

Charge to the Graduating Class President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

For all of today's graduates, this ceremony marks an important milestone for you and your families. This was my first and your last year on this campus. We have seen much together this year! This marks the completion of your educational journey at Trinity and the moment when you – officially – are moving on to the next phase of your lives.

As you prepare to embark on your life after Trinity, I'd like to tell you a story that I was reading earlier this year. It was a story about Jacob Pruett.

Jacob Pruett entered this world around the year 1825, right around the founding of Trinity College in 1823. He was born a slave in Barbour County, Alabama, and was moved to Bullock County about 30 years later. Starting in 1867, on the heels of the Reconstruction Act, more than 700,000 African American men were registered to vote. Jake Pruett was one of those men in Bullock County, Alabama. I wonder what was going through his mind waiting to register to vote, having spent most of his life as a slave and now having the first opportunity to exercise his rights as a full citizen of the United States. Maybe he was scared. Undoubtedly, he was proud.

I ask that you remember his name today – Jake Pruett.

Generations passed, and Jacob's granddaughter Alberta was married and living in New York City with her husband, Samuel. They lived only blocks away from the renowned Riverside Church in Harlem, where the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a speech addressing a meeting of the Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam.

In April 1967, Martin Luther King was a trailblazer for making this speech. It marked a turning point for him, as it was the first time he spoke publicly against the Vietnam War. Those close to him counseled against giving the speech, yet despite these warnings, he said that he felt that he could no longer preach about the evils of violence and oppression while sidestepping the topic of the war. So he spoke out. It was exactly one year before his assassination on April 4, 1968.

King admonished that America could not afford the luxury of gradualism but rather must embrace what he called "the fierce urgency of now" and act to end the war. He said: "We are faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there **is** such a thing as being too late. Procrastination," he reminded us, "is still the thief of time."

That message, I think, applies perfectly to this momentous occasion, your graduation from Trinity College.

Graduates, your time is now.

You must begin the process of deciding what you are going to do and who you want to be – now. How will you do this? What is it that you are so passionate about that it has to be done now? What is it that you need to fulfill you? What is your personal fierce urgency of now?

I believe that Trinity has prepared you well to make that decision. Your time at the College has given you the ability to determine what should be done now and what can wait. You have delved deep into your chosen subject areas, with Trinity faculty members guiding you along the way. You have learned to analyze, to reason, to ask the right questions, to be thoughtful. You have taken part in classes, community service, and outreach in the Greater Hartford community. You have participated in the Mill (A.J.), you have been P.R.I.D.E. leaders, you have been in the leadership of Greek organizations, you have written for *The Tripod*. Oh, I have seen you have performed wonderfully on the stage with your voice, Marisa Tornello, and with your piano playing, Davis Kim. You have worked in laboratories and on the field, shoulder to shoulder with different types of people.

You have a breadth of experiences that will serve you well as you start on your path. You have left your mark on this campus. Your Trinity education has given you the tools necessary to achieve your goals.

Maybe you think you know where you are headed, but you might not know how to get there, how to get your goals accomplished, the steps to take, the right questions to ask. But if you wait to figure it all out, you will never move forward. The most important thing is to get started. Do not wait. Do it now.

Trinity students know the importance of doing it now. Consider our men's ice hockey team and our men's squash team, both of which recently won national championships. Our women's ice hockey team won its first-ever NESCAC title, and our women's squash team made it to the national finals. Georgios Papadeas helped lead the men's basketball team to one of its best finishes ever, and Team IMPACT is making a difference to local youth. And this afternoon at 3:30, here on our own fields, our women's lacrosse team will host the NCAA quarterfinals, knowing that a win will earn them a trip to Trinity's fourth straight Final Four appearance. Consider Yanique Anderson, our winner of a Fulbright; we also have two winners of Davis Projects for Peace awards. Rachael DiPietro, an IDP student, won the Newman Civic Fellows Award. These Bantams understand the fierce urgency of now. They know that they need to seize the opportunities that present themselves, and at just the right time, they prevail.

Trust in yourself that you are ready for the roadblocks that may get in your way – and know that without a doubt there will be roadblocks in your lives. When you hit one, reassess the situation and your priorities and determine what needs to be acted upon.

All the while, keep this in mind: Anyone can succeed when things are going well. The true measure of a person lies in how one gets back up after being knocked down. That is what determines your strength of character. My character has been tested this year. And I bet that yours has been, too. And at Trinity, you have expanded more than your intellect; you also have developed your character.

Trinity has a long, venerable history. As we move toward the College's 200th anniversary, we aim to balance our long-standing traditions with a deep understanding of the fierce urgency of now. We know that we need to move forward, and move forward now – not yesterday, not at some point in the future. We have to think about how to plan for tomorrow and for the future of higher education.

This spring, when we wanted to develop a mentoring network program for future incoming classes, we posed a challenge to student design teams. I am particularly proud of how the participating teams not only lived up to the challenge but surpassed my expectations. Thank you for the Bantam Network. These students understood the urgency of now, expressed nearly five decades ago by Martin Luther King, Jr.

And now I want to take you back to Jacob Pruett. You recall that he, too, much like King, was quite a trailblazer. Jake spent 40 years of his life in slavery and then became one of the first African American men ever to vote in the United States. His granddaughter Alberta was a trailblazer as well. She was the first African American invited to serve on the board of the Girl Scouts of New York City. Her husband, Samuel, was the minister of the largest black Methodist Church in Harlem in the 1950s. He was a trailblazer, too, rising through the ranks of the church to the top leadership position in the largest church in the largest city in our country.

As I mentioned before, Samuel and Alberta lived only blocks from Riverside Church, where King gave his momentous speech. I know that they would have attended this gathering if they had not been killed in an automobile accident just one year earlier. You may wonder how I can be so sure of that, but, trust me, I am quite certain.

Jacob was the father of Lily Pruett, who was the mother of Alberta Pruett, who married Samuel Sweeney, who were the parents of Paul Sweeney, who had a daughter Joanne Sweeney, who became president of Trinity College. And my cousin Carolyn and my brother Paul Wesley uncovered and wrote about these stories.

In America, in four generations (from around the time of the founding of this College), you can go from slave to president of one of the finest educational institutions in the country ... when you have four generations of individuals who understand the value of education, who exercise their rights as citizens of this great country, and who understand the fierce urgency of now.

I understand the fierce urgency of now, for this College and for all of you. I urge you to move forward – now. You are ready. Trinity has given you what you need to seize your future. Find your passion and follow it. As King said, tomorrow is today.

Congratulations! And remember, Trinity College will always be your home!

Go Boldly! Be Engaged!