**Remarks for Graduation Ceremony for Medical Imaging School**

**Washington Hospital Center**

June 25, 2013

*President Patricia McGuire*

*Trinity Washington University*

Congratulations to all of the new radiological technicians who have earned your diplomas tonight! You have achieved another peak along the high ridge of your path through lifelong learning.

I am sure that each one of you has a story of persistence, doubt, struggle and worry. I suspect that each of you could attest to the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, that “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”[[1]](#footnote-1) You learned to do things you thought you might not be able to do, and in that learning experience you have achieved your new degrees.

Tonight your story is sheer delight, great satisfaction, and hope for the future. Enjoy this moment, you deserve it!

I asked Dr. Grant to tell me a little bit about you, and I learned that you are mostly women with one brave man among you. Your average age is 25. About a third of you are parents, you mostly attended on evenings and weekends, you are very focused on patient care, and you are earning your credentials in 50% Advanced Imaging: Interventional Radiology, CT, MRI & Mammography, 25% Diagnostic Imaging. You are in the vanguard of the new generation of healthcare professionals moving up the ladder at a time of dynamic change in all health professions.

Even as you enjoy this moment, you know that your profession, your employer, your families and your community will expect even more of you. The more we learn, the more we must give back. For each one of us, our journey through education cannot be simply about the technical knowledge and skills we acquire in our respective disciplines. If I only cared about the technical nuances of the law, I would hardly be speaking to this class of radiological technicians tonight. And if you only cared about the perfection of radiology --- which I sure hope you do! --- you would hardly have the patience to listen to my thoughts on the meaning of your graduation in the larger world we all inhabit.

But all of us, as educated people, share a common purpose to improve the human condition through the intellectual power we bring to solving the specific problems we undertake as well as to the perspectives we contribute to our larger social conversation about the quality of our lives together. As healthcare professionals, you, quite literally, have lives in your hands, can affect the quality of life of the patients you serve, offering hope, comfort, relief or solace for each life you encounter.

Beyond the excellent care that you can and do deliver to your patients each day, you also have opportunities and obligations to be leaders and advocates for the larger community. Our city, our communities, our nation all need our best collective brainpower, passion and courage to address the complicated challenges of this historic era.

Consider, for a minute, the unequal conditions of children in the District of Columbia. 30% of children in D.C. live in poverty, and 51% live below the federal threshold for low income families. These children also suffer abysmal conditions in their schools despite all of the money thrown at school reform. These children also suffer hunger, very poor healthcare, chronic health deficiencies and evil effects of abuse and violence. In this city alone, to say nothing of the larger region and nation, the unequal condition of children, most of whom are African American and Hispanic children, exemplifies the wide gap between aspiration and reality in our society.

Ensuring equality of opportunity for all people to enjoy the freedoms and privileges of life in the United States remains one of our greatest challenges in this nation. And equality of opportunity to excellent, affordable healthcare and education is part of that challenge.

This year marks a half century since momentous historic events whose large impacts still ripple through our lives. 50 years ago this month, in June 1963, President John F. Kennedy gave a landmark address calling for protection of civil rights for all people. *“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated...”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

At the same time, from a cell in a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Later in the summer, in August 1963, Dr. King would lead the largest demonstration ever seen in the March on Washington, during which he proclaimed his dream for equal opportunity and justice for all. “*We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

The legacy of Kennedy and King and those who fought for civil rights, women’s rights, human rights has widened the doors of opportunity for millions of Americans over the last half century. I know that I have reaped many benefits from their struggles; each of you can only answer that question for yourself.

And yet, this large, sprawling, often-brawling nation of America in 2013 also continues to fight the very old fight about equal justice and opportunity --- for whom? how many? *those people??* Today’s headlines cry out about our struggles over immigration policy, affirmative action in higher education, the black-white education gap in our K-12 schools, the persistence of chronic violence and poverty in our cities, the plain fact that women still earn less than men and women’s opportunities still stop short of the glass ceiling in too many places.

Despite the Supreme Court’s ambivalence yesterday about the need to continue to promote affirmative action in higher education to remediate the ill effects of historic discrimination --- and despite the Court’s ruling on the Voting Rights Act this very morning that seems to say that the Civil Rights Era is over --- the real truth is that we are far from done with the task of transforming these United States into a society of genuine equal opportunity, peace and freedom.

Each one of us who has the privilege of education must accept as the price of our education the imperative that we keep working for justice, expanding opportunity, confronting hatred wherever and whenever we encounter it. We can’t wait for courts or legislatures --- heck, they’re turning back the clock, if they’re making any decisions at all. Better that they make none. But progress has stalled on many fronts, and so we, the people, are called to action on behalf of all people in need.

Healthcare is one of our modern battlegrounds for equal opportunity and justice for all. The still-virulent opposition to the Affordable Healthcare Act is not simply driven by its apparent complexity --- we could all wish the law might be simpler. But the very complexity of the law is emblematic of the struggle for justice in providing healthcare for all in this very wealthy nation that distributes its resources so unequally. As healthcare professionals, you are on the front lines of the changing national landscape for hospitals and healthcare providers.

By now you might be saying, why me? I’m just a radiologist. Why is she telling me that I’m responsible for these lofty issues, far more than the specific parameters of my job description?

Your diplomas tonight signify your move up in the ranks, your move beyond mere technical parameters of jobs to a more expansive perspective on social responsibility.

The great South African leader Nelson Mandela, about whom we are thinking a great deal this week, once said that, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

Never sell yourselves short; your continuing education advances your stature in the workplace, makes your leadership more apparent to colleagues, burnishes your power as a role model for your children, and puts you in positions of advocacy not only for your own benefits and advancement, but for the improvement of conditions for others --- whether here at the Washington Hospital Center or in the D.C. community or in the other communities where your voices are strong and compelling.

Who are you to be advocates for social justice, for improved opportunities for others? Here again, let’s think of the example and words of Mandela. In his biography *Long Walk to Freedom* he recounts the story of how he gradually came to the view that he could not simply stand by while he knew that others were not free:

*“It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, than transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am no more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. Freedom is indivisible;....to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

None of us will ever be faced with the appalling evils that Mandela faced in the long struggle to break the bonds of apartheid. But all of us, in our far more limited spheres of influence, must be willing to step forward to confront what is wrong, to stand up for those who don’t have the strength to do so, to give voice to the needs and hopes and aspirations of the people and communities we serve.

You will find this challenge hard at times, yes. You will be tempted to step back and say nothing, of course. You will be frightened by the possibility of being all alone out there on a treacherous landscape of moral imperatives laced with chasms of criticism. When faced with the daunting risk of making the right choice for action, remember Mandela’s words: “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Tonight, you are triumphant. Tonight your long, hard work in study and assessment and achievement is done for this particular phase of your lives. But while your immediate credential is secure --- though the licensing exam remains --- your continuing educational achievements await. Never stop learning. Whether you choose to continue in school to earn more degrees and credentials, or whether you choose self-directed learning, always remain hungry for learning, thirsty to absorb the next idea, to challenge superficial opinion with careful analysis, to invent and proclaim new ways of thinking about vexing chronic conditions.

May you always remember the glory of this moment. May your life’s work be a source of constant renewal and deep satisfaction. May your children rise to and then beyond the role model you have created. May your patients and co-workers know that, in your good hands, their lives will be improved immensely.

Congratulations!

1. Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. President John F. Kennedy, [Address to the Nation on Civil Rights](http://videos.huffingtonpost.com/john-f-kennedy-addresses-the-nation-on-civil-rights-517811986), June 13, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html), April 16, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., [“I Have a Dream” Speech](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/17/i-have-a-dream-speech-text_n_809993.html), March on Washington, August 28, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nelson Mandela, [quotation on education](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/16243-education-is-the-most-powerful-weapon-which-you-can-use). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, p. 544 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)