**Remarks for Chatham University Commencement**

**May 16, 2016**

**President Patricia McGuire**

**Trinity Washington University**

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President Barazzone, Mayor Bowser, distinguished guests, and, you, the Chatham University Class of 2016: thank you for this great honor, and congratulations to all of the graduates!

Congratulations to President Barazzone as you complete such a remarkable tenure as Chatham’s president. Your list of accomplishments is long, and I’m so pleased that the Esther Barazzone Center on the Eden Hall campus will remind future generations of your exceptional leadership. And more, I’m so glad that my good friend Esther will now be a neighbor in Washington!

Mayor Bowser, congratulations on your remarkable leadership for the District of Columbia, and let me thank Chatham University for preparing this exceptional leader for the nation’s capital so well! We are just so very fortunate to have Muriel Bowser as our mayor at this time.

Now, about YOU, the Chatham Class of 2016: Graduation day is among the most consequential moments we experience, and as the years go by you will remember this day with pride. You will take Chatham’s glorious mission to the many corners of the planet that you will illuminate with your incandescent sense of hope and immutable belief in the possibility for achieving much good in this world.

Consequential moments for all of us loom this year as we consider what kind of country we are and hope to become. Your Chatham degrees come with large expectations that you will be the well-educated citizen leaders who are essential for the vitality of our democracy. Many critics of higher education question whether a college degree is “worth it.” You will demonstrate the worth of your degrees in the ways you enlarge democracy’s ideals of justice and freedom each day.

When you put on your caps and gowns this morning, you cloaked yourselves in the mantle of stewardship for the habits of freedom of thought and speech without which democracy withers. Freedom of expression is at risk in too many places where talk has become alarmingly cheap, betraying the purpose of freedom of expression to expose the Truth, not to deceive and corrupt. The very idea of Truth seems, on occasion, to be an antiquated vestige of times before Twitter and Snapchat. Marty Baron, editor of the Washington Post, said in a commencement speech last week at Temple University:

*“There was a time, not long ago, when we would differ on the interpretation of the facts…But fundamentally we agreed on the facts…That was then. Today, many feel entitled to their own facts when, in actuality, they are lies…What has taken hold is an alternate reality, a virtual reality, where lies are accepted as truth…We must ask ourselves: How can we have a functioning democracy when we cannot agree on the most basic facts?”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

We must defy the odds in this ugly campaign season that we will wind up with government by jabberwocky. Your Chatham degrees will compel you to exercise vigilant stewardship of Truth, without which freedom devolves into anarchy and, soon enough, tyranny as demagogues exploit the cacophony of ill-informed opinions and outright lies swirling down the drains of too many media outlets. Tyranny invents the “alternate reality” of Baron’s warning, promoting the fear that makes some people all too eager to surrender liberty in the hope of finding security --- an empty promise whose only end is even deeper human misery. If you have studied any history, any philosophy in your college days, you surely recognize the political dialectic; nothing is new in history.

Too much of today’s toxic narrative denies the truth of this nation’s continuing great achievements in ever-enlarging the promise and the reality of liberty and justice for all – and all means *everybody*. The promise is not fully realized, of course, nor is the nation perfect by any means. We surely struggle each day with racism and its evil consequences, with poverty and the stunning wealth gap, with economic and social fears that cry out for policies and practices rooted in justice. But we must fundamentally expect our leaders to be people of hope and vision, leaders who believe in America’s great promise and who will govern as if everyone really can participate in all of the blessings of liberty. Governing this great nation is not a reality TV show where only the survivors get to enjoy the benefits of freedom. You will prove the worth of your higher education in using what you have learned here as a powerful engine for the common good.

America has always had a large heart, a characteristic noted by Alexis de Toqueville when he observed the “habits of the heart”[[2]](#footnote-2) bringing Americans together for charitable work. Whatever your specific career, you will have many opportunities to participate in great civic and charitable causes. Demonstrate the value of your college education in the vigorous ways you exercise the habits of your hearts.

America’s large heart has long been open to those fleeing tyranny and poverty elsewhere. A century ago, the American Dream inspired my grandparents as teenagers to make the perilous journey from bitter poverty in Ireland and Italy. I never met them; my grandparents died young, disappointed and still impoverished, but their children, my parents, never wavered from their belief that this great country would make their own children prosperous.

My parents never went to college but they cherished the value of education. Here I am today, a college president with many honors, and yet I never can forget the pride in my mother’s eyes, even at age 90, when she would pull out the faded photograph of herself in her high school cap and gown, Mary Monti, Hallahan ’39, the very first child in her entire family to graduate from high school. She could not have more for herself, but she relentlessly sought all for her children.

I see that same look in the eyes of my students who are Dreamers, students who but for the kindness of benefactors would be denied a higher education because our national policies will not support undocumented college students. Many are mothers who want only the best for their children. Today, we hear too much talk of building walls, of sending people “back” to places of violence and poverty. Instead, as stewards of this large-hearted democratic idea, let us raise up our historical memory to recognize in today’s Dreamers the dreams of our own grand-and-great-grand parents who overcame so much to ensure that their children could prosper in this great nation.

You will prove the worth of your college degrees by nourishing the vitality of America’s large heart through ensuring that every person has the opportunity to achieve a great education.

But, but, but… you say, I’m an Accounting major, or earning my degree in English or Healthcare Management, what do my studies here at Chatham have to do with solving our nation’s problems? Heck, I just want to get a good job and pay down my student loans!

Well, my friends, one of the most enduring strengths of a great liberal arts education is the way in which it gets under your skin, festering a provocative itch that keeps you restless to find something bigger than yourself. If Chatham has done its job well, at some point in your lives, you will have an experience that shakes you out of your comfort zones, shatters your carefully constructed ideas about seamless career paths.

I never set out to be a college president. I went to law school because I had this vague idea about working for justice. In my second year I discovered a program called Street Law where I taught law to kids in the public high schools in D.C. That experience changed my life, and I took a permanent job with the clinic. Riding home one night with a law school friend who was going to work for one of the most elite law firms in town, he asked me what I was doing after graduation, and I said, proudly, “I’m going to work with Street Law.” He looked at me, horrified. “What are you going to do that for,” he shouted, “there’s no future in it. You’ll ruin your career! You’ll never amount to anything!”

Well, I think I’ve done ok. I discovered the worth of my Trinity degree in the way it formed my philosophy about social justice and educational opportunity and the urgent need to move succeeding generations of young people from the margins into the mainstream.

The real worth of your college education is in the way it dares you to take risks, liberates you to follow your life’s passions, steps away from the predictable paths to follow the causes that will change the course of many lives, including your own.

One of the great causes of human society today is embedded here in Chatham’s commitment to environmental sustainability. All around us, we see the ominous signs of climate change --- as educated people, we surely cannot simply nod in agreement or change the topic when people in positions of responsibility deny the science of climate change. Remember our obligation as educated people to steward Truth.

We prove the worth of our college degrees through our commitment to environmental justice and sustainability, making sure that we leave this planet in better health for future generations.

The health of this earth enlarges the human spirit. Chatham alumna Rachel Carson knew this and wrote so beautifully:

*“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

May you know the beauty of this earth for all of the years to come. May you take pride in being stewards of the great American cause, which is to ensure the blessings of liberty for each succeeding generation. May you use the power of your Chatham degrees to realize the “lives of purpose and value” that will be beacons of hope and joy for all of the lives you will touch and transform down through the years.

1. [Marty Baron commencement address at Temple University School of Media and Communication](https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/wp/2016/05/06/martin-baron-adresses-temple-university-graduates/?tid=a_inl) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* [*Chapter XVII*](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/detoc/1_ch17.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Rachel Carson](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/15332.Rachel_Carson), [Silent Spring](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/880193) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)