of God helped to reform Ignatius' reality and gave him a new vision of himself. Ignatius' vision of God was very tangible and personal. He had seen and experienced God in such a way that he was now able to truly find God in all places and in all things. Ignatius describes this 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 important for us to understand that we are loved completely and fully. 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 fam-

ily, friends, talents, and gifts. By reflecting on what we have, 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 listen to our own heart. This understanding and response to our heart is how we become transformed and grow into people who we want to be and who we are meant to be.

As first year students, we are embarking on a pilgrimage that has no set route or map. The roads and possibilities are endless, and we need to be open to the new possibilities that abound. While there is no set way to travel, there is, however, a way to proceed. Our flexibility, adaptability, and ability to reflect upon our daily experiences enable us to discern the correct direction to pursue. We make good decisions when we examine and attend to the relationships within our lives. This discernment needs to be at the heart of our decision-making.

Like St. Ignatius of Loyola, who informed his reflection through reading during his convalescence at Loyola, we will ask you to begin your journey into BC through your examination of this novel. While reading, we would ask each of you to also think about what stirs inside of you. What aspects of the novel resonate within you? Where do you see and experience love within this novel?



Before reading the novel, 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.*

## BEFORE YOU READ: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

*Before you read the book, examine your self-understanding by reflecting on yourself and how you relate to others. Here are some questions to help you get started:*

What events, experiences, or people have influenced or shaped who you are today and who you want to be?

How do you define family, and how has your relationship with your family changed since you were young? How do you envision this notion of family changing over your four years at Boston College?

How have you found a community outside of your family? How does one feel connected to a community? Can you become lost in this search for connection?

How has the search for connection affected your development? What are the expectations that groups have for you?

How would you describe your identity now? How are you open to changing yourself in your time at BC?

When in your life have you felt superficially judged by others? When have you judged others, perhaps prematurely? How have issues of class affected your growing up?

Can you think of someone whose life you have impacted, for better or worse?

How do you begin to search for your own self-understanding?

How does faith shape who you are and how you interact with others?

Discovering God in all things, which is an Ignatian desire, calls us to look always for opportunities to experience the Spirit working in our everyday lives. In what ways have you come to see and understand God's love in the world?

How do you find time and where do you go within our hectic pace to contemplate life?

Have you taken time to listen to what your heart is calling you to do?

What are your goals for your time at BC? What are your ultimate life goals? How do these goals match with your heart's desires?



## A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT:

Escaping into a novel's landscape and travelling along with fictional characters can often provide us with a critical stance and a better understanding of our own lives and the world in which we live. This journey into one's self and our subsequent search for self-understanding are key effects of great literature. Great literature has a probing quality that affects our whole being while making us think outside of ourselves.

This self-directed pursuit requires a close examination of our past and present to understand our desired future. This ability to know one's true self is at the heart of our own discernment. While reading this novel, it will be important to think about the motivations behind each character's choices and how those decisions connect each of the characters in a unique way. Understanding how, as people, we are all connected in ways that we cannot truly understand or fathom is important to consider as you embark on this new journey into college.

Arthur Blaustein in *The Novel as Moral Conscience* states: "When we read socially conscious novels, we learn about who we are as individuals and as a nation. They inform us, as no other medium does, about the state of our national soul and character—of the difference between what we say and how we actually behave." Thinking broadly will be an important part of your academic life here.

Entering into Boston College, we are connecting to those who have come before us, who are here now, and who will come after us. Thinking about how our choices and decisions affect the multitudes of those with whom we will interact, even in the most simplistic of ways, is vital as we begin to build a community here on the Heights.

Relationships usually provide interactions which affect both individuals—each person gives and receives something from the other. This impact can often happen without our realization. It is also important to reflect upon how we impact others' lives in positive and negative ways. If we can embrace the lessons in this novel, we can begin the conversations and reflections that will enable us to live a wholesome life.

It is our hope that the thematic organization of the textual-based questions will begin to probe you to think about the academic relevance of the text while connecting you to a series of much larger questions which will be discussed throughout the entire year.

## FAMILY, TRADITIONS, SYMBOLS, AND RELATIONSHIPS

**“...The statue had been in their family for four generations, passing down a maternal line from mother to daughter, and it was their intention to hold with tradition.” (p. 1)**

**“Things go downhill from here....There’s no redemption.” (p. 10)**

How do you understand redemption? How does your understanding weave through the novel?

**“Later on there was a shorter, cheerier version she used for the boys as a bedtime story that did not involve theft...” (p. 12)**

There are two different stories concerning the history of the statue. How do these differing versions affect our understanding of the characters? How are our own family stories created and passed on to generations? How truthful are they and is there a darker side?”

**“They believe it’s actually a statue of her.” (p. 2)**

**“The statue possessed a kind of ethereal beauty that poor children in Ireland had never been acquainted with, not even in the church...” (p. 6)**

**“The statue always goes to the daughter.” (p. 295)**

Why does Patchett start and end her novel by focusing so intently on this statue and its matriarchal connections? Why does Bernadette’s death give her a saintly devotion that if she lived would not have been possible? Why is that saintliness not enough? How does Kenya complete this family? Why is the statue given to her? Why does she need it the most?

**“They had asked for one child and then came home with two....he would have given anything if she could have had a daughter. Even if she had come at the very end...” (p. 91)**

What can we learn from the Doyle family? As we are moving forward and beginning to redefine the nuclear family, please think about the Doyle family and how it is defined through both biological and personal relations. How does the arrival and integration of Kenya benefit the entire family? How is Kenya accepted so easily? How has she always been the missing piece in the Doyle family?

**“Whenever he got angry at Doyle he would try to imagine that other man, the one who was coded in his genes, but it was never very satisfying. He could not picture him as a scientist, a brilliant herpetologist or entomologist who had given his son away.” (p. 95)**

Why do we make certain choices that lead us on toward the paths that we

follow? Given the nature of choice, how much is nature/nurture?

**“But right from the beginning Doyle saw the little boys as a fresh start, a chance to do a better job. It was remarkable in retrospect, seeing as how Sullivan was at that point still more than a decade away from complete ruin....He had stood by Sullivan, even if Sullivan would never acknowledge it. He had been an imperfect father to an imperfect son and as far as he was concerned they were even.” (p. 97)**

Keeping the parable of the Prodigal Son in mind, compare Sullivan’s arrival home to that of the biblical story. How are they different? How does each father’s reaction affect the son’s integration back into the family?

**“If his mother had lived, the chain of events would never have begun. There never would have been an accident. He would not have been sent off in the world by himself.” (p. 109)**

Sullivan seems to suggest determinism within his life; do you see that as true? How do we overcome profound loss and continue to build a life that is free?

**“Maybe that was the definition of life everlasting: the belief that the next generation would carry your work forward.” (p. 133)**

How are you embracing and carrying forward the legacies of others? How will Boston College aid you in the journey?

**“I left because my father gave up on me as soon as there were those other boys for him to bank on, and I hated those other boys, your sons, because they took his attention and his love without any effort at all. Besides, everything reminds me of my mother.” (p. 149)**

How are Sullivan and Doyle similar? Why do they need each other in more ways than they realize? Why and how does Sullivan find peace with his past and present to build a future?

**“Sometimes I feel like my entire life has been some sort of study in genetics....There’s Kenya doing things like you, and then I wonder if my boys are doing things like me.” (p. 196)**

What makes us who we are? How do chance encounters and/or our friendships affect our lives in profound ways?

**“It occurred to him now for the first time with this girl in his hands how the two mothers were linked by their absence, and a wave of loneliness of the sort he did not allow himself came over him.” (p. 224)**

Kenya’s presence fills the absence of both mothers. What enables her to do this?

**“We both want the boys to do well, but the boys are going to do well, each in their own freakish way. It isn’t what we’d wish for them but they’ll find their happiness in the world.” (p. 259)**

How does Sullivan attempt to provide his father with understanding in regard to his sons? Does Doyle ever understand? Where are our blind spots? What can’t we see or don’t want to see?

**“He loved them, each of them, for being themselves and for being part of his favorite niece and for being the family of Teddy, whom he loved above all others.” (p. 269)**

**“He was so pleased to have found his friends again, to have found everyone in so unlikely a place.” (p. 275)**

What role does Father Sullivan play in the family? What role does he play in the overall plot structure of the novel? How does Father Sullivan in a Dickens-like way, which means that there is no such thing as coincidence, connect all the characters and unite this family?

**“The present life was only a matter of how things had stacked together in the past, and all Kenya knew for sure was that if she had the chance to hand over everything she had now in order to regain what was lost there would be no words for how fast she would open up her hands.” (p. 292)**

This novel is set within a very short time period in the midst of a snow-

storm. How does the isolation of the storm allow for these modern characters to interact in the way that they do? While the bleakness of the storm glosses over and hides much of the distractions that constantly interject into the characters’ lives, the world that is created has a mythical or fairy tale quality to it. A fairy tale always ends with: “They lived happily ever after.” Is this possible outside of the context of a fictional world? To what degree do you proscribe to this?

## **IDENTITY, RACE, AND CLASS**

**“There were more black students in the lobby than a person usually saw around this place. Most of the time they were diffus, scattered, always in the landscape, never all together. But tonight they held a slight majority.” (p. 26)**

Do you know what it feels like to be in the minority? If so what is it like? What are the pressures that one feels? Those times that you were in the majority, what freedoms and liberties did you take for granted? How can we grow and develop from our individual encounters with those who are different?

**“Tip would have said it made no difference to him, when in fact that alertness he always carried in his neck, the alertness that stayed with him so consistently he never even noticed it anymore, temporarily released its grip and disappeared.” (p. 26)**

What is the alertness that Tip feels? How does his race impact his life? How did growing up in the Doyle family affect this understanding of race? Is Tip aware of his own racial identity? How do we come to understand and explore our own identities when we arrive in college? Are we more at ease in homogenous environments? If so, why?

**“But a random little black girl? I don’t think anyone’s going to stop us at the door.” (p. 63)**

Why does Tip assume this and is he accurate? How does race play into the way in which we see and are seen by others?

**“I do appreciate your inspiration and leadership...but I need some more specific advice. I need to know how to keep my child safe in public schools, safe from guns and chipped lead paint and pushers and bullies who have been bullied too much themselves.” (p. 113)**

How is a single mother with all her burdens supposed to deal with the vacuous rhetoric of a politician? While Tennessee thinks this question, why does she not ask it? In what way have we been affected by our own socioeconomic status? When have you taken your comfort for granted? When have you considered how other people live?

**“I need to know how I can walk her straight to the door of her classroom in the morning and still get to work on time and how she can learn enough to get to college when there are thirty-five other children in the room and half of them did not get breakfast.” (p. 113)**

How is it that in the richest nation to ever exist we can allow for such savage inequality within our public school system? How is it possible for children to grow and develop in an environment that makes it so difficult to find success?

**“That was Boston: on one block there were houses so beautiful the mayor himself could be living in one and three blocks away there was a housing project where it maybe wasn’t always so nice...” (p. 177)**

How does this economic discrepancy make you feel? What ideas and questions does it prompt from you?

**“While they’re fixing the windows and picking up the trash and planting flowers, they get rid of the poor people too. I mean the black people, the brown people....You have to be poor and black to get taken out of this place....I was only black.” (pp. 217-218)**

What is gentrification and whom is it benefiting? If we redevelop whole sections of a city, what happens to those who have no place else to live?

## MEN AND WOMEN FOR AND WITH OTHERS

**When Tennessee sacrifices herself to save Tip from being struck by a car, Teddy rushes to her aid and begins to quote from President Ronald Reagan: “Your loved ones were daring and brave ...and they had that special grace, that special spirit that says, ‘Give me a challenge and I’ll meet it with joy....They had a hunger to explore the universe and discover its truths. They wished to serve, and they did. They served all of us.” (p. 44)**

In the American culture, individualism is the norm. How can you be selfless in a culture that does not model this? How is Tennessee challenging her sons at this moment? How does this act of selflessness affect the lives of each character? What enables you to want to help others? How does meeting a challenge with joy help us to discover our own calling?

**“I’m not sure she has anyplace to go. She said she didn’t have anyone she wanted to call. If they won’t let her sleep here she said she wants to come home with us.” (p. 63)**

When it becomes clear that Tennessee’s injuries are serious, what convinces the Doyle family to take Kenya home with them? What are our responsibilities to and for others?

**“This was another reshuffling of life, a complete reinvention that called for some time and a little peace...” (p. 99)**

Sullivan arrives home and finds himself in the middle of a family dilemma. What does this help him to realize? How is reinvention not always the solution? How do reinvention and reflection differ? What does Sullivan grow to see about himself through his reflection?

**When Teddy tries to justify his calling toward the priesthood to Sullivan, he says, “I want to help people. Is there anything so wrong with that? Isn’t that what Da taught us to do? Isn’t that why you were in Africa?” (p. 107)**

What does the world need from you?

**“...I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth.” (p. 107)**

Ignatius’ contemplation asks us to fall in love with the world. What would that mean to you—to fall in love? To be truly invested in the cosmic drama, we also need to consider this quote from Eugene Debs. How does it make you think about your commitment to responsibility?

**“What I don’t understand is how I never saw them....How I never saw them. I think she’s been standing there since I was a baby.” (p. 135)**

**“There must be people everywhere we never see.” (p. 135)**

How come Teddy does not truly see the world around him until after the car ac-

cident? Why can't we truly see others? If Teddy could not see his mother and Kenya, what else could he not see? Who are the people that we don't see? How can we open our eyes? How does compassion and empathy help us to see?

**“There are things that go on that none of us can understand, that even you can't understand. I want you to come and see her.” (p. 136)**

When we slow down, we are able to understand and see patterns within our lives. What are those patterns telling us and where are they leading us? How can we better see the threads that connect us to other people and the world that surrounds us?

**“I know you love her and I know that counts for everything, but I have to tell you I've wondered. You were the one going back to college. You were the one talking about law school. Then you take my baby and all of that's gone?” (p. 198)**

**“What Mr. Doyle couldn't see was that the boys while bright and dear and brave, knew nothing of sacrifice. They had never been asked to give anything up, not like Mr. Doyle had, not like she had.” (p. 212)**

What sacrifices did Doyle and Tennessee make for the boys? Was it worth it? What sacrifices have people made around you so you can attend Boston College? Are you willing to sacrifice for others?

**“Maybe there was a way Tip and Kenya had had similar childhoods after all. She too had been attending lectures on social responsibility, sitting through the same crushing liturgies on the moral imperatives of honesty and humility.” (p. 219)**

In the modern American culture, we live as if we are not tied to anything other than our own interests; therefore, are we required to be our brother's keeper? How does a social conscious form in our society? Is your view on social responsibility similar to that of Tip and Kenya?

**“It would be the last time he would ever see him as a child, the last time before all of the guilt and regret came to sit with him for the rest of his life.” (p. 280)**

Why is Father Sullivan a mentor to Teddy? How does he mentor? How does a mentor challenge us in ways that can be difficult? How can others see aspects about us that we cannot?

## **POLITICS**

Tip and Teddy Doyle's names are based off of two influential politicians from Boston. Boston has and continues to be a fiercely political town: Bostonians love the Red Sox and politics. It will be important to think about how ambition and unfulfilled dreams connect with politics in this novel. Doyle, the former mayor of Boston, connects his children so intimately with this world that it becomes infused in all things.

*Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr. '36*, for whom the library at Boston College is named, is arguably one of the most influential politicians of the twentieth century. He held the position as Speaker of the House of Representatives for the second longest term in history. As a graduate of Boston College, Tip O'Neill was a prominent, powerful, and loyal champion of working people. He truly believed in the idea that "all politics is local." A believer in social justice, House Speaker O'Neill demonstrated that politics and government could make a difference in people's lives.

*Senator Edward Kennedy*, the senior senator from Massachusetts, ranks among the most powerful senators of the twentieth century. Due to his long history of public service, he has become well known by his nickname "The Lion of the Senate." He is the most prominent living member of the Kennedy family. Senator Kennedy has experienced great sorrow and loss throughout his life. However, his commitment to helping those less fortunate has been a hallmark of his political career. Senator Kennedy's legacy will not come without criticism, however, concerning many of the choices that he has made in his personal life. Those choices and decisions impacted his 1980 presidential campaign.

In the classical tradition, Plato thought that only the best should govern. How do we judge our politicians? Do we hold them to a higher standard than we hold for ourselves? What do we want to see modeled in our leaders?

Teddy has the ability to recall great speeches. What qualities define greatness in a speech? How does a great orator affect the crowd?

**"Politics need not be marketed by politicians, packaged by pollsters and pundits. Politics can be a moral arena where people come together to find a common ground." (p. 28)**

Do you agree that politics is an arena for moral discourse? If so, how can we find common ground? How do you plan on finding common ground among your new community?

**"We have a responsibility. Doyle gave one small, reflexive nod of agreement. It was that sense of responsibility that made him continue to drag Tip and Teddy towards the cause of leadership. They didn't want to go, but...It wasn't entirely up to the child to be free to decide what was best." (pp. 30-31)**

What does it mean to be called to be a leader? How would you answer the call? The call to leadership has an implied responsibility to and for others. How does that greater responsibility affect each of us as we start to shape our lives here at Boston College? What is our responsibility to the larger world around us?

**"There were some people who had the ability to tell other people what was worth wanting, could tell them in a way that was so powerful that**



**the people who heard them suddenly had their eyes opened to what had been withheld from them all along.”** (p. 115)

How does Dr. Martin Luther King inspire Tennessee to act? What does she do?

**“It was better to have done something, to have stood for something great and gotten shot for it than it was to never stand up for anything and die like everybody else.”** (p. 115)

What is it that you stand for? What do you hope to accomplish?

**“Duty—honor—country...Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be. They are your rallying points; to build courage when courage seems to fail; to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith; to create hope when hope becomes forlorn.”** (p. 282)

How does the title of the novel play into the overall theme of politics? What is this novel asking from each of us?

## **PRAYER, DISCERNMENT, AND FAITH**

**“...Bernadette managed to give up praying to the statue for years. She sometimes prayed to a vague idea of God, more out of respect to her Uncle Sullivan than anything else.”** (p. 13)

What is prayer? How does one pray? What does Bernadette desire from prayer?

**“...The religion of her childhood started to creep back into her daily life, maybe because there was more to pray for...”** (p. 13)

When we are in times of need, feel confused, or desire, reflection, prayer can help us to find clarity. There are many places here on campus to find a sacred space to pray. We encourage each of you to seek out these sacred places and reflect upon your life. We suggest that each of you visit [www.bc.edu/prayermap](http://www.bc.edu/prayermap) and find a place to pray on campus.

**“He believed in the comfort of human touch....he touched her neck and closed his eyes and prayed that she would have peace. That was all he asked for.”** (p. 128)

What is the difference between praying for peace and a cure? Do you believe in the power of prayer?

**“...Father Sullivan spent his days praying, trying and failing in a seamless continuum...”** (p. 129)

Why do so many people seek out Father Sullivan’s touch? What are they looking for and not finding? How is acceptance needed to heal one’s self? How do you look for healing or acceptance in prayer?

**“It’s all ritual.” (p. 250)**

Teddy goes through a ritual each morning and prays to the statue of the Holy Mother. How is ritual important within our lives? How does ritual enhance the act of prayer?

**“His father liked to say he paid more than forty thousand dollars a year to one of the finest universities in the world to give his son the right to peer into glass jars at dead fish.” (p. 19)**

How do your family’s expectations and your own converge and diverge? Coming to college, we often have to carry our family’s expectations with us. How do we find the balance for what we want and what our parents want for us?

**“...Tip knew the exact point of origin of this interest and his father was completely to blame....It was Doyle who had settled them at the edge of the tide pools...”(pp. 19-20)**

When you reflect upon the passions that stir your heart, where do they come from? Reflecting upon those moments of great joy and light in your life, what do you see and remember?

**“In Tip’s food chain, academics sat on the top and everything else was there to be eaten. In Teddy’s food chain, nothing even came close to their uncle.” (p. 22)**

How is it that two brothers can be so vastly different in their views on life?

Is it possible to find a balance between Tip and Teddy’s perspective? Boston College hopes to develop all aspects of your life here—intellectually, spiritually, and socially. Are you willing to engage in this process?

**“Even now, when it was abundantly clear that Doyle had failed, he could not entirely abandon his drive to shape them. They should be leaders, smart boys like these, boys with lives of such advantage. The call to service should be coded in their bones.” (p. 31)**

What do our families expect of us? What do we expect of ourselves? What does the world need of us or expect of us?

**“...Father Sullivan always replied to the charge with a big song and dance about having a calling...” (p. 31)**

The stories of Charles Darwin and the *Voyage of the Beagle* inspired Tip’s life and his dream of exploring Brazil. What has inspired you and how can you develop those passions? What was it that inspired St. Ignatius of Loyola to set out on his journey? How do we begin to listen for the calling that Father Sullivan references?

**“Anger and sadness and a sense of injustice that was bigger than any one thing that had happened stoked an enormous fire in her chest and**

**that fire kept her heart vibrant and hot and alive, a beautiful, infallible machine.” (p. 242)**

When she runs it is like “meditation in motion.” What are the things that you do that evoke a similar sensation?

**“It wasn’t just that he was watching her run: he was watching who she was. It seemed perfectly reasonable to think that she could take this energy and pour it into anything.” (p. 243)**

We all need to strive to find this same calling within our own lives. For athletes, they call it “being in the zone.” When we are in that zone, we are calm, at ease, patient. Things happen organically and from a place of comfort. Time moves away and we become one with what we love. We urge you to look for this inner peace within your own lives and embrace that which you love above all things.

**“His decision was his penance, in the same way medical school had been Tip’s penance, though neither brother spoke of it as such. Both of them could see there would have been a benefit to being more like Sullivan, who had dealt with mistakes of his life by setting himself adrift.” (p. 284)**

What realization does each of the brothers have over his individual vocational calling? How can we use

this novel as a guidepost within our own lives? How do you plan on ordering your life?

**“If he thought there was something to faith then there must be something to faith.” (p. 13)**

How do you understand faith? To have faith in anything—marriage, friendship, or God—demands a level of courage. Do you consider yourself a courageous person? The courage to accept faith and God are missing from many people’s lives. Why is that?

**“Suffering breeds character...character breeds faith. In the end, faith will not disappoint.” (p. 32)**

How do our individual sufferings, trials, tests, and tribulations affect us as we journey toward adulthood? How has your character been shaped by sufferings, trials, tests, and tribulations? Have you come to experience your own faith through your sufferings, trials, tests, and tribulations?

**“This was a hard, steady fall of a medium-sized flake that meant business. To tilt your head back and look straight up into a streetlight was to have some comprehension of infinity. (pp. 36-37)**

Do you ever stop to look for moments of the divine around you? Have you ever been overcome by the experience of mystery or a profound sense of beauty? What was your experience in these events?

**“Somewhere along the line Teddy’s love for his mother had become his love for Father Sullivan, and his love for Father Sullivan became his love for God. The three of them were bound into an inextricable knot: the living and the dead and the life everlasting.” (p. 76)**

What kind of images does Father Pedro Aruppe’s prayer on love evoke? If God is love, please explain how Teddy’s love and faith in God grows.

And if God is love, what does it mean to you? What nourishes your faith and love for God? If you are struggling with your understanding of God, what nourishes your hopes and dreams for the future?

**“So sure was Johnny Sullivan’s belief in God’s impassioned love for him that he had felt certain he alone would never age.” (p. 126)**

**“He believed in a carefully ordered universe: action and reaction. But now he could not longer picture a God who kept track of such minutiae or would think to punish anyone for it.” (p. 126)**

How has Father Sullivan’s faith and concept of God changed over time? Even at your age, how have your views changed and developed?

**“He tried to see what was ahead for each of them and he could see nothing at all. It would be incorrect in**

**every sense to say that so near the end of his life he had lost his faith, when in fact God seemed more abundant to him in the Regina Cleri home than any place he had been before.” (pp. 130-131)**

Like Father Sullivan, it is possible to see God in all places, but often our own confusion can prevent us from seeing God, and, from accepting God’s love. Where are you in your understanding?

**“God was in the folds of his bathrobe, the ache of his knees. God saturated the hallways in the form of a pale electrical light.” (p. 131)**

Where do you experience God and what does it mean for you to find God in all things?

**“If he did become a priest he would have his entire life to direct people away from some incalculable unknown in favor of valuing the lives they led.” (p. 133)**

When we pay attention to the chance encounters and coincidences within our own lives, are we experiencing God’s grace? How does faith connect with God’s grace?

“...Father Sullivan hoped to elevate the present to a state of the divine. It seemed from this moment of repose that God may well have been life itself....Life itself had been holy. We had been brought forth from nothing to see the face of God and in his life Father Sullivan had seen

it miraculously for eighty-eight years.” (p. 131)

The wonderful poem by Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*, poses this question: “What is it you plan to do, with your one wild and precious life?”  
What do you plan to do with yours?



## 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

*As you finish the novel and enter into your first year of college, it will be 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 much 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.*



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**CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:  
A PROGRAM OF THE OFFICE OF  
FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE**