

Remarks for Winter 2013 Graduation

January 8, 2013

**President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University**

As we gather for this 2013 Winter Graduation ceremony, we find much joy in celebrating the achievements of our students who are fast becoming Trinity alumnae and alumni. We congratulate each of you on your hard work, dedication to excellence, great fortitude and resilience each day as you stayed focused on your journey through intellectual transformation to this proud moment. We thank your families and friends who were there for you, supporting you in the tough times, cheering wildly as you raced toward your goal.

Enjoy the moment, but do not tarry. The acutely urgent demands of our city, nation and world beckon you. The call to action has never been louder for Trinity graduates. The privilege of this education comes with a clear expectation that you will embrace the values that expect you to use your knowledge and skills each day for the improvement of your families and communities, and even the larger global village.

Headlines blare at us daily about all of the intractable problems of contemporary life. Fiscal cliff. Medicare. Gun Control. Education. Environment. Terrorism. Crime in the city. Social Security. Red States and Blue States. 99%, 1%, 47%, haves and have nots.

We can debate the specifics of each. But there are much deeper moral and philosophical problems at the root of all of these issues. Framing the questions more thoughtfully than the attention span of most TV watchers will permit, I see the three greatest issues that challenge all of us who have the special privilege of a higher education:

What do we owe to our communities?

What do we owe to our children?

What do we owe to posterity?

Why do I use the word “owe”? The moral concept of justice, as I hope you have learned in your studies here at Trinity, is not about “getting mine, too” or exacting punishment upon a transgressor. The real idea of justice as an ethical way of life --- a Platonic ideal, perhaps --- is about what we owe to others, a relationship of service --- for people of faith, the ultimate expression of paying forward what we owe to God for the gift of life. In just a few minutes, we will hear from a Trinity alumna who exemplifies this ideal of living a life devoted to social justice. Before we introduce Marie Dennis, let’s contemplate how we think about living out the ideal of justice in terms of what we owe to our communities, to our children, to posterity.

What do we owe to our communities?

At the very least, we owe our communities excellence and integrity in our chosen fields of work, and active engagement with neighbors, co-workers and the larger civic community. Trinity graduates do not just get by, taking a paycheck without returning great value. Trinity graduates do not sit on the sidelines while the great issues of the day play out on someone else's field. Whether your degree tonight takes you one step closer to being a nurse, a teacher, an intelligence officer, a writer, a corporate executive, a journalist, a campaign manager, a nonprofit leader or human resources expert, the Trinity seal on your diploma calls you to put your knowledge and skills to work for the best possible purposes in your workplaces and communities.

What do we owe to our children?

We owe our children, at the very least, the ability to live, and to live well. Not merely to survive the meanest of circumstances, the harshest of realities, but to thrive, to grow, to be healthy, to be able to learn, to look forward to the day when they will pass the legacy of your great example to their own children.

A society that tolerates conditions that permits its children to be gunned down in a first grade classroom has a sickness deep within its collective soul, an inability to confront the incessant violence that robs all of us of our human dignity. A nation that allows its legislators and judges to protect the historic artifact of the militia bearing arms over the essential, unequivocal moral imperative of protecting the right to life, itself, is morally obtuse. If we cannot protect the lives of our children, what else is worth protecting?

We Trinity graduates cannot just shrug our shoulders and walk away from engagement with these difficult issues. We must devote our best talents, our highest intellectual efforts, our most passionate advocacy to the imperatives of building a better, safer, more secure and life-giving community for our children.

What do we owe to posterity --- economically, socially, morally?

225 years ago, the founders of this nation were keenly aware of what they owed to future generations. They said in the preamble that they aimed to "ensure the blessings of Liberty on ourselves and our posterity" as a fundamental purpose of establishing the Constitution of the United States.

150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln was keenly aware of this commitment to ensure Liberty for posterity when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the beginning of the end of this nation's long, sordid, sinful acceptance of slavery.

70 years ago, millions of Americans --- our fathers and grandfathers --- marched off to war in distant lands on both sides of the globe so that the "greatest generation" could ensure freedom for generations to come. American troops are still sacrificing everything to ensure the blessings of liberty for posterity.

50 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream for posterity, a colorblind nation where all children could grow in peace, equality and freedom.

All of us who have the privilege of a Trinity education for our brief days on earth share in the responsibility to pass these legacies along to the future in ways that are stronger, clearer, more secure and certain of their ultimate fulfillment.

Yet, today, the conversation is not so lofty, the actions not nearly so profound. Our nation is deeply concerned about posterity, but in a way that's quite different from prior rhetoric about unfettered freedom and racial equality. The nation's first African American president, about to be inaugurated for a second term; but he confronts the challenges of short-sighted economic and political bargains in Congress, selfish special interests pushing for legislation that only serves themselves, and a lack of collective national willpower to advance the agenda of equal opportunity for all.

Even as the gap between rich and poor grows wider each day, we're worried about the potential for economic collapse, the specter of future generations of Americans living with the consequences of a crushing national debt, of opportunities foreclosed because this nation can't manage its own budget. And yet, this nation that says it has to rollback its commitment to social services and education found four trillion dollars to spend on war in the last ten years.

Long before the fiscal cliff festival of the last few weeks, the public discourse of our nation grew increasingly divided, then pungently toxic as the election season stoked long-burning coals of resentment and self-interest as the forces of division picked sides: red state, blue state, big government, small government, wealthy elites and welfare drones. It's become increasingly hard to talk about a vision for this nation in which what we owe to posterity is more important than what we feel we deserve for ourselves.

We can't resolve this debate tonight, of course. But what we can do is resolve to bring the voices of reason, informed by Trinity's moral view of true social justice, to bear on every conversation we have about the future of our community, nation and society.

Can we really agree to legislative solutions that leave the poor even more marginalized? Is it right to have a tax system that allows very wealthy individuals to escape their fair share?

Will we really tolerate a system that permits governors to block legal healthcare benefits to people in need because of political disagreements that fester long after the bill is signed into law?

Must we continue to allow selfish special interests to corrupt law and policy in ways that hold the entire nation hostage to gun violence?

The short-sighted political actions of this era will betray our debt to posterity if we stand idly by. We cannot avert our eyes from the truth; we cannot close our ears to the cries for justice; we cannot remain silent when we have been educated to raise our voices loud and long.

You, our latest graduates this evening, you join that long line of Trinity alumnae and alumni across a century in carrying the light of Trinity as bearers of hope and charity to a world that needs both in abundance.

In all of this, we honor the courage and commitment of our founders, those brave Sisters of Notre Dame who had the best idea that ever inflamed this campus, the idea of founding Trinity.

You are the latest example of their bold inspiration, witness of the wisdom of their hard work and the dedication of those who followed them down through the years. As you take your diplomas forth from this graduation ceremony tonight, may you go with the strength, the light and the love of the Trinity through all the days of your lives.

Congratulations, graduates!