

**Remarks for Cap & Gown Convocation  
Saturday, September 26, 2009**

**President Patricia McGuire  
Trinity Washington University**

Congratulations to our seniors! By taking on these caps and gowns today, you are accepting the seriousness of purpose and lifelong sense of mission that accompanies your Trinity education. Let's take a few minutes at the closing of this convocation to reflect on the purpose, the mission that you will have in the days to come.

This evening, we have heard from a wonderful Trinity exemplar, a young graduate who took from this place a remarkable sense of purpose to change the lives of children through education. Philonda Johnson is the new role model for the Trinity students who will be teachers and school administrators for the next generations. Who among you will join forces with Philonda? Who among you will find your lifelong mission bringing hope and security to children and families through improved educational opportunities?

Those seniors in this room who came to Trinity three years ago as part of the Class of 2010 wrote some powerful essays in their applications to college --- I'm going to quote from a few of them again, as I did on your first day here --- you revealed your great sense of purpose in passages like this:

*"Most people have a dream, but when a person is living in poverty it is easy to abandon the dreams and replace them with a lack of ambition along with diminished hope. I want to be a driving force in the community around me and restore the aspirations for those in need to have a better life..." (Application Essay, Class of 2010)*

Who among you will restore the aspirations for those in need in our community? Who among you will find your sense of purpose in alleviating the conditions of poverty and violence that repress the talents of children in too many families today?

We live in dangerous times. You have come of age in the shadow of September 11, maturing through years of war and compromised civil liberties and ever-present threats of new forms of terror about to unleash murder and mayhem on our civilization. I firmly believe that the chronic threat of unimaginable horror befalling the ordinary lives of most citizens fuels the climate of stress abroad in the land this year. What will you do to restore the peace, to lead the community to a more stable sense of security and harmony than we have at present?

Three years ago one of you wrote of the prevalence of violence in your application essay:

*"Who will stop the madness if I will not...?" (Application Essay, Class of 2010)*

Who among you will stop the madness, the violence, the hair-trigger accusations, the self-destructive cycle of blame and recrimination that has replaced civil debate in too many places?

A Trinity graduate has responded to the call to work for peace in these days of intense international concern over the spread of nuclear arms capacity in rogue states. Ambassador Susan Flood Burk, Class of 1976, recently took her oath of office as President Obama's Special Representative for Nuclear Non-Proliferation. If you want to know how important her work is this very minute, just look at the banner headline across all columns in this morning's *Washington Post*: "U.S., Allies Say Iran Has Secret Nuclear Facility." I hope that every person here today will take the time to read the accompanying stories. Leadership for peace demands that this nation never relent in its quest to ensure that nuclear power is used only for peaceful civil purposes; Ambassador Burk is directly involved with these international efforts. In a speech at the Geneva Center for Security Policy in August, Ambassador Burk outlined the initiatives that are her responsibility to strengthen the global Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty and other agreements, and she crystallized the leadership challenge for the United States and other responsible nations:

*"I have described a number of initiatives and other steps that can set us on a path toward greater international security and allow us to meet the genuine economic and social needs of countries embarking on or expanding their civil nuclear programs. Their success is predicated on the assumption that all states – those that possess nuclear weapons and those who have foresworn them – have a responsibility for doing their part to advance our collective security.*

*"The United States and other nuclear weapon states bear a special responsibility under the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) to pursue nuclear disarmament. President Obama has described his agenda for meeting this responsibility, and we will pursue it with resolve.*

*"But non-nuclear weapon states bear no less responsibility to work constructively and actively to prevent further proliferation and help create the conditions for nuclear disarmament efforts to succeed. The responsibility does not end with their decision to forswear a nuclear weapons capability and to accept IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards to verify their commitments. It must continue through the participation of those non-nuclear weapon states in rigorous, collective efforts to prevent other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. These efforts benefit the international community as a whole, whose collective security and well-being is threatened by the spread of nuclear weapons. Through such efforts all states can help create the conditions necessary to achieve the nuclear free world that we seek."* [Ambassador Susan Flood Burk, "Strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime: A Blueprint for Progress" Geneva Center for Security Policy, August 12, 2009 at <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/rls/rm/127886.htm> ]

Who among you will join Ambassador Burk in the quest for world peace? Will you who plan to become teachers or business executives or lawyers or nurses or journalists take the time to learn about disarmament and nonproliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear power so that you can be effective citizen leaders in the global discussion of reducing nuclear threats, including the threats posed not only by Iran and North Korea, but more ominously, threats that exist when terrorists work covertly with those states and others to gain control of nuclear materials?

This is real Trinity leadership in one of the most important sectors of our global village.

*“Who will stop the madness if I will not?”* Susan Flood Burk has answered that question for herself --- will you answer that question with as much purpose and conviction?

This time last year, we were witnessing the final weeks of the most dramatic presidential election in modern history. Barack Obama’s election made history, and just eight months ago many of us in this room braved the bitter cold of a January day to give personal witness to this nation’s declaration that change must come, that new leadership is imperative, that our society’s challenges at home and abroad can be solved through peaceful, intelligent means and not simply the overwhelming display of force.

Today, the exhilaration of January 20 is gone, replaced by the even colder realities of governing in this very fractious nation. Now, I don’t know what version of the health care plan is right or whether I agree with the Baucus proposal but I do know this: when a member of Congress disrupts a presidential speech by shouting a scurrilous accusation from the House floor, we citizens have to pay attention to what’s happening to us as a nation. When serious public figures have a very public debate about whether racism is driving opposition to the president’s proposals we can agree or disagree with the analysis, but we have to pay attention to what’s happening to us as a nation. When the Speaker of the House and other leading public figures express concern that the angry rhetoric so evident in town hall meetings and, even more so, on the internet could spawn real acts of violence, we must pay attention.

And, having paid attention, we citizens must act. We --- we, the people --- we are responsible for the climate of tolerance and respect, or hatred and disruption. We can make this choice; we do influence the tone as well as the content of the debate.

Who among you, Green Class assembled so splendidly in your academic robes of intellectual power, who among you will have the courage to say to the angry mob, let us stop shouting and sit down with those with whom we disagree and have a reasonable discussion? Who among you will be a force for civility and calm in the raging chaos?

You know the stakes in the current debate over health care reform. You know that it’s about real people who are suffering because they are afraid to go to the doctor because they have no insurance or cannot afford the co-pays. You knew this long before the debate became fashionable. One of you wrote in your application essay:

*“Have you ever stopped to notice that at the same time you're buying excessive jewelry, expensive cars, etc., that someone is dying of a serious illness all because they can't afford to pay for medication? ...We have to help change the lives of others who have no opportunity to even come close to what some people take for granted.”* (Application Essay, Class of 2010)

You know that the fundamental issue in the health care debate is whether the richest society on the face of the earth will have enough compassion to care for the sick, the elderly, the children in poverty; this is a matter of urgent justice. Another Trinity graduate, Kathleen Gilligan Sebelius, Class of 1970, has now made these issues the cause of her life. She has become the Secretary of Health and Human Services, leading the national effort on health care reform. This is no easy job, and Secretary Sebelius has demonstrated courage and a clear sense of purpose in moving

past the critics and angry rhetoric toward a focused effort to achieve results. Who among you will have this much courage and strength to work to achieve goals that improve the lives of marginalized citizens? Who among you will have the great sense of purpose to blow through opposition to ensure that justice is served?

You wrote in your application essays so long ago:

*“If I am successful at college then my younger siblings and cousins will follow and we can all create a new generation of college educated people [in my family]. I want to be a great influence on changing my family's future legacy.” (Application Essay, Class of 2010)*

You are your family's legacies for the future, the guarantors of your childrens' security, the hope for their ability to rise and surpass even your own great achievements on some future academic stage.

More than a century ago, a small group of brave women with big ideas and larger ambition set about the considerable task of founding Trinity. They had no money. (A grand Trinity Tradition!) They did not yet own any land. There were no buildings. They had no students.

They wanted to do something that was never done before. They wanted to have a college where Catholic women of that day could earn college degrees. Unheard of! Heresy! The idea generated a lot of opposition. Some people in the Church said it was a heresy called “Americanism.”

But those women had the one thing they needed to persist: faith. Those women did not let angry right-wing rhetoric frighten them. They did not pay much attention to the people writing screeds against them --- long before bloggers, there were letters and statements written on real paper, or in things called newspapers. We have copies in the archives. Those women, the great Sisters of Notre Dame, persisted, showing great fortitude and courage. They somehow found the money, bought a little piece of land, and began building the great granite structure that would become Main Hall.

They recruited nineteen young women who were true pioneers, women who broke through a massive gender barrier in higher education in this city on the day they first set foot on this hallowed ground --- November 6, 1900. Those women not only made history, they made it possible for succeeding generations of Trinity students and graduates to make history as well. They made it possible for Philonda Johnson '05 to make history in founding the KIPP DC Discover Charter School. They made it possible for Nancy Pelosi '62 to become the first woman Speaker of the House. They made it possible for Kathleen Sebelius '70 to become, first, Governor of Kansas, and, now, Secretary of Health and Human Services. They made it possible for Susan Flood Burk '76 to become Ambassador for Nuclear Non-Proliferation. They made it possible for so many other Trinity Women to make history across many different generations, doing vastly different kinds of work, but all work that comes together for the public good, for the sake of justice, for the improvement of human life and dignity in our local neighborhoods and large global village.

Three years ago, before you ever really heard about these women or our grand traditions, a member of this class wrote in your essay telling us why you wanted to come to Trinity:

*“I want to be **more than a witness to history** --- [I want to be] a creator of it.” (Application Essay, Class of 2010)*

You knew even at the beginning of your Trinity journey that you wanted to make history. Those great women, our Founders, the Sisters of Notre Dame, made it possible for you to have such audacious ambition.

Your caps and gowns today signify the power that is within you to become such creators of history for succeeding generations. Wear this regalia with pride, with care, with an ever-stronger sense of stewardship for the precious gifts you have received here at Trinity: the power of a great education, the wisdom of intellectual maturity, the charity to use what you have learned here for the best possible purposes in enlarging the lives of others.

May you go forth from this Cap and Gown Convocation renewed in your sense of mission and purpose in a world where you can make the history that will change other lives for the better. May the power of your education at Trinity give you the strength to persist, to insist, to be relentless in your quest to improve opportunities for others to thrive. May you be forces for hope, for justice, for peace in every community you inhabit. May the blessings of the Trinity go with you all the days of your lives.

Congratulations, Class of 2010!