

Our Communities, Our Nation, and Our World Need You

My sisters, my brothers, my siblings all: good morning! And what a great celebratory morning it is!

Yes, I did greet you by using kinship terms when none among you is my biological sister or brother. But from training in anthropology, and from plain ole common sense, I know that kinship is about more than “blood.” Kinship is also about shared values.

And surely among all of us here this morning, there are many shared values—including that we value the kind of education that students receive here at Trinity College that teaches them to understand the world better and to honor their responsibility to help to make the world better.

I turn now to greet Sister President Joanne Berger-Sweeney. Thank you for your extraordinary leadership and distinguished service in the world of science and in American higher education.

I also want to recognize the critically important work of Trinity faculty and staff who are engaged in the sacred process of preparing students not only to make a good living but to live a good life.

To the families of today’s graduates: Thank you for supporting these women and men who have stayed the course and arrived at their graduation. It may be that you have believed in them when they didn’t always believe in themselves. And yes, many of you have been their human ATMs.

A warm and hearty greeting to all Trinity alumni and friends. May you continue to love *and* support this very special college.

To make sure I have not left anyone out, I greet you once again as my sisters and brothers all. And now I turn to offer a Commencement address for this very mighty Class of 2018 Trinity graduates.

Dear graduates, I do not think I have to convince you that we are living in very challenging times. But in case you ask me for evidence that all is far from peaceful and just in our communities, our nation, and our world—let me recall with you that on August 12 in Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacists wore the symbols and shouted out words associated with the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis. And day after day, we hear from more than one leader in the world expressions and actions of bigotry and hatred for people of color, for women, for people of Jewish and Islamic faiths, for individuals of LGBTQ communities, for differently abled individuals, for immigrants, and yes, for women, men and children who are poor.

Surely you agree with me when I say that in communities across our nation and our world, there is a crying need for peace, justice, and equality for all people. It is because of the state of our nation and our world that we turn to you, the graduates of this very special college, to say that you can be and you must be the leaders we desperately need.

So what is required of you to be the leaders we have been waiting for? First, you must be of service to others. Listen to these words of Dr. Martin Luther King:

“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s

theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

This idea of being a servant leader was taught to me by my parents, my minister, and my community leaders as I grew up in the segregated South. They repeatedly said to me, "Doing for others is just the rent you've got to pay for your room on earth."

The much-admired African American educator, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded Bethune-Cookman College that is now a university, would often say, "Go on and climb to the top. But remember, you must lift others as you climb."

Elie Wiesel, the great humanitarian who as a boy was put in a concentration camp because he was Jewish, once said this, "Our lives do not belong to us alone. Our lives belong to those who need us the most."

There are so many ways to be of service, such as volunteering in a soup kitchen, a center for the victims of domestic violence, or an after-school program. Beyond the moral and ethical reasons to volunteer, there are some very practical reasons. Studies have shown that people who volunteer have less stress, greater satisfaction, as well as improved problem-solving and networking skills. And yes, students who volunteer do better in school.

A second requirement if you are to fulfill the promise of being effective leaders in today's highly technological and diverse world is this: You must not only understand and respect your own culture; you need to have knowledge of and respect for people who are different from you. Indeed as technology transforms our world into a global village, a leader must respect the diversity of humankind and think and act in an inclusive way.

To acquire the skills and sensibilities to function in today's world, you must be able to work and interact with people who do not have the same skin color and hair texture as you do, who do not speak as you do, worship as you do, move about physically as you do, and partner as you do.

There is an incredibly rewarding bonus in store for those who manage to do this. And that is you will come to more fully understand and respect yourselves. As we anthropologists say, "It's scarcely the fish who discovers water." Indeed by learning about others, we better understand ourselves.

Here is a third requirement if you are to fully embrace your potential to be the leaders we desperately need: You must believe that a positive change is possible *and* that you have a responsibility to help to make it happen. There are so many ways that, as young and not-so-young people, you can help to change our world. Indeed, we are witnessing a time in our county when young folks are at the forefront of the call for positive change on a number of issues.

One of my heroes, Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the Children's Defense Fund, has said this: "If you don't like the way the world is, you change it, you have an obligation to change it. You just do it one step at a time." There is an African saying that speaks to the power of one person to make a difference. It says: "If you believe one creature cannot make a difference, you have never spent a night in a closed room with a mosquito."

Let me bring closure to my remarks by telling you a story. One day, while walking on a beach, an old man encountered a young girl picking up starfish and throwing them back into the ocean. The old man asked, “Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” The girl replied, “The sun is up and the tide is going out, and if I don’t throw the starfish into the ocean, they will die.” “But young girl, don’t you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it? What you are doing can’t really matter.” The young girl listened politely to the old man, but then as she bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the ocean, she said, “It mattered to that one.”

The girl was indeed a leader. This young hero honored her responsibility to be of service to others—including starfish! She understood and respected diversity, including biodiversity. And this young girl was committed to being an agent for positive change, even when that meant saving a few starfish along a beach.

I believe that each of you, today’s graduates of Trinity College, can and must be the leaders we need—for you can be of service to others, you can respect human diversity, and you can be agents for positive change.

So go on dear graduates and be the leaders we have been waiting for!

Congratulations!

And Godspeed!