

Charge to the Graduating Class
President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

Good morning, and welcome to everyone. To the Class of 2024, I wish you a heartfelt congratulations on your tremendous accomplishments! Let's not forget to thank those who made your success possible. Let's give a round of applause to those who supported you throughout your time at Trinity College—faculty, staff, family, and friends.

As we close out our Bicentennial year, we do so knowing that you play a part of Trinity's history and future—you are the FIRST graduating class of our THIRD CENTURY.

This has been an extraordinary and complicated year, marked by moments of joy but also of sadness and tension. Certainly, recent media coverage has focused on student protests across the country. It is the work of a college to foster the intellectual independence of our students so that they can develop well-informed opinions and cultivate their voice. This is our Bicentennial commitment to the future.

We are a community, and as a community, part of what this year has taught us is how to hold firm to what we believe and how to care for one another. I am grateful that we remain a community that believes in our convictions while choosing to respect one another even in the face of difficulty and conflicting beliefs.

The year also was unusual in that we lost beloved community members; among them were Vice President for Advancement Michael Casey, Professor of Language and Culture Studies Johannes Evelein, and most recently, our colleague in Campus Safety, Jorge Lugo, all who truly loved this community.

In the fall, one of our own, rising junior Tahseen Aliahmad, was shot—while walking in Vermont with his childhood friends and wearing the keffiyeh of their Palestinian tradition—in an act of violence that shook our community and the entire country. And let's also remember Jillian Hegarty, your classmate who died too soon. In her honor, we have saved her a seat where she would have sat today, next to you, and laid a brick in her memory on the Lower Long Walk. Also, someone has endowed a scholarship in Jillian's name.

But while there have been challenges, let's not let the moments of pride and celebration get overshadowed.

You are part of the Trinity College Bicentennial. This community came together so many times this year—two symposia, the Bicentennial Fall Weekend, and sold-out performances of *JOY!* in the Austin Arts Center. From the Cinestudio film series to last weekend's gala where we established the Bicentennial Hartford Scholarship, more than 11,000 people participated as a united community.

We shared too many academic successes this year to recount. Trinity was named a top producer of Fulbright Scholars. Professor Pablo Delano was selected for a major art installation at the prestigious Venice Biennale. And I was honored to deliver the first-ever President's Medal for Science and Innovation to an alumnus, Eric Fossum, who changed the world with this little camera that is in all of our cell phones.

I am so proud of our athletics teams who continue to compete with heart and integrity. Squash, football, basketball, lacrosse, hockey, track and field—all competed to the top of their leagues. Congratulations!

You may be sitting next to a future world changer right now. You may be sitting next to a future president. Or you just might become THAT person whom classmates will say “they knew you when.”

Life is unpredictable. But knowing what you value, whom you can turn to, and how to care for one another—as friends, classmates, mentors—are the lessons we learn in this connected community. After you leave today, remember the respect and the engagement that you have shared with one another—lean on one another during times of challenge and times of joy.

Now, it wouldn't be a Commencement speech of mine—or, for that matter, any of my speeches—if I didn't talk about a book that I've read recently. This year, I've chosen a book that reminded me about why I love reading so much.

American author and physician Abraham Verghese (Ver-Geez) took 14 years to write *The Covenant of Water*. I dare call this sweeping 700-page epic novel a modern masterpiece.

The novel spans 77 years, from 1900 to 1977, and tells the story of three generations of a Saint Thomas Orthodox Christian family living in the town of Parambil, in southwest India. Verghese described the watery land of Travancore—later known as the state of Kerala—as (I quote) “rivulets and canals, a latticework of lakes and lagoons, a maze of backwaters and bottle-green lotus ponds.” We follow a young 12-year-old girl named Mariamma who becomes known as “Big Ammachi”—or big mother—after she travels on a river journey to marry a 40-year-old widower and act as mother to his young son, Jojo. We follow Big Ammachi's life—the joys of family, the sorrow of death, the suffering of maladies. Her life flows like the strength and power of the waters of a river. According to Tao Te Ching: “Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it.” And so are the twists and turns in Big Ammachi's life.

Verghese writes poetically and introduces us to complex beautiful characters; he opened my eyes to a world so distant and so different from our world here. As a physician and an administrator at the Stanford University School of Medicine, Verghese is a man of both science and letters. He infuses into his story ailments that are mysterious and untreated—from leprosy to cretinism to neurofibromatosis—that suffuse secrets and suffering into Big Ammachi's world. The plot unfolds unexpectedly like the bends of a flowing river.

This book offers lessons that I want to share. First, if you leave here with one sentiment today, let it be this—***never stop learning or finding wonder in books.*** This book opened my eyes to a whole new world. I didn't know there was a community of native Christians who lived in southern India since the second century A.D. Even at my age, I find wonder in the new things I learn.

Second, ***never stop seeking answers.*** I do not see science, spirituality, and creativity as separate—they are completely interwoven. As a neuroscientist, I found the book's scenes of medical study and clinical surgery fascinating. But I thought the same of the stories of the family's benevolent ghosts,

wise elephants, and mysterious curses. We, as human beings, use the tools we have to explain life's unknowns—whether it be by knowledge or by imagination. Today, you will leave this campus with the best tool possible—a liberal arts education. Make the most of this tool to find answers for the future that you seek.

Third, ***embrace the unknowns on the journey of life***. Life will pull you along like the waterways of Travancore. You can struggle against its currents, or you can let it reveal your next destination. Big Ammachi, who suffered greatly, also loved greatly. She found joy in so many quiet and beautiful moments of her life. Never let apathy trap you. (Personally, while I will retire from Trinity next year, who knows! I might just embark on a new career in creative writing. I know that I have a novel to be written in me!)

We do not know what our lives will bring. We do not know what the rest of the year will bring. But, Class of 2024, I do know this: Your education does not end at graduation today. Your real education is just beginning.

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. You hold the power to use the important tool of a liberal arts education to make your community a better place, wherever you go.

I hope you come back often, and we want to hear about your many adventures. We can't wait to see what unfolds for you on the watery journey of life. **MAKE US PROUD!**

Congratulations!