

## Convocation 2021

Welcome to the new academic year and, for many of you, the formal beginning to your life as a member of the Trinity College family. Students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends, we are all part of the Bantam family. This is a community of people who care for one another, hold one another responsible for our actions, take an active role in advancing the college, and enthusiastically support the next generations, paying forward the opportunities we've received.

Convocation is an especially happy occasion because it's when the entire campus community comes together to welcome our newest members and to officially launch the academic year.

You, the Class of 2025, are survivors. You are surviving a pandemic; you survived a high school senior year where so many elements were remote for many of you; you survived a tumultuous year of racial and political reckoning—and with all of this turmoil, you pursued your academics, and you are here at one of the best liberal arts colleges in the country. Congratulations to you newest members of the Trinity community and to all of the people who supported your journey this far!

How many of you have a relative who attended Trinity? How many of you are the first in your families to go to college? How many of you live within an hour of Hartford? How many of you had to take a plane or train to get here? How many of you are fluent in a language other than English? You see, we come from different places with different life stories, yet each of us made a choice to join this community: Trinity College. Our differences can make coming together challenging, but it is our differences that make us who we are and that make our community deep and strong.

Now, what you will discover is that most of my speeches are centered around a book that I'm reading—I'm an avid reader, and it is rare to find me not engaged blissfully in a book or two. This summer, I was plenty busy preparing for this fall semester, but I still found time to enjoy several books; I love historical fiction and nonfiction alike. As a sidenote, students, when you see me walking on the Long Walk, you can almost always start a conversation by asking me, "What are you reading now?"

This summer, I read a book titled *Rules of Civility*. It was written by Amor Towles, an investment executive turned novelist, and describes a clever, brash heroine who is introduced to upper-class 1930s New York society through an unusual and somewhat unfortunate set of events. The story follows the heroine as she defines her own values and observes the strict rules of civility to which others in her orb adhere. These rules, and the title of the novel, were based on the *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, a book containing 110 principles that were transcribed by a young George Washington, our country's first president, and that originated from a set of guidelines authored by French Jesuits in the late 16th century. And it is said that Washington's act of transcribing these rules by hand helped him internalize ideas of civility, in turn molding his character. While it should be said that Washington practiced these rules imperfectly, in an America scourged by slavery, I was struck by the importance of rule number one and its relevance for our Trinity community today.

*Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present [sic].*

This rule guides us to show respect for one another—no matter who or what is involved. It doesn't dictate that we should respect someone only if that person looks or sounds like us or agrees with our opinion; no, it is clear: civility calls upon us to respect everyone we encounter. This rule is as relevant today as it was more than 200 years ago.

George Washington, who was trying to learn these rules of civility, was a teenager, not too far removed from the age of you, our entering students. This is a time in life that you are exploring the rules of social connections and interactions and trying to discern how those rules will guide you and shape your own values. Trinity doesn't have a book with 110 rules of civility, but the college does provide guideposts and a space in which YOU can create your own civil rules.

Without doubt, these rules will be based on values from your upbringing coupled with those you acquire HERE, living and learning on this incredible campus, where you interact with people from across society, across the country, and across the world. Your time here will give you an opportunity to develop the empathy, the careful listening skills, the discerning analytical

skills, and the value system to guide you throughout your lives. And we will provide innumerable opportunities to use these rules—to practice, revise, practice, and revise. You won't get it right every time, but you will learn.

It seems that in our current society, we have lost some of the rules of civility in our interactions. This leads to me think about why. There's no question that political divides have torn at our civility, and these circumstances preceded our most recent presidential elections. The seeds of divisiveness have been laid for decades and are the fodder of incivility. Recently, I heard a troubling prediction from a political watcher in Washington, D.C., who foresees that every four years we will see a flip in political power between our major parties, that we will be swinging back and forth regularly, because each side will block, with a complete lack of civility, any progress the other side tries to make. [I hope that the recent bipartisan vote on an infrastructure package is a sign that this prediction may be wrong.]

We all can play a role in changing this problematic prediction; we, here at Trinity, can be part of a more civil future.

Higher education—and Trinity's special brand of an urban, residential liberal arts experience—provides the pathway for our students' transformative educational experience. This experience evolves from simply what our students do to what they live and who they are. That journey fosters not only their intellectual development but also the social and moral growth that can contribute to a more civil society.

As an institution of higher education, we, your teachers, your staff, and your administrators, and all of our alumni and friends, welcome this extraordinary responsibility and privilege to be a part of your transformational education experience.

In four years, YOU will leave as ambassadors of the rules of civility; we WILL model how to interact with others with respect.

So, parents, I'm here to say, don't quibble over the subject matter of the classes your student is taking. Don't worry if they are spending lots of time playing sports, in clubs, or volunteering in the community. Your students are here to learn both inside and outside the classroom in a manner that will prepare them to be civil, engaged citizens in a diverse world. What more can you ask for? I KNOW, a job at the end of it all! But I can assure

you that our students have jobs or are in graduate or fellowship programs or the military when they leave Trinity—in the last two years, even with the pandemic looming, that successful first-destination percentage has been between 93 and 96 percent.

We've got that covered!

And during your time here at Trinity, we debate and disagree, and we will model a civil society! The world is watching.

One more thing: As new students, you're joining the Bantam Network—an inclusive, supportive learning community. Each one of you is part of one of 10 Bantam Nests, which are organized around first-year seminars and supported by faculty, staff, and other students who will help you transition to college life and provide you with guidance in myriad ways.

Just before Convocation, you were handed an envelope to be opened during this ceremony. Now open those envelopes and discover your nest.

We are all part of the Bantam Network!

It's now my pleasure to invite Acting Dean of the Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs Sonia Cardenas to officially launch the academic year.