

The Inaugural Address

“Bold, Engaged, in a Complex Learning Network”

Welcome to the Honorable Dannel Malloy, governor of the State of Connecticut, and the Honorable Pedro Segarra, mayor of the City of Hartford; members of the City Council; Board of Trustees Chair Cornie Thornburgh and all members of our board; Trinity College faculty, staff, and students; past presidents of Trinity College; those of you who have graciously agreed to be on the program and celebrate Trinity College with me today; parents and families; alumni; members of the Hartford community; friends and colleagues; my own family: Urs, Clara, Tommy, you know that I would not be able to be here without your support; my brothers; my cousins; Mrs. Norwood; Aunt Elizabeth; St. Paul's in Natick—I can't name you all, but you are all in my heart; and, of course, other esteemed delegates and guests and my colleagues from Wellesley College and Tufts University. I am so pleased that you all are with me on this very important day in my life and in the life of Trinity College.

I am truly happy to be here at Trinity, at this moment in history. Even as the College approaches its 200th anniversary, it remains a forward-looking institution. The pace of change in the world is ever accelerating and disruptive. We recognize that we are preparing our students for careers that may not even exist yet and to become active citizens of a world that will continue to evolve in ways that are inconceivable to us now. So that you might understand where I think Trinity is headed in the future, I think it will help you to know a little more about me.

I am a neuroscientist, by training and in spirit. I am fascinated by the complexities of the brain and how we learn. I am an experimentalist at heart; I believe in trying things, revising, and trying again. I am intrigued by problems that others think are unsolvable.

So today, as I speak, I cannot help but weave a bit of my scientific background into my address, but I promise not to make it too technical. The brain is a beautiful organ made up of cells, called neurons, and your brain contains hundreds of billions of neurons and support cells. What is even more fascinating is that each of those neurons is interconnected with as many as thousands of other neurons, connecting to every part of our bodies from our hair to our toes. One organizing principle of brain cells is that many form networks or connected collections. And these networks are what make us capable of learning.

What is learning? One definition of learning is reacting differently to your environment in the future based on feedback that you have received in the past. In other words, neurons receive inputs, learn, and then interact with other cells differently. The more dependable and predictable the situation, the easier we learn. The more varied and unpredictable the environment, the harder it is to learn. But complex reinforced learning yields very strong connections, meaning the greater the challenge, the more we can learn.

Over the next few minutes, I want you to see how my personal history, Trinity's history, and the stories of our networks weave together. They will serve as one foundation for how we move forward in the future.

I often like to talk about books that I have read recently. I would like to tell you a bit about *The Warmth of Other Suns*, by Pulitzer Prize winner Isabel Wilkerson. This book details the Great Migration of six million African Americans, between 1915 and 1970, from the South to the North, the Midwest, and the West. Each of these six million people took risks in search of a better life.

They took a leap of faith. They went boldly into the unknown. One of the three journeys that was highlighted in the book was that of Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, who left Louisiana, was educated in Atlanta, Georgia, was a brilliant surgeon by all accounts, and then migrated to Los Angeles, California.

This book resonated with me because I recognized the stories as those of my parents and our lives in California. My parents met at Clark College in Atlanta. They married a couple of days after my mother graduated at the age of 19. My father, who was older but delayed school while serving in the U.S. military, had one year remaining. In that year, my mother earned a master's degree in sociology from Atlanta University.

And then they both headed (with my oldest brother Paul in tow) to Howard University in Washington, D.C., where my father attended law school. There in D.C., my second brother, John, was born, and my father graduated number two in his law school class. Family lore has it that on the day my father graduated from law school in 1954, he packed up his bags to drive cross-country to set up life in Los Angeles. My mother and the two boys took the train west to join my father a little later.

The part of the story that I didn't understand until I read Wilkerson's book was just how dangerous it was for a black man to travel cross-country at the time. Jim Crow practices extended far beyond the South. Wilkerson describes the social networks that spanned the country informing blacks where it was safe to stay, find gas, and eat a meal on the long trek west. It was something of a 20th century Underground Railroad.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster's story in *The Warmth of Other Suns* was my father's story.

Somewhere along the way, my parents had a daughter, and that was me. I was born and raised in sunny Los Angeles. My father felt that California was the land of opportunity, where our family would be perceived differently than they were in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., or even New York City, where he grew up.

But Wilkerson describes California as a difficult place for African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s because the rules of engagement were just not clear. Sometimes, they were treated like individuals in the "more enlightened North"; sometimes they were treated with the prejudice that signified the "South" that they had left. California was hard to learn; the environment was variable and inconsistent.

But my parents became deeply involved in the fabric of their new California home. My father's first job was at the Urban League before going out into private practice; my mother spent most of her career working for the Girl Scouts and eventually became executive director of the Angeles Girl Scout Council. They both had deep roots in the church and depended on community. Social networks existed long before Facebook, and my parents were very successful in using theirs to help themselves and help others. Mark Zuckerberg would have been impressed with my parents' social networks.

My parents took risks. They seized the opportunities that their education afforded them. They developed and used their networks to the fullest, and those networks supported their children and inspired them to learn. They went boldly. They were engaged. They successfully navigated a complex learning environment in California.

My journey is a reflection of my parents' story and their pioneering spirits. I was one of the only African Americans graduating from Johns Hopkins with a science doctorate my year. I was the first African

American woman to move through the ranks to become a tenured full professor in biology at Wellesley College, the first African American to be elected to the Council and then treasurer of the Society for Neuroscience, and now the first woman president and the first African American president of Trinity College.

Some say that I am bold and engaged. I guess that I would respond that I'm not sure that I know how to be anything else. I am boldly moving into new frontiers, but just as my parents did, just as my brothers have done, I have learned from the complexities of my California upbringing and have been supported by an incredible social network, many members of whom are here today. I am a neuron that is part of an incredible learning network. I learned better, I got smarter because of the complexities of my learning environment.

Similarly, Trinity College, as an institution, has a history of going boldly, being engaged, and navigating a complex learning environment. This way of being traces all the way back to 1823, when the College first opened its doors. Trinity was founded by leaders of the Episcopal Church, but the founders made it clear right from the very beginning that students of all faiths were welcome, unlike many of the institutions of higher education that were founded around the same time. Trinity was bold.

The book *Trinity College in the Twentieth Century* was written by College archivist Peter Knapp, Class of 1965, in collaboration with his wife, Anne. Peter, sadly, passed away last month. His book details how in 1936, during the historic Hartford flood, Trinity students helped evacuate victims and staffed emergency shelters. That was engaged. It details how Trinity endured major enrollment concerns during World War II because so many students had enlisted to fight the war. That was engaged. It details Trinity College's bold decision in 1969 to admit women after nearly 150 years as a very successful, all-male institution. That was bold. It tells how in 1998, the College established the Trinity College Boys and Girls Club, the first collaboration of this kind in the nation. That was engaged.

But Trinity College also has had to navigate a changing Hartford. When Trinity was founded in 1823, Hartford was a thriving center of commerce and intellectualism. Throughout much of the 19th century, it was home of the likes of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain. Hartford is still a jewel, but it has evolved.

Trinity College has had to maintain a learning network in the varied and changing Hartford environment. But it is not simply the complexity of the situation that makes a great institution. It is how you use the strength of that complexity to build the future. Trinity is a smarter organization because of the complexities that it has faced.

At Trinity, our goal is to inspire a highly capable, talented, and diverse student body to become educated citizens of the world. What we do at our core is teach and create knowledge in the liberal arts—exposing students to the large range of subjects that prepare them broadly for life after college, giving them a diverse and complex environment in which to learn, and engaging them in research that impacts our community and the world.

The liberal arts develop a habit of mind, a manner of analyzing problems that is acquired over a series of intellectual encounters both inside and outside of the classroom—those incredible bonds between professor and student, student and student, staff and student, and alumni with students ... forming an

incredible learning and social network. It is highly personalized; it is deeply meaningful. It instills a manner of learning that lasts a lifetime.

One of the greatest strengths of academia is the diversity of people and the openness to different viewpoints. To be a great college, we must ensure that we have financial resources to allow a diverse set of students to attend this institution without regard to their ability to pay full tuition. Also, what we must do better is help our students connect their experiences in the liberal arts to the skills that they will need when they leave our campus.

Now let's talk about the city. One of the wonderful particulars of the liberal arts learning that Trinity offers today is its unique location in an urban environment and a capital city in this great state of Connecticut. Here at Trinity, we "do" the liberal arts really well, while leveraging the mutually beneficial partnerships possible only in a city—a capital—to become leaders and engaged global citizens.

Our motto should be "liberal arts with an urban pulse, preparing students for life beyond our hedges." Our students learn the skills and ways of thinking that they need to address the real-world problems of tomorrow, both in their careers and outside of them. The difference here is Trinity's location; its prominence in ever-changing and complex Hartford is one of the things that make it distinct.

Most academic institutions do not have a chance to play such an integral role in the life of their city or town. I am not a politician, but I will need to build coalitions and I will need help navigating this complex city with a storied history in order to promote Trinity's growth in Hartford, as a trusted neighbor, and on the national stage as a top liberal arts institution. I will depend on you, my colleagues in city and state government and in academia and beyond, to be my partners in furthering Trinity's mission.

I ask you, how many selective liberal arts colleges have a Community Learning Initiative, in which faculty members design courses that partner with the community to involve students in hands-on learning they could not get within the walls of a classroom?

How many selective liberal arts colleges have the groundbreaking Center for Urban and Global Studies, which combines academic study and civic engagement in diverse local, national, and global settings?

How many selective liberal arts colleges have helped create a Learning Corridor, which now hosts the Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy?

How many selective liberal arts colleges have a Trinfo.Café, where our neighbors learn technological skills, create resumes to get jobs, and work in a community garden, with volunteer assistance from students?

How many selective liberal arts colleges take on practical challenges in the community and the world with a world-class, accredited Engineering Department while maintaining their commitment to the liberal arts with world-class humanities departments such as history and English, among others?

How many selective liberal arts colleges have a women's rowing team that won an NCAA championship last season and a history of outstanding scholar-athletes?

How many? I know that Trinity College does. I don't know about you, but Trinity College was and is my first choice!

So I ask all of you, what will you do to help take Trinity boldly into the future? What will you do to make your mark on Trinity's history? Exciting things are happening here. These are challenging times in higher education, in the nation, and in the world. Trinity will be a leader in this changing world. I ask that you join me in the leap of faith—that bold step—now to make a better Trinity College.

And now it is my time to lead this great institution into the future, with your help. So what is the future that I envision for Trinity College?

I can promise you that it will involve experimentation. I told you that I am an experimentalist at heart. We will try things, and some of them may fail. It will be based soundly on lessons learned, and we will continue to be a learning network in a very complex environment. We will think better and harder about how to mentor our students and build bridges between the education they learn here and jobs beyond our doors. It will involve cutting-edge teaching and research in between the disciplines to address challenges in our complex and changing world. It will involve innovation and financial sustainability. It will involve a path of engagement with the whole person, not just the intellect. It will require full engagement with each other, with Hartford, and with the world at large.

There is no substitute for the varied face-to-face social networks that one encounters at a small liberal arts college in a capital city. But we will use tele-education and an online presence to enhance our face-to-face learning. It will involve your support and engagement to build a shared dream that will allow us to achieve our full potential.

As I reflect on this, I am taken halfway across the world to the African nation of Liberia, which has suffered the loss of more than 2,700 lives to Ebola during the recent outbreak of the deadly virus. It reminds us that the social networks that are essential for our learning also allow for the spread of communicable disease. The effects of this public health nightmare are threatening peace and stability in the region, as there is talk that this crisis may spark war. The combination of multiple disciplines, the manner of analyzing problems that is learned through the liberal arts, will ultimately bring about creative solutions to this and other world problems.

Liberia's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, also a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner, not long ago offered her inspirational words about the importance of dreams. She said quite simply: "If your dreams don't scare you, they're not big enough."

Let us dream big.

Let us go boldly.

Let us be engaged.

Let us embrace the complexity.

I invite you to join me in making Trinity College's future the best it can be.

Thank you.