At the very end of the movie *The Martian*, with Matt Damon, his character, Mark Watney gets to speak with new astronauts who are being trained for a trip into outer space. He anticipates their questions, so he queues up his answer:

“Did I think I was going to die?” he asks. “You bet I did. It’s space. Anything can go wrong. And it will. And when it does you just start answering problems. And if you answer enough problems, you might get to live.”

But what drives Damon’s character is not death, or the fear of dying. Earlier in the film when it appears that he will die because of a mishap with the Hab in which he loses his crop of potatoes, he records a message to his parents: “I’m okay with dying,” he says, “because I’m part of something important and beautiful and bigger than me.”

How do we keep this vision in front of us in the midst of challenges, in the midst of answering and solving problems – that we are part of something bigger, something beautiful, something really important?

I want to frame some of the work we have accomplished together across the campus of the University of Northern Iowa in a way that might remind us of this vision, that our work, even the dailiness of it, is truly about something that goes beyond the mundane—and indeed into the sacred.

I will address three large projects in these brief remarks.

First, the work of the Academic Master Plan. Four years ago we developed and approved a plan for priorities within Academic Affairs. Those priorities included a focus on student success – not
only their academic and professional success, but also their civic engagement and their personal success – as well as on faculty excellence.

But we have not reported out on how well we have done. That is, we have not taken the time to account for the way in which our activities have added up to something bigger. I will rectify that soon and send out a report to campus. As you read that report, reflect on the remarkable things that have been accomplished and the difference that these things make in the lives of our students. And if I have missed activities that we could usefully add to the report, please let me know.

Second, the work of the Higher Learning Commission assurance argument. We have over 100 faculty, staff, and students, including many of you, who are participating in this endeavor. It is a heavy lift and again catalogs many of our accomplishments. Two areas deserve special attention because they were both highlighted in our 2000 and 2010 recertifications as problem areas.

We were warned that we had not developed learning outcomes at the program level which were then assessed to understand the extent to which students were learning. That issue has been addressed in such remarkable ways that we have received an Excellence in Assessment designation from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Thank you to Dr. Deedee Heistad, Executive Director of Undergraduate Studies and Dr. Kristin Moser, Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness for their leadership and to all the faculty for their work in program assessment; this designation is the gold standard in learning outcomes assessment and it could not have been accomplished without your dedication (though we do have more to do!).

And we were warned that we needed to revise our General Education program because it was not outcomes based. We have moved in a very thoughtful and collaborative way to develop a mission and clear learning outcomes for General Education (which have been adopted by the Faculty Senate) and a new structure (listening sessions have been scheduled for October 7, 8, 9).
Both of these tasks have a great deal of bureaucracy around them. But they are about something so much more – about the “bigger” vision that we need to hold onto as we do this work together. This work is certainly about the learning that happens while our students are with us.

But it is about more than that. It is about their life journey and the foundation that you are creating for the journey, the platform from which they will launch themselves into the world. In the midst of the dailiness of our work, we must remember that. It doesn’t show up in an HLC criteria. It won’t be assessed. But it is the most critical piece of what we do.

Finally, academic positioning. The goal of academic positioning is to embody the spirit and to nurture the culture that underlies what we are doing with General Education. The structure and outcomes that we embed in our General Education Program are not meant to be the lasting structure and outcomes for the next forty years; they are to be assessed and reviewed annually, and refined, and overhauled as we see fit. That is, academic positioning is about learning to be innovative not in fits and starts, but as a part of who we are. We must become more nimble to be responsive to the fast changing climate of the professional world and of higher education. If we do not, we will become obsolete.

At its basis, as I stated in my April 24 email, academic positioning is about “creat[ing] the conditions under which excellence in teaching and learning, scholarship, and service can flourish into the future”; creating a “culture of innovation and resilience”; reviewing and refining our academic programs; and considering our academic structure.

You will hear more about academic positioning soon. Most importantly, we must remind ourselves as we engage this work that it is about something bigger – not just about solving problems, one at a time, but about creating the conditions under which the University of Northern Iowa will thrive.

I ask myself this question every day: How can the work we do together make UNI a better place – not just for ourselves, but for our future faculty, staff, and students?
There is so much more that we are doing together that I don’t have time for, but it is truly transformative work – collaborating with faculty leaders on shared governance and the Faculty Handbook. Our commitment to working together has been enhanced over the last few years and that commitment must be deepened and embedded in our culture, our systems, and our processes.

I want to thank all of you, all of the faculty who work so tirelessly to offer our students opportunities not only to develop their intellectual capacities, their habits of mind, but also their social-emotional and psychological capacities, their habits of heart and habits of spirit.

Students who journey with us have the opportunity to become whole human beings, prepared for professional careers, prepared to be active citizens, prepared to flourish and thrive as a result of the curiosity and engagement, the confidence and humility, the care and compassion, the resilience and persistence that you model for and nurture in them.

This work, this daily work, touches so many lives and ripples its way out into diverse communities and into the future, touching so many more lives.

Thank you for your commitment, your dedication, and your passion. The world is a better place because of what you do.