

Charge to the Graduating Class
President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

Class of 2023, we gather to celebrate you and your tremendous accomplishments here 'neath the elms. And let's not forget to thank all who have made your success possible. Let's give a round of applause to thank your biggest supporters—faculty, staff, family, and friends—who have cheered for you since day one.

You are a very special class: you are the last and crowning graduation class of Trinity College's SECOND CENTURY. You are the only class that will celebrate the Bicentennial as both students and alumni. You have just added your story to the history of this magical place, Trinity.

As you know, it wouldn't be my Commencement speech—or, for that matter, any of my speeches—if I didn't talk about a book that I've read recently. But first let me set the stage with lyrics from a song:

“Look at her, a prisoner of the gutter,
Condemned by every syllable she ever uttered.
By law she should be taken out and hung,
For the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue.”

Professor Henry Higgins sings these lines in “Why Can't the English?” a song that questions Brits' ability to teach their children how to speak properly. He is singing, of course, about Miss Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl, in the musical, *My Fair Lady*.

This is a story, and, yes, one of my favorite musicals, about the importance of how the English language is spoken. People are immediately judged by how they speak—their enunciation, their dialect, their accent. Professor Higgins reminds Colonel Pickering, his colleague, that “if you spoke as she does, sir, instead of the way you do, why, you might be selling flowers, too!” Higgins transforms Eliza from a flower girl into a princess—the way she speaks English changes, too.

The moment we open our mouths, we are judged with assumptions about our socioeconomic status, our upbringing, where we're from, and, dare I say it, our level of intelligence.

Language has power. And here at Trinity, you have learned something of that power! My guess, and certainly my hope, is that you speak more eloquently and write more precisely because of your Trinity education.

This leads me to the book I want to share this year, titled *Babel: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translator's Revolution*, by R.F. Huang. This brilliant novel was given to me by one of our newest professors, Assistant Professor of Political Science Dang Do, who heard me reference my use of books during my Convocation speech at the start of this academic year. He stopped me on the Long

Walk one day to say how much he liked this book (by Huang) and thought I might like it, too. He was right!

The book is a fantasy involving a prestigious institute of language and translation at Oxford University called Babel (or in British English, “Baabel”), where an elite group of students are trained to collect and translate world languages into English—including languages from colonized countries. The most precise translations and word matches are then used to unlock the power of magical silver bars. These bars power the British economy and colonial suppression in the 19th century. Underlying the surface is a story of how the British empire used language to dominate, indeed colonize, other cultures, particularly those in Asia.

The main character, Robin Swift, is taken from his home in China and brought up in Victorian England, a very different world; he eventually attends the Babel Institute. He is taught to live and act as a Brit, and the only remaining trace of his homeland is the very precise manner in which he can translate Chinese into English. Robin is forced to suppress the very thing that provides his translations meaning—his native culture. But how can one divorce the meaning of language from the very culture that produced it?

I will never forget a line from the book: “The act of translation is always an act of betrayal.” One can never translate with full precision the nuances and meanings from one culture into the structures of another.

For me, this book is a reminder of the precious responsibility of teaching and learning in the liberal arts tradition.

Babel is a story about how one could use teaching and knowledge to inculcate a particular point of view. This is true when you limit what can be taught and how it can be taught—when you believe that there is a single lens through which to view history.

I want to contrast the book with what I know is true about a Trinity education. Our professors have a responsibility to teach our students to develop a full understanding, not just a narrow view, of history. We aim to teach students HOW to think, not WHAT to think. A Trinity education is about learning how to speak, how to be heard, AND how to listen. It’s about acknowledging and valuing different perspectives.

This is probably why we have graduated Trinity alumni who consider themselves politically conservative as well as those who consider themselves liberal. We have taught you how to analyze an issue, not what the conclusion should be. And in a society so politically divided, at a time when some people are trying to restrict what we read and how we interpret it, this gift of critical analysis is the most precious gift that we can give our students.

This book also is a reminder of duty—the duty that comes with the privilege of education.

And your duty, members of the Class of 2023, is to take what you have learned here and to use it for the public good, not solely for personal gain or landing a good job. While I certainly hope that you get a good job after you leave, more importantly, I hope that you take what you've learned here to make the world a better place and to empower others to do the same.

Ask yourself: How might I advocate for what's right or give voice to those in need? How might I create a tool that will improve lives for others? How might I research a topic that sheds light on the human condition?

Our Commencement speaker, Nicole Hockley, Trinity Class of 1992, has answered these questions in her courageous work with Sandy Hook Promise.

Like Nicole, you have incredible power to make your community a better place. You have already started to use your magic here at Trinity.

When I think about people who have made Trinity a better place, I recognize the leaders who have come before me. These are board chairs, trustees, deans, presidents—all of whom saw their duty to guide this institution through 200 years and some of whom are with us now. Trinity's living leaders, who are here today, please rise as you are able. Let's give them a round of applause.

You, the Class of 2023, also have a unique place in world history. You are the only class for whom the COVID pandemic interrupted all four years here at Trinity. When you arrived on campus, you didn't know what was in store; by the end of the year, terms including “social distancing” and “remote learning” became part of daily life. While your second and third years were here in person under COVID restrictions, hopefully, this, your senior year, has felt more normal to you. You are my resilient class.

You showed resilience in how you adapted and cared for one another. You got on with life in a world of Spotify, Harry Styles, Bad Bunny, and Lizzo. And how many of you binge-watched *Squid Game*, *Ted Lasso*, or *The White Lotus* together? And during COVID, when in January 2021 I taught along with Urs the “Neuroscience of Learning and Memory” course for mostly sophomores, many of whom are graduating now—Rene, Mani, Nick D., Ross, Alli, Steph, Sarah, Molly, Gillian, Emlyn, Dani, Luc, Kerry, Anya, Nic Z.—you reminded me what an incredible privilege it is to teach and just how smart our current students are.

During our Bicentennial year, we want you to know that you will always be connected to us here at Trinity and to others by shared memories of this magical place 'neath the elms. Please, come back to campus often and stay engaged. Please remember that no one person can provide the single

perspective for our multilayered history. This is what makes our Bicentennial so rich; we are celebrating not one Trinity but all Trinity—and especially you.

And so, I ask you, the graduates of 2023, what is your commitment to the future and how will you fulfill it? How will you use your power to make the world a better place?

I can't wait to see the magic that you produce. MAKE ME PROUD!

Congratulations!