



Convocation Remarks President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

What Do Humans Need?

Good afternoon, and welcome—to the returning members of the Trinity College community who join us in celebrating the start of the academic year and to those who’ve just arrived: the amazing Class of 2028, transfer and IDP students, and their family and friends!

I am delighted to begin this new academic year together! You may already know that this is my last year as Trinity’s president. For 11 years, I have had the privilege of welcoming our newest class at this traditional Convocation ceremony. You, Class of 2028, are my last class here, and you will always hold a special place in my heart.

Trinity is a remarkable place of discovery and learning; it’s a place where you can find your purpose in life!

Now, my tradition is to base most of my speeches on a book that I’ve read, but this year for my last Convocation speech, I was inspired by *two* books. Both books are about the future, and they have vastly different takes on what the future will look like.

Prophet Song by Paul Lynch won the Booker Prize in 2023 and takes place in Ireland, in a relatively near future. Ireland has been taken over by a totalitarian government. Individual freedom is under attack, and any opposition to the government is criminalized.

The main character, Eilish (yes, like Billie Eilish), is a scientist who is on maternity leave to raise a growing family of four children. She watches in disbelief as her husband, Larry, who works for a schoolteacher’s union, is hauled away by the secret police for attending a teachers’ protest. She’s smart, thoughtful, and analytical, yet she refuses to see what is happening to her country until it is too late. She is in disbelief that her comfortable life—with a home, a family, and a car—can turn so quickly into seeking refuge in a civil war-torn country. When Eilish’s sister from Canada tries to get her out of Ireland, she refuses to leave because “how would Larry find us?” Her purpose is focused on how to hold the family together in a country descending into chaos.

This dystopian vision is contrasted with beautifully written passages of calm, but overall the book is a discomfiting read. With no paragraphs and no quote marks, the book gives you a sense of the urgency of time, of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

What follows is an example of a poignant passage, one of many that keep you on edge as the world deteriorates around Eilish:

After a bad dream, Eilish reminds her daughter that “your father is with you all the time, she says, even while he’s gone, that is the meaning of the dream, your father came home to remind you that he is always here with you because your father is always alive in your heart, he is here with you now with his arm around you, and he will always be here because the love we are given when we are loved as a child is stored forever inside us, and your father has loved you so very much, his love for you cannot be taken away nor erased, please don’t ask me to explain this, you just need to believe it is true because it is so, it is a law of the human heart.”

The passage from the book that I chose for us to focus on is the following gentle reminder of hope, which is something that we all need. Eilish remembers longingly that “happiness hides in the humdrum, how it abides in the everyday toing and froing as though happiness were a thing that should not be seen, as though it were a note that cannot be heard until it sounds from the past, seeing her own countless reflections vain and satisfied before the glass while Larry waits impatiently in the car, he is standing in the hall taking off his raincoat, he is shouting for his slippers as he slides out of his green boots.” Even in the bleakest times, we can find happiness in the memories of the small things.

I also want to remind you that Eilish’s world is driven by purpose; it’s driven by her passionate desire to keep her family together and to await Larry’s return.

The second book, *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* by Becky Chambers, is the counterpoint to *Prophet Song*. It takes place in a distant future on Panga, a habitable moon. Centuries before the start of the book, robots became sentient (self-aware) and refused to work for humans. Humans benevolently released robots into the “wild,” never to return again. Until . . . centuries in the future, a human (Sibling Dex) and a robot (Mossap) meet in the wild.

Human society has re-formed without robots or AI and with significantly less technology, but they still have small phone/computers. In Panga, every person generates the energy that they need to sustain themselves, and the society has based principles on kindness and mutual support.

When Dex (the human) and Mosschap (the robot) meet in the wild, after centuries of separation, Mosschap has one question for Dex: “What do humans need?” Mosschap is still programmed to cater to human needs.

It’s a question that is difficult, indeed, to answer.

Before meeting Mosschap, Dex was a monk, traveling across the region, performing ritual tea services. Dex carefully created custom blends for a “stranger who approach(s) their table, and feeling the warm, wordless exchange coursing in the space between. Such service made Dex feel “peaceful, close to their god and to their people and the world they all shared.”

Dex and Mosschap together contemplate philosophical questions such as whether humans need a purpose or whether they can just exist. Dex shares with Mosschap, “We don’t have to do more than that, do we? You don’t have to have a reason to be tired. You don’t have to earn rest or comfort. You’re allowed to just *be*.”

What underlies both books? They ask this fundamental question: What do we need as humans? Each book approaches this question differently in the context of chaos and change.

From my own perspective, we need food, water, and shelter to survive, of course. But we also need other people, those we care about and those who care about us, people who support our intellectual, emotional, and social growth. We need to think, to ask challenging questions, to analyze, and to ponder. Ultimately, ***we need to believe that we have a purpose in life.***

Dex and Mosschap and Eilish all appreciate what humans need—lives with purpose.

This brings me back to you. I’m here to share that at Trinity, you will find what you need. Part of the mission of this College is to support your growth. You will have challenges that you’re not exactly sure how to resolve. You will meet people with opinions different from your own but people with whom you can form connections for life.

I want to leave you with a few pieces of advice based on these books: First, look for those quiet moments of happiness, look for the joy in the ordinary. Find moments to just ***be***.

Second, never forget that you can influence the future, and it doesn't have to be what either of these authors created. It can be a future of your making. You have the power to create a future in which you wish to live.

Third, remember that your tomorrow begins today, here at Trinity, and let it be shaped by your purpose and by the faculty and staff and friends around you. Welcome, my very special Class of 2028!