

**Remarks for the 2010 Trinity Commencement**  
**President Patricia McGuire**  
**Trinity Washington University**

Each year at Commencement it is customary for the president to address the state of the university and the state of the academy. I am pleased to report that the state of Trinity is well: the achievements of this glorious green Class of 2010 give witness to the strength and vitality of our mission. We have much to celebrate. This year, Trinity's enrollment surpassed 2,000 for the first time in our history, with 800 women thriving in Trinity College, our historic women's college. Trinity students continue our strong track record of graduate and professional school acceptances. Senior Sydney Cross is the second Trinity student to receive a prestigious Charles Rangel Fellowship for International Affairs. Trinity alumnae have distinguished themselves in many endeavors. Maryel Barry, a history major in the Class of 1982 and sixth grade teacher at the Henderson Middle School in Falls Church, won the distinguished 2010 Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher Award, sponsored by *The Washington Post*.

We are especially delighted that the daughters of this proud *alma mater* are now serving our nation as the Speaker of the House of the United States, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, Ambassador for Nuclear Non-Proliferation with the United States Department of State, Solicitor General of the United States Department of Labor.

I am particularly pleased that, today, our Trustee and good friend Argelia Rodriguez will join the ranks of our honorary alumnae, and this moment gives me the opportunity to recognize and thank Argelia and the hard-working staff of the D.C. College Access Program for the remarkable ways in which you have supported so many Trinity students so generously. In the same way, this moment also gives me the opportunity to shout out Trinity's immense thanks and gratitude to Donald Graham and all of the board members of D.C. CAP whose vision, wisdom and great generosity made it possible for thousands of D.C. residents, including Trinity students, to realize their dream of a college education through the support of the DC-CAP grants as well as the DC Tuition Assistance Grants.

While Trinity today is well and thriving, the state of the academy and our world is far less promising. Our planet is in peril. Our rational discourse in tatters. Our liberties increasingly compromised for the sake of greater security.

The most-well-educated people ever in human history have created appalling economic and environmental catastrophes, inflicting misery on millions of citizens of this small planet. The wages of greed will haunt generations. The catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico is the metaphor for the sins of our time, whether avarice or negligence or intellectual arrogance. Giant plumes of oil now move silently out of sight, beneath the surface, deep within ocean currents, toxic fingers oozing silent destruction ever closer to the coastlines. In the shattered ruins of the oil rig we hear the modern echo of Shelley's ancient *Ozymandius*:

*Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*<sup>1</sup>

Institutions of Church, Education and Government that should be moral and intellectual beacons in times of social distress now suffer their own debilitating moral lapses.

Where is the voice of the Catholic Church, once so strong and clear on issues of social and economic justice, on the imperatives of immigration reform, environmental protection, economic responsibility and educational justice --- all the building blocks for human life and dignity in this nation and large global village? But the voice of the Church is muted by the shame of scandal, and too often lost in political entanglements that diminish true moral authority.

Where is the voice of the university community on the large deficiencies in K-12 education and our own responsibility to address them through more effective teacher education? We universities must not be silent on the obvious threat to academic and intellectual freedom emerging in Texas where the ideological choices of politicians now dictate the content of the history and social studies curricula and textbooks, a decision that has national implications. Academic freedom is not just a disposable luxury at the university level. We must defend the integrity of curricula at all levels from political manipulation.

No government should dictate the content of curricula or textbooks, save for establishing legitimate expectations that every citizen should be able to read, to write, to calculate and to analyze with increasing sophistication as essential tools to exercise the obligations of citizenship in a democracy. But if our children cannot read at all, they will hardly know about the difference between texts discussing Thomas Jefferson or Jefferson Davis. Ensuring that citizens learn to read is surely an essential concern of government as a matter of justice; but dictating what students may or may not read is not the role of government in a democracy.

Institutions of government in a free society --- whether federal, state or local governments --- have a grave responsibility for the protection of individual rights and civic freedoms. For a state to deny such protections to individuals unless they produce papers to prove that they are worthy of protection is a profound insult to our shared values in this nation. Freedom, justice, equality, respect are not just for people with the right papers. In the history of nations, governments that have demanded identification papers have been those that have committed frightful abuses against humanity.

In this nation built by immigrants, an eruption of hatred in the southwest puts our entire nation at risk of dishonoring, even destroying, our collective heritage in the many disparate struggles for justice among peoples whose customs and languages and beliefs once looked so very different to the ruling class. My Irish ancestors were spat upon; my Italian grandparents derided because they could not speak English. Who are we --- a generation whose once-unimaginable success became possible because of our immigrant ancestors' sacrifices --- who are we to say that others

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandius*, <http://bit.ly/a1bYSm>

now may not enjoy the same opportunities that we, the children and grandchildren of immigrants have had, in this great land?

What is happening to us as a nation? Where is our once-robust confidence in a future of limitless opportunity, in a posture of broad hospitality, in a culture that fostered the “habits of the heart”<sup>2</sup> as the distinctive American characteristic acclaimed by visitors from abroad who once found inspiration on these shores?

To you, Trinity’s new alumnae and alumni in the Class of 2010: your challenge today is no less than to reclaim our great American characteristics of optimism for the future and welcome for the stranger; to restore confidence in the institutions of learning, faith, economics and politics that must be the pillars of a good society.

You will be the leaders of communities, cities and this nation at mid-century when the majority of people in this country will be Black and Hispanic. Through the year 2050 and beyond, in spite of all of the efforts that some will employ to stop the inevitable between now and then, you and your children and their children will lead this nation across that great demographic and cultural chalkstripe on history into a future that must more affirmatively embrace the values of freedom, equality and justice as essential for the most diverse society in history to live in peace and prosperity.

To you, the Class of 2010, I give you this charge: As you take your place alongside those great graduates of Trinity I cited at the start of these remarks, and the thousands more who have carried this mission to the far corners of the earth, you now accept the obligation that comes with your Trinity degree to give life and meaning to Trinity’s mission each and every day by the ways in which you manifest the virtues of charity and hope, by your passionate advocacy for the cause of justice and possibility of true peace in every workplace and community you inhabit.

To those of you who will be teachers and school leaders: Your work may be the most important of all. Your work, done well, will change lives and the fate of entire families for generations. You must insist on excellence, persistence and success for your students and your school every single day. We need you to restore the hope of the city, the security of families, the opportunity of economic and social success for your students.

To those of you who will exercise leadership in the public square, as elected and appointed officials, as staff and advisors to governments, as volunteers and civic activists for the causes of your lives: never let the smallest mind win the day. Be interested in all interests, but beholden to no special interest save the interest of building the good society of our longing. Remember that the true purpose of law in a free society is to secure liberty and justice for all, not profit for only a few at the expense of many.

To those of you who will be leaders in corporate life: we have seen the devastating consequences of safety corners cut, accounting schemes unraveled, ethical breaches triggering cascades of economic instability and even recession. Can one person in the Accounting or Marketing or Human Resources departments make a difference? I should hope that if that one

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<sup>2</sup> See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

person is a Trinity graduate, the answer will be a resounding, “Yes!” You may be one person, but you carry the weight of Trinity’s expectations with you. You are in the vanguard of a new generation of corporate leaders who must insist upon the highest possible standards for excellence and integrity from the production line to the bottom line.

To those among you who will tell the stories and express opinions through old and new media: never be afraid to expose the truth, to proclaim the truth to the world. Show your passion through well-constructed and persuasive arguments. But use your influence to set higher standards for public discourse and debate, enjoying the argument but rejecting the temptation to score points through vilifying the opposition or manipulating facts.

To the nurses and health care specialists: to you we entrust that special calling to be responsible for human lives in the most intimate ways, to relieve pain, to rehabilitate injury, to bring comfort and service in the most humble of ways while managing the great technologies and complex systems that are the wonder and difficulty of health care today.

To the artists and poets and musicians inside each one of you: share the gifts of your avocation freely, lest the joys of your excursions into liberal learning become only a distant memory.

For all of us citizens of planet earth: let this day be a time of recommitment to the necessity of engagement with the great causes of our time. Let us stand in solidarity with our new Trinity graduates in pledging our active support for their many endeavors, our love and friendship to encourage their strength and resilience especially in the challenging days to come.

On this Feast of Pentecost, may the Class of 2010 go forth from this moment carrying the light of the Spirit that flows through Trinity high for all the world to see. May your education here give you the strength to inspire and renew your families, places of work and communities. May you be courageous leaders for justice and peace, advocates for those who have no voice, exemplars of honor, beacons of hope in the darkest of places. May the blessings of Trinity go with you each day, the power to persist and prevail, the wisdom to choose well and rightly, the love that is the light for your way across the distant terrain of your lives.

Congratulations, Greens of 2010!