

Trinity College
Joanne Berger-Sweeney
Convocation, August 31, 2017

Good afternoon, and welcome to all—to the returning members of the Trinity community who join us in celebrating the start of the academic year and to those who've just arrived: the Class of 2021, transfer students, Individualized Degree Program students, new faculty and staff, and parents, family members, and friends. We are delighted to have you with us and excited to begin the new academic year together!

As we celebrate here, we have at the front of our minds and in our hearts all of those who are suffering in Texas and Louisiana from the devastation that Harvey has wreaked. It's difficult to fathom the enormity of that crisis and the acute challenges our counterparts at colleges there are dealing with. Our thoughts are with them on this day, and our hopes are for clear skies and quickly receding floodwaters, along with the continued support of an entire nation to help that region recover.

Meanwhile, here on this beautiful day in Hartford, there's something truly special about the arrival of a new group of students, the anticipation of the opportunities that await you in your Trinity journeys, and the faith that you will transform this place for the better as you transform yourselves. Every year on this day, I am newly inspired, and this year is no exception: Your energy, your enthusiasm, and your promise keep me focused on the future.

I hope you all feel inspired, too. Do you know why? Because we have a lot of work to do together.

What is that work? Embracing differences, engaging across divides, listening with empathy, and, most importantly, seeing each other's humanity. That's the hard work of evolving as a just community, and that is the charge I impart to each and every one of you on this momentous day.

When I was a little girl growing up in Los Angeles, we recited the pledge of allegiance in school every day. I probably uttered the phrase "with liberty and justice for all" thousands of times without thinking about it very much. What does it mean to live in

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a society and to be a member of a community where all are truly free and truly equal under the law? Is this our reality, or is it an impossible ideal?

For me, it's a very real and very achievable aspiration. That I'm standing here today as Trinity College's president, and that all of you—legacies and first-generation college students alike, from all over the world and all economic backgrounds, and identifying across a multitude of ethnic, racial, and gender expressions—represent the excellence of the Trinity student body ... now, that's just plain remarkable progress.

Such progress isn't easy. I'm often reminded of Frederick Douglass' famous words: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." He said, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men (and I might add women) who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."

This work toward progress, toward the Trinity we want to be and the example we want to set for the world, will happen in your classrooms, in your residence halls, on the playing fields and in dining halls, in the city of Hartford and on your Trinity journeys around the world. It demands your persistence and your resilience, your inquiry and your intellect. I know you are up to the challenge.

Every year for the past 50 years, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA conducts a survey of incoming first-year college students. It's a fascinating set of data, and I can tell you that it revealed that the Class of 2020 was the most politically polarized in the history of the survey. Only about 42 percent of students said they were "middle of the road" on political issues, with greater than ever percentages of students characterizing themselves as either far left or far right. These results reflect the broader divides within our country, and I'd predict that this year's survey shows an even greater degree of polarization.

What does this mean for us here at Trinity? To me, as an educator, it's a call to action, and an inspiring one. It's a reminder of why we're here, and what we at this

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small, residential liberal arts college in a diverse capital city do best. We can create community and foster understanding across deep divides.

And just to be crystal clear, we're not here to change people's politics, but we do aim to open people's minds!

Speaking of minds, as you may know, I'm a neuroscientist. So, I know something about brains. I'm also the mother of a 17- and a 20-year old. And I have to say, I have been consistently puzzled by the teenage and young adult brain—and I'm guessing some parents here can relate. You know what I mean: There are many days when I shake my head—whether at my own children or my adopted family of 2,100 Trinity students—and I say to myself, "*What were they thinking?*"

As you will come to learn, I love to read, and so I often talk about the books that I've read. This summer I read *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*, by my colleague Dr. Frances Jensen. A few important takeaways about what and how teens and young adults are thinking:

1. Most important... the teen/young adult brain is primed for learning; teens learn complex information faster than at almost any other time in their lives. Memories are easier to make, and last longer during this period.
2. Teens and young adults can learn faster, but (and this is an important but), they are worse than adults at multitasking.
3. The reward centers of the brain are particularly sensitive. We take advantage of this enormous curiosity and capacity to learn, and the inherent reward that comes with intellectual and social stimulation. But the teen/young adult brain is also more sensitive to addiction (alcohol, drugs, video games) than the adult brain.

4. At the same time, the teen brain isn't networked or wired like an adult brain. Organizational skills require brain connectivity and integration of many different parts of the brain. Much of the decision-making and suppression of impulses lies in an area of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, right here in the front. And the prefrontal cortex just isn't highly connected to the rest of the brain in the teen years and young adulthood. That means that teens can be impulsive, take big risks, and can't always suppress the first thing that comes to their mind ... a thought is more likely to become an action. Hence when an adult asks, "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING??" An appropriate answer for a teen could be, "Well, I really wasn't thinking about the consequences!"
5. Another thing that you've probably recognized is that emotionally stressful situations may impact the teen brain more than they do adult brains. The combination of brain development and hormones really are wreaking havoc on their emotional states.

So, you parents can think about this as scientific research to help you understand why your teenager/young adult did that crazy, dangerous thing they did, or you can think about it as fact-based support for the intensity of our efforts to educate young people at this incredibly special phase of their lives. Remember, this is a period in which they are primed for learning and capable of understanding the complexities of our world and in which they are open to change.

To you, my students, Trinity College is where all of your brains will find boundless opportunities for growth. Make sure to take intellectual risks—take a new subject, engage with a new idea. Take a risk because it may change your mind. Take a risk because it may change your heart. *These are worthwhile risks for the young and the young at heart.*

We are also here to impart a sense of responsibility as we grow together. I want to tell both students and parents: this is NOT a consequence-free zone. Your actions here WILL have consequences because that's how we teach responsibility in a supportive manner.

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I want your first year at Trinity to be truly extraordinary. It will be full of learning, of course, as well as challenge, discovery, and a whole lot of fun. Fun is one of the things we are *really* good at here at Trinity, by the way.

Once more, I welcome our new students and all new members of the Trinity community. I'm thrilled you're here, and I can't wait to get to know you better!