



Fearless Leadership for Social Justice

Remarks to the Senior Class for the 2014 Cap & Gown Convocation

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President Patricia McGuire

I have Roosevelts on my brain this week --- thanks to the historical documentary film maker Ken Burns. The public television series¹ on this remarkable family was an occasion to revel in the ideas and ideals of great national and global leadership in times when the world was troubled --- as if we're not troubled today! The times in which we live, like the times in which each generation lives, are best by woeful human problems. War. Poverty. Greed. Economic stress. Political Infighting. Oppression of people on the basis of gender, race, language, religion. These are not new issues today; these issues are as old as Original Sin. The question for each age is not whether we have an absence of such challenges, but rather, in the face of often-overwhelming social, economic and political issues on a global scale, do we have the moral will, the social cohesion and the political leadership to find our way through to a stronger, more progressive, more peaceful and just society.

The Roosevelts --- Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt --- are distant historical figures for most of us. And yet, we are the beneficiaries of their great legacies in everything from the national park system to anti-trust laws to the vast social safety net including Social Security and the federal financial aid system, to expansion of civil rights, the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“Fear” is a word that the Roosevelts seemed to use a lot. The Burns narrative suggests that the Roosevelts, despite their very privileged backgrounds, had to face and overcome fears in difficult circumstances throughout their lives.

The first President Roosevelt, Teddy, had asthma as a child and became quite famous not only as a politician but also as a war fighter and adventurer. He once said: *“There were all kinds of things I was afraid of at first, ranging from grizzly bears to ‘mean’ horses and gun-fighters; but by acting as if I was not afraid I gradually ceased to be afraid.”*²

¹ Ken Burns, [The Roosevelts: An Intimate Portrait](#) on PBS

² Theodore Roosevelt Autobiography, 1913, quoted at the [TR Inaugural Site](#)

The second President Roosevelt, Franklin, Teddy's fifth cousin, seemed to have everything in life going his way until he was struck by polio that left his legs paralyzed. But he persisted in his public ambitions and eventually won election to the presidency for a remarkable four times, leading the United States out of the Depression and through World War II. FDR famously said in his first inaugural address in 1932, referring to the national state of mind about the Depression: *"We have nothing to fear but fear itself"*³

The Roosevelt who might have been rumored as a presidential candidate had she lived in more modern times --- Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR's First Lady, Teddy's niece --- lost both of her parents in childhood and had to overcome a sense of neglect and abandonment through her life, including her husband's notorious infidelities. One of her more notable comments is this: *"You gain strength, courage and confidence in every experience in which you look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do."*⁴

Too often in our very modern lives today in 2014, we seem beset by fear, overwhelming dread, a sense that we are in grave danger --- physical danger from criminals and terrorists, or psychological danger that is a plague of an acquisitive society, a fear of losing out to someone deemed less worthy, the preoccupation with hoarding shiny new toys while worrying that your brand new iPhone6 might just be another plastic piece of trash in another month. Our modern leaders seem unable to quench those fears, in fact, too often they stoke our worst nightmares by making sure we are eternally suspicious and afraid --- "see something, say something."

Where is the voice of a Rooseveltian leader speaking to courage and triumph in the face of adversity, calling out the need for action rather than warning us to duck and cover?

In his second inaugural address, as the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression was waning, President Franklin Roosevelt spoke truth to the power of the people. He said it was *"the challenge to our democracy"* that so many Americans remained deeply impoverished and on the margins of a society growing more prosperous for some. *"I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished,"* he declared, saying that it was this nation's challenge and obligation to address these conditions of poverty. *"... The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."*⁵

That, my friends, is what we mean by social justice. Roosevelt's description of the conditions of poverty in America in 1937 continue to be realities for too many people in this nation today. But rather than hearing leaders call us to *"provide more for those who have too little"*⁶ what we hear from our leaders most often today about poverty is silence.

We hear political leaders in Congress and elsewhere actively advocate ideas that would, in fact, end the legacies of the New Deal by diminishing or dismantling programs like Social Security or the subsequent expansion of the safety net for seniors in the Medicare Program

³ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 1933, [History Matters Website](#)

⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt, *"You Learn By Living,"* Quoted on [GoodReads Website](#)

⁵ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Second Inaugural Address, [History Matters Website](#)

⁶ Ibid.

under President Johnson. Johnson, perhaps the last of the Rooseveltian presidents, actually declared a War on Poverty --- such an old-fashioned idea in today's curdled political environment. LBJ, an old southern segregationist who became a transformational leader for the expansion of civil rights, also pushed past the fear and hatred of racism to win enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, triumphs of social justice that are now in severe danger of curtailment in the modern age of suspicion and fear.

Fear is a consequence of bigotry and selfishness, a convenient weapon for political demagogues to maintain their own power, which is tyranny. Fear says we must build higher walls across the southern border. Fear denies thousands of central American children safe shelter and redress from the appalling conditions they have fled in their countries. Fear says that Dreamers are taking something away from other, more deserving young people. Fear allows politicians in Congress to block or undermine social net programs that would serve the poorest among us while preserving tax breaks and other benefits for the wealthiest. Fear mocks the very idea of healthcare for everyone. Fear allows the massive stockpiling of weapons in homes. Fear says shoot first, ask later whether that young man lying dead on the street posed any threat whatsoever.

Roosevelt was right: fear itself is the greatest threat we face. A fearful society is a society that tolerates injustice in the name of protection; that pawns its own rights and liberties in a Faustian bargain to gain a fig leaf of security; that sets peace aside as a frivolous indulgence on the theory that pre-emptive war will somehow put an end to the fear that haunts us.

A well-developed sense of social justice must be the antidote to the corrosive spread of public fear. Social justice tells us to "See something, DO something" --- reach out to that other person in solidarity and love rather than cowering in fear and suspicion. Social justice demands that we become the voices of those who have no voice, who live on the margins suffering the indignities and deprivations of poverty in families and neighborhoods that lack access to such fundamental services as decent healthcare and a good education.

Trinity seniors! You know this true meaning of social justice. You are the exemplars of courage for your children and families, faces of hope and triumph over so many conditions that could have held you back. But even as you celebrate this evening, you must know that our expectations are ever higher. With your caps and gowns you are now cloaked in much greater responsibility for the leadership for good, hope, for justice and for peace that you will exert from this day forward.

Your Trinity regalia symbolizes the difference you represent in a society where too many people just follow the trends. When society trends toward fear, you must lead toward hope. When society trends toward suspicion and hatred of others, you must reach out to embrace them. When society measures success by how many toys a person might acquire, you must share what you can with those who have less. When zealots whip public opinion against civil rights and equal opportunity, you must be advocates for the moral righteousness of justice for all. When demagogues cultivate fear by spreading ignorance, you must use this education to destroy fear with the powerful light of knowledge.

117 years ago, a few courageous women stared down the demagogues and fear mongers who said that the education of women would destroy marriage and ruin families. Those gutsy Sisters of Notre Dame who founded Trinity did not fear a few old monsignors over at Catholic University who said that the founding of Trinity was a heresy. Those great women knew the true meaning of social justice in elevating the dignity of women through education. Through their courage, thousands of lives have been improved and enlarged across the Trinity generations.

Our founders made your triumph possible today. May you go forth from this convocation cloaked in the mantle of their legacy. May you be fearless exemplars of the values of virtues of Trinity. May you go forth with the strength to be exemplars of justice, the wisdom to know how to use your education to benefit others, and emanating the light of hope that will illuminate the pathways of all who walk with you, fearlessly and with great courage, through the days of your lives.

Congratulations, seniors!