

The Call to Unifying Leadership: Remarks for Cap and Gown Convocation 2012

President Patricia McGuire
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Allow me a brief interactive moment:

How many seniors are in the audience?

How many juniors?

How many members of the Red Class?

How many Green Class members?

How many athletes are here?

How many business majors?

There! That was pretty easy, wasn't it? You don't mind being classified and categorized in those ways, do you?

Now let's try this:

How many members of the 1% are here?

How many of you are part of the 47%?

Do we have any members of the 99%?

What about the 53%

Oh, dear, that's not quite so much fun as polling the class colors, is it?

We really don't like to be categorized politically or socially, do we?

And yet, this presidential election season has become notorious for its divisive categorization of Americans, for charges of class warfare, economic and social stratification that may be worse than ever --- or at least it feels that way.

The worst kind of leadership divides people, generates conflict among the followers, seizes power by sowing seeds of doubt, division and dysfunction in our society.

The bitterly divisive rhetoric of this season can make sensible people simply want to walk away from all of that, to turn on some TV sitcom or spend more time talking about RGIII or whether the Nationals really will make it to the World Series --- we don't mind being categorized by our fan loyalties, just don't stereotype my preferences because I'm from Philadelphia!

Seriously, we cannot just walk away. We have to pay attention to what is happening to this nation politically, socially and spiritually. We have to become even more engaged, not less,

and we have to exercise the vital rights and responsibilities of our citizenship to keep our freedoms strong --- and this includes the right to vote.

Whatever your political persuasion, whomever you like among the candidates, that's your business, but it's my responsibility to urge you to get out there and vote!

But let's talk about this matter of so much divisiveness in our political culture and popular discourse. The leadership of Trinity graduates should be a force for unity, for collective action to improve our society. Rather than allowing politicians to divide us, to pit people against each other, we should bring the force of our leadership to bear on the great causes that need our united effort. These are the causes that will be the life's work of this senior class we celebrate with so much joy tonight, even as these causes have been at the forefront of Trinity's footprint on the world for generations.

These are the causes of justice and peace, the essential moral framework for a good society.

Across a broad range of occupations, in their engagement with countless issues of social and political concern, Trinity graduates have united their talent and passion in witness to the central moral imperatives of social justice.

In vast numbers, our graduates have been teachers, illuminating the minds and hearts of children with the knowledge of early education and the wisdom of advanced learning. We stand united today on behalf of teachers, the courageous women and men arrayed on the front lines of the endless battle against the darkness of ignorance that fosters so much fear, violence and tyranny on our small planet. Look at the places in the world where children, and particularly where girls and women are denied the most basic education, are condemned to lives of illiteracy and oppression as a result; such places are the gardens of tyranny and terrorism.

The other day in Social Hall, my friend Johnny Barnes, the retired executive director of the ACLU in D.C. and my former teacher, polled the audience about the Bill of Rights as part of our Constitution Day observance. If all of our rights were denied except one, he asked us, which one of our fundamental rights would we ask to preserve?

No surprises here. The right to freedom of speech won that poll, hands down, because we instinctively understand that when we are free to speak, we are free to teach, and if we can teach, we can also learn, and in the power of education we find the most effective antidote to repression, to fear, to tyranny.

Sadly, the liberating power of education is denied to too many children even in this great country, and even in our fair city of the District of Columbia. Too many children do not learn to read well, to write persuasively, to be numerate and proficient in the quantitative skills that so many career paths demand.

A conundrum divides us in this city and in the nation over the best solution to these protracted educational failures. Is the fault with teachers? With parents? With communities? With politicians?

There we go again, dividing us up, pointing fingers when we should be joining hands to find a more effective solution to the problem.

We must be united in standing for our teachers, without whom there will be no educational solutions. We can do so without indulging irresponsible behavior --- and the good teachers will thank us for confronting that. Teachers must also be able to exercise their freedom to speak, to teach, to communicate knowledge and engender skills in their pupils in schools that operate with fairness, without fear, without the oppressive climate that arises from so much corporate and governmental control that teachers become mere automatons preparing students for endless tests that do not measure real learning. I've yet to hear of a standardized test that measures the worth of a teacher who evokes delight in her students, who sparks curiosity and enlarges imaginations, who awakes the real creative genius in young minds. Let's stand united in support of great teachers.

We must be united in working to create the kind of society in which children arrive at school ready and able to learn. Such a society readily recognizes the problem of poverty for what it is --- not a consequence of lazy, slothful behavior by irresponsible people, as some politicians would have us believe, but rather, the horrific consequence of unresolved social, economic and political sins committed across generations.

A child is not ready to start school if she arrives in her homeroom hungry; if he slept fitfully in the back seat of his homeless mother's car the night before; if she witnessed a parent's alcoholic rage, perhaps accompanied by domestic violence; if he's afraid to go home after school so he spends the day distracted by fear; if she sees no point in learning fractions, having heard over and over again that she will never amount to anything, anyway.

Surely we can stand united for improving the conditions of children in D.C., 30% of whom officially live in poverty. Yes, the most recent census report confirms that in one of the wealthiest cities in the nation, one-third of the children still live in poverty, and more than 50% live in low income households. More than one-third of adults in D.C. are unable to read --- yes, rampant adult illiteracy in a city that also has the highest per capita academic achievement as measured by the number of advanced degrees.

Standing united on behalf of the poor is an expression of the solidarity that Gospel social justice expects of us. Taking action to address conditions of poverty is an essential part of working for the dignity of all human life. Sharing our talents and resources with our brothers and sisters in need is the rent that we pay for the gifts we have received, including the great gift of our education here at Trinity.

This presidential election has already spent a combined total of more than \$600 million --- two thirds of a billion dollars --- on television advertising largely devoted to the two candidates bashing each other in ways that are deeply disappointing all the way around.

Imagine what we could do with some of that money devoted to the children of the nation's capital. I read the lists of big donors to both parties --- it's an occupational hazard! --- and I

know that, while some are also generous in charity, many others would never consider sharing an equal amount to improve child care in the city, revitalize prenatal clinics or counseling centers, support adult literacy programs, or provide scholarships for college students in need.

We may disagree about which candidate has a better program for the healthcare needs of our nation, but surely, we can stand united on the need to ensure that children, the elderly, and people living in poverty should not have to suffer terribly and even lose their lives because they do not have access to good medical care, to basic preventive dentistry, to the kinds of essential medicines and treatments we may take for granted. We stand with our new generation of Trinity nurses and health care professionals who will be leading the way for improved health care opportunities for all people in our city and nation.

We may disagree about political solutions to the job crisis, the mortgage mess, the Middle East situation or our role in Europe, but we must agree on this: every human person counts, and no one should be discounted, pushed to the margins, treated with contempt or vilified as unworthy of a leader's best efforts in service because of political disagreement or personal circumstances. We must insist that our leaders care for all of the people, not just those they choose to invite to the table.

One of the most complex tasks of leadership --- whether the leader of a school or a nation, of a family or social club or union or PTA --- one of the most complicated of all leadership tasks is to discern the needs of all of the people, even those who are unpleasant, difficult, churlish opponents or distastefully abject. A bad leader serves only those who agree; a good leader tries to understand all; a great leader unites the entire community in pursuit of the goals that will lift the entire society to greater collective fulfillment, the achievement of justice for all which brings with it a clear sense of hope and a welcome state of peace.

In the few days we have left together this year, my best hope for you, our seniors on the way to graduation very soon, is that you will enlarge your capacity to be such leaders, advocates and activists for justice, people of hope who can unify your communities, workplaces and families in pursuit of those common goals that will improve the lives of all whom you touch.

In so doing, you will bear witness to the wisdom of our founders, those great Sisters of Notre Dame who founded Trinity 115 years ago not to be like every other college or university in this nation, but to be a very different place, an institution that gives living witness to the Gospel imperative to work for true justice as the only possible pathway to genuine peace. Those great women did not know you, but they created Trinity for you, and they are with you tonight, cheering for your triumph as newly robed seniors, calling forth the best of your efforts, your talents, your passion and convictions to use this education well in service to our world.

May you stand courageously for children, in solidarity with the poor and all those in need, bringing the strength, wisdom and loving light of your Trinity education to bear on the great causes yet to come.

Congratulations, seniors!