

Charge to the Graduating Class
President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

This is a most wonderful day of celebration. It took us more than two years from when you completed your studies to get here, but get here we did! And although we've been through countless unimaginable challenges during that time, we have so much to celebrate. We are pleased to gather to recognize you and your tremendous accomplishments. First, may I ask Trinity faculty and staff and alumni and parents to stand, as you are able, to be honored by our graduating class?

I realize that it may have been a while since you've heard one of my speeches, but you probably remember that I like to talk about books that I have read recently. Today is no exception. *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance during the Blitz*, written by *New York Times* best-selling author Erik Larson, is a nonfiction work that offers a glimpse into the world of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during what is known as the Blitz, the infamous World War II bombing campaign on the U.K. by Nazi Germany that aimed to destroy British morale and to pressure a quick surrender. But that goal was not realized, despite the loss of more than 40,000 civilians and massive property damage. The British showed great resolve. They were resilient. Does that sound familiar to this class? It should!

In a chapter appropriately called "Tea Time," Larson explains that the "one universal balm for the trauma of war was tea. It was the thing that helped people cope." After all, tea is and has long been an integral part of British life, and drinking it was a defining act of normalcy amid the utterly abnormal bombing campaign. And taking a few moments every day—at tea time—to relax and converse with others was just the soothing balm the British people needed.

It's important to note that Churchill was a complicated individual; while he definitely had his faults, as we know with respect to the treatment of people in India, he knew what was required to persevere through hard times. When a proposal to reduce the ration of tea arose, Churchill reportedly said that tea was more important than ammunition. Larson writes,

"Tea acquired almost a magical importance in London life." ... Tea was comfort and history; above all, it was English. As long as there was tea, there was England."

I don't think it's much of a stretch to say that for the British people, having their tea time—and retaining that bit of normalcy—strengthened their resolve.

After reading this chapter, I, as a neuroscientist, wanted to know more about tea. How, exactly, does tea affect the brain, and what neural networks are involved? I did a little digging and found some research on tea's "mood-altering magic." A little side note here for scientists: Common tea, *Camellia sinensis*, is full of antioxidants and is associated with lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. Tea also contains caffeine, which together with *c. sinensis*, improves mood and alertness. In other words, tea has the benefit of making you feel both calm and alert. But most studies acknowledge that it's not just the tea that has a calming, centering effect; it's the act of preparing and then drinking the tea—the tea time itself—that may provide some of the drink's benefit. It's hard, if not impossible, to separate the effects of tea's chemicals on the brain and the fact that at tea time, you stop, relax, sit down, and—if someone else is with you—share a cup of tea. At tea time, you are both caring for

yourself and offering care to your companion, in effect, saying, “I care about you and what happens to you.”

I want you to take a moment right now to allow your mind to wander back to the spring semester of your last year at Trinity, back in March 2020, when COVID-19 knocked on our door and Trinity was forced to make the difficult but necessary call to send everyone home. The caring from those in our community was evident right from the start. Staff cared for students who were unable to go home, and you, your families, and many alumni and others made donations to the Student Emergency and Equity Fund—the “SEEF”—to ensure that all of our students had whatever they needed to complete their Trinity educational experience.

You also received care from Bantams 40 years your senior. The Class of 1980 reached out to you, writing personal notes of encouragement aimed at lifting your spirits and reminding you of the marvelous alumni network you were about to join. The Trinity faculty and staff—a big shout-out goes to our Information Technology Services team—also took great care in ensuring that you had the smoothest transition possible to remote learning, which allowed you to finish your degrees and make it to this day, albeit two years later.

The COVID years have been a time of great learning, pivots, and tremendous resilience. You discovered the all-important combination of relying on yourself while simultaneously relying on others, especially to get through difficult times. You also learned a flexibility of thought, that if things didn’t end up exactly as you planned, you figured out how to find your hope and joy. And you also became aware of your vulnerabilities, recognizing when you needed to reach out for help.

Today, as we celebrate you and the knowledge and fortitude you found at Trinity—whether in books or classes, on the field or stage, or in everyday life during a global pandemic—we also recognize your resilience in waiting two whole years to return to the Main Quad, ’neath the elms, to celebrate your Commencement. Talk about determination!

The fact that so many of you chose to come back today shows the strength of the bonds and connections you made while you were here at Trinity. And it also may say something about the importance of closure. You have your degrees; many of you are in jobs or graduate programs, and you didn’t have to come back. You wanted to come back. It was a choice you made, and we are so glad to welcome you here once again.

Speaking of welcoming back, we were so lucky to hear from today’s Commencement speaker, Will McCormack, who sat where you are today in 1996. Will, as you may know, won the 2021 Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film with *If Anything Happens I Love You*. This poignant piece focuses on the heartbreaking aftermath of a school shooting tragedy, which, unfortunately, is timely yet again with last month’s elementary school shooting in Texas; Will’s film shows grieving parents as they navigate the tumultuous void of losing a child this way. I urge you to come to Cinestudio this afternoon at 3:30 to see it or to watch it on Netflix when you next have a chance; it’s such an incredibly beautiful and insightful film that shows the resilience of these two people whose lives have been changed forever.

We’ve all had to have some degree of resilience to get to where we are today, more than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to evolve. And so I ask you, the Class of 2020, how will you share your wisdom—what you learned during the pandemic—with the Bantams who come

after you? How will you show them the same care that you received? What might you tell them about your tea time, your balm for making it through an unprecedented period in history? I can't wait to see all that you give to the world and what you accomplish, and importantly, how you will care for others! **YOU ARE MY VERY SPECIAL CLASS OF 2020!**

Congratulations!