

Remarks for Cap and Gown Convocation 2010
September 25, 2010

President Patricia McGuire

Before we leave this convocation, I offer a few final thoughts for our seniors to ponder.

Across the arc of your college days the world has traced the trajectory of war and recession, terror and retribution, the hope for change and the inevitable disappointment of political reality. You are among the rare citizens of the earth profoundly privileged to have a higher education, and you will carry your degrees into a culture in which intellectual attainment, at least in some places, is increasingly viewed with suspicion if not downright hostility.

We are in an age of dumbing-down where anyone with an internet connection can fill cyberspace with screeds lacking any resemblance to truth, railing against the 'eastern intellectual elite' as enemies of civic virtue, glorifying mangled syntax as high political rhetoric; an age where any demagogue can mount the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to trash the very values of justice and human dignity that makes that monument meaningful for millions.

This is an age that hijacks history with no regard for the actual facts, a time in which provocateurs can claim to know the real intent of the writers of the Constitution while mocking those whose advanced learning might actually acquaint them with the robust political debates of Jefferson and Adams, Madison and Hamilton and the other Founders who were much less sure of what they had created than the aggressive certainty about the Founders' intent proclaimed by some current pundits.

Trinity seniors: you are stewards of the Truth. You have studied history and embraced philosophy and pondered human motivations and peered into the essence of cells and human life. You have discovered your voices and learned to raise them with passionate eloquence and conviction, clarions for the virtues of justice and charity that are so necessary to pierce the rancid cacophony of uncivil discourse that fills the air.

You have been witness to the election of the first African American president in the history of the United States; you have heard and engaged the debate about whether we have entered the post-racial era of our history; you have been part of an urban community increasingly fractured by the bitter shards of racism and classism that yet have the power to tear fresh wounds across the old scars.

We are not post-racial or post-anything; we are the latest inhabitants of the cauldron of the centuries-old struggle for human freedom, justice, equality and peace in a nation whose desire for the good society is continuously tempered and often undermined by the reality of the human impulse to dominate, dictate and decree the framework for our lives together, and, indeed, who may enjoy this life here, at all.

Trinity seniors: the caps and gowns you have so eagerly embraced, this regalia that you wear so proudly tonight, is also your mantle of responsibility and accountability from this moment forward.

You reach this moment of achievement in an age that manifests increasingly profound doubts about the ability of knowledge to secure prosperity and peace. We hear so much talk at policy tables today about imposing more limited outcomes on higher education, a measurable checklist of job-related tasks, as if all of this struggle in hard learning is for the mere purpose of securing a position as a mid-level public or corporate servant. Yes, of course, we all must work, and yes, the ability to find gainful employment is certainly an important result of a great education.

But mere job training is not our mission in higher education at Trinity; our work here is no less than the enlargement of the mind and spirit, the cultivation of the ability of the human intellect to keep discovering new knowledge throughout the lifespan, the discernment of ethical and moral choices, the formation of each individual's ability to philosophize about the meaning of life and to engage the search for truth.

As a Catholic institution, we believe quite deeply that these are not merely good secular ends but truly sacred, what we call the dialogue of faith and reason as a means to secure salvation. Trinity's motto says this quite simply: *Scientia Ancilla Fidei, Knowledge the Servant of Faith*. Seniors; the first responsibility you have taken on this evening by donning these robes is the stewardship of the purpose of higher learning as the bedrock of a truly free society and essential to the quest for ultimate salvation.

Your second, related, obligation is to use these voices you have discovered and cultivated here at Trinity to advocate on behalf of the restoration of a civil and clearly informed, if not even learned, civic discourse. Certainly, somewhere in your study of History, you have come across the Know-Nothings of the 19th Century. This was a movement exclusively populated by one demographic group --- white protestant males of British lineage --- that spread a virulent form of hatred against immigrants, particularly those who were Catholic.

Two centuries later, they're back – the nativist know-nothings are brandishing their torches in the darkness of a civilization wrought by fear and ignorance against “the other,” the person who looks different, the person who calls God by a different name, who dresses differently, whose skin color is darker.

For most of us, our ancestors came to these shores from other nations --- some by choice, some in chains. We, who are the children and grandchildren and great-grands of those vast waves of immigrants and slaves, we have to make it together, and we all own this nation, all of us, not one over the other, not one more powerful than the other. We all own it, together, and we forget our common heritage as people from somewhere else at our peril. A diverse nation that regrets its diversity soon becomes a treacherous landscape of warring tribes.

Which leads to your third, perhaps most difficult, responsibility as educated women and men of Trinity. I say “most difficult” because this is the part of this fractious age that hits home the most. Ever since last week's mayoral election in D.C., people have been asking me what I think

of the results. My answer is not about a political choice, but rather, about the social, educational and moral implications of this election for our community in this city. I do congratulate the presumptive next mayor, Vincent Gray, who has been a good friend of Trinity and higher education, and we are looking forward to welcoming him to campus early in October for a town hall meeting.

Several key issues have emerged in the post-election debate that no one in this room can ignore, and these issues must be ours to engage in the days to come.

The first issue: the deepening of the east-west divide in the city, which is a chasm that is actually more about social class than race, but that drives powerful racial wedges among the citizens who live here because we know all too well that poverty is the disease that historic racism spreads. The condition of our city schools manifests racism's legacy, deepening poverty by leaving the majority of citizens in some neighborhoods unable to read or compute at high enough levels to fill the jobs that are readily available. D.C.'s high unemployment rate is not about a lack of jobs, but rather, the scandal of public education.

But how do we fix public education, which is essential to remediate poverty, without exacerbating the condition of disenfranchisement that is a corollary manifestation of the racism that has perpetuated the District of Columbia's colonial status? This is the second issue: resolving the intractable war between two irreconcilable views about how to achieve educational reform. One view holds that the only solution to failing public schools is a relentless purge of teachers and replacement of old methods with new emphasis on tests and top-down measures of performance. The opposite view holds that the only solution to failing public schools is more support for teachers and communities who are struggling with a broad range of social problems that impede student learning.

Neither view is completely correct, but both views have some merit. We must find a solution somewhere in the middle of the competing approaches, not with the cudgels of threatening people's jobs and ignoring parent concerns, but with more effective incentives to bring teachers, parents, students, civic and governmental leaders together with a sense of common purpose to move past the current climate of recrimination to restore emphasis on student achievement in a range of learning and assessment modalities. It certainly *is* all about the children, but the adult players must feel respected and empowered as well, not driven to the margins, in order to make the changes in curricula and methods, funding and parenting necessary to achieve real change in the ultimate student outcomes.

Finally, the third issue: whatever political side you may choose on these and other issues, the ultimate triumph of democracy is the act of genuine human freedom to choose who will govern; to term the people's choice 'devastating' is to misunderstand the triumph of democracy, which can surely be bitter for the defeated candidate, but which always must be cherished as sweet for the society the leader must serve with both humility and respect for those governed. To paraphrase the late political philosopher John Gardner: we don't need leaders to tell us what to do; we need them to rekindle hope, to express our collective hope in the best future we can possibly create together in our city and nation. (John Gardner, *No Easy Victories*)

You, the women and men of Trinity who proudly wear your caps and gowns today, you are now part of the intellectual leadership for our city and nation; you are the latest witnesses to the hope of educational attainment, to the power of educational justice. May you go forth from this Cap and Gown Convocation renewed in your sense of mission and purpose in our world. 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 2011!