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Matriculation Convocation 2016: Together, Against the Current

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Matriculation Convocation 2016: Together, Against the Current

Monica, thank you for that generous introduction.

Thank you Kathrine Handford for providing an organ prelude that sets the stage for this and every convocation. Thank you Phillip Swan, Steven Sieck and members of the freshman class for beginning our year with such beauty. I look forward to many future performances. And thank you, Howard Niblock, for your thoughtful selection of today's opening and closing words.

I also want to thank Tim Spurgin and the Convocation and Commencement Committee of last year for assembling a provocative and engaging series for this academic year. I hope you will join me in attending all convocations. I look forward to seeing the committee's selections for future convocations under the leadership of Monica Rico.

Welcome to the academic year. I want to specifically welcome the freshman class, our transfer and Waseda students, the eight new tenure line faculty, their spouses and partners, and the many other new faculty and staff who join us this fall. I know you will extend a warm welcome to all new members of our community as you welcomed me close to four years ago.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the passing of Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, the Edward F. Mielke Professor of Ethics in Medicine, Science and Society and Associate Professor of Philosophy. Patrick will be greatly missed. His teaching and writing has influenced many, including me.

Events of the past year have made me keenly aware of how important our work is here on this campus and on campuses across the country. Conflict around human difference, and the degradation of essential communities, abounded at home and throughout the world. The events of the past few months have reinforced my sense of this painful trend. We, and our leaders, seem to lack the skills we need to stem this tide. Establishing consensus and response even to basic threats, like the impact of the Zika virus, seem beyond our collective capability. Education, like Lawrence offers, can provide the skills to help resolve these conflicts and solve these problems. But I wonder: will continuing to perfect the education we offer be enough to move us forward or do we need to also rethink the nature of our community and our interactions within it?

National and world events, even events in Appleton and on other college campuses, have focused my attention, and probably yours as well, on what is basic to our common enterprise. Can we nurture a campus environment that embraces learning and enables us to grow as human beings? Can we enhance our curriculum to address the challenges that face society? Can we find ways to better connect the education we provide to the opportunities available to our graduates, and the life challenges they will face? Can we more deeply learn from the diversity on our campuses?

What makes this set of enduring questions even harder to answer is the societal trend to become more inflexible in its approach, less willing to rely on those knowledgeable for solutions,

and less interested in listening to build consensus. Can we, here, at Lawrence, together, work against the social tendencies that have led to this crisis in our communities today?

Many scholars and teachers offer advice that reinforces impulses within our learning community. In preparation for this talk I decided to look for sources I rarely consult, to open my own thoughts to different perspectives. I have been especially grateful for insights offered by religious leaders regarding cooperation and learning.

For example: when asked about how to move toward a culture of cooperation, the future Pope Francis answered, “such a culture has, at its foundation, the idea that the other person has much to give me, that I have to be open to that person and listen, without judgment, without thinking that because his ideas are different from mine . . . he can’t offer me anything. That is not so. Everyone has something to offer, and everyone can receive something. Prejudging someone is like putting up a wall, which then prevents us from coming together.”

This idea, to find value in views that are different from our own is, I believe, one of the core tenets of a liberal arts education. In Appleton this last year, this value was not always embraced, but if learning is a process of transformational change, it starts with new ideas and that requires listening to what others say and think.

This theme of listening to a wide range of voices and ideas is echoed in many traditions including my own. Maimonides, probably one of the most important Jewish philosophers, said, “every human being can contribute to human wisdom and knowledge.” What makes this statement remarkable is that Maimonides was born in the twelfth century, during a time when Christians and Muslims intermittently persecuted the Jews. His open minded approach to learning not only provided Maimonides the framework for some of the most important philosophical texts for the Jewish religion, but also helped him lead advances in astronomy and medicine.

From an entirely different tradition, one hears similar words of wisdom. In *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Heart Sutra*, Thich Nhat Hanh (tĭk-năt-hăn), states, “In Buddhism knowledge is regarded as an obstacle for understanding. If we take something to be the truth, we may cling to it so much that even if the truth comes and knocks at our door, we won’t want to let it in.”

If we listen to these philosophers, we begin to understand how important it is to sustain a learning community that is open to many different points of view. But this would require us to look for the positive in each contribution, rather than reverting to social media or other forums to criticize every expression of views that differ from our own. And it would also increase the need to teach and practice the ability to let understanding grow, even if it doesn’t conform to what we have always believed.

These are not simple challenges. Diana Eck recognized the difficulty in, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. She considers how the 9/11 attacks brought a new consciousness of the transformation

of American society. She says: “Without question, some Americans are afraid of the changing face of our country. After all, the first response to difference is often suspicion and fear.”

This sense of our unease with change and difference was addressed earlier by John Dewey, one of the foremost philosophers on education of the last century. Dewey believed that the antecedent condition for learning is “to be uncertain, unsettled, disturbed.” We have learned that this state seems difficult to sustain when the social environment feels unsafe. But these voices lead us to wonder whether we might create a sense of communal safety even as we foster an environment that may feel disturbing and unsettling. Do we really need to reject everything new and unfamiliar when challenged with fear and uncertainty?

President Obama spoke to this problem in his commencement speech at Howard University last spring. Thinking about the way change happens in the world, he said: “don’t try to shut folks out . . . no matter how much you might disagree with them. There’s been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view, or disrupt a politician’s rally. Don’t do that -- no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths. . . . That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t challenge them. Have the confidence to challenge them, the confidence in the rightness of your position. . . . But listen. Engage. If the other side has a point, learn from them.”

Essayists have published hundreds of recent articles on the state of learning at colleges and the impulse to create more inclusive campus communities. These writers chronicle student protests, administrative and faculty responses, debates about names and the power they have to create equitable learning environments, and efforts to redefine intellectual freedom within this new context. Interest in these issues is so widespread, one wonders whether American society is using the college campus as a microcosm in which to search for solutions to the challenges that face us today.

One such article, “*The Big Uneasy, What’s roiling the liberal-arts campus?*” by Nathan Heller for *The New Yorker*, examined the current campus experience primarily through the lens of events at Oberlin but also with a nod toward Yale, Claremont McKenna, Ithaca, and Harvard. Heller’s description of events on those campuses reminded me of the pain we all felt and the conflicts we have had with each other here over the past year together. Heller’s article included student and faculty voices that argued against the belief that learning and personal growth are central to the work of the educational community we call college. It seems some of us no longer share the central mission of college of “changing lives,” but expect college to be a four-year holding tank where students, faculty, and staff can act out their identities in opposition to each other. Have we, as liberal arts communities, lost our central commitment to learning, growth, and human development?

I was heartened to read in *The Lawrentian’s* Welcome Week Edition that many columnists still believe that changing lives is at the core of a college education. They speak about the importance of personal growth and change; they give us hope that we, as a community, will take the path of openness, cooperation, readiness to listen, and to change.

Listening last spring to our visiting Scarff Professor, George Rupp's lecture on campus, I wondered whether recommitment to the goals of learning, intellectual openness, growth, and human development might be only part of the task that faces us at Lawrence, and colleges across the country, as we prepare our students to be global citizens in this difficult world. When I attended this lecture I was not entirely open to new understanding, as the Buddhist teachings suggest. I joined the session to fulfill my role as host, hoping to spend more time with my long-time colleagues George and his wife Nancy. But what I heard was a deep and sophisticated critique of western individualism, which Rupp believes, is preventing the United States and other western countries from providing leadership to find solutions to global problems.

In *Beyond Individualism: The Challenge of Inclusive Communities*, Rupp speaks from his experience as dean of the divinity school at Harvard, president of Rice and Columbia, and most recently president of the International Rescue Committee, the largest refugee resettlement organization in the world. He writes: "to put the overall argument bluntly, the modern Western individualism so many of us (including me) know and love has led us into a global dead end – or, to mix metaphors for a slightly more positive image, to a wide channel so shallow that it is tough to navigate without running aground." Rupp believes this primarily secular focus on the self prevents us from understanding the deep roots of community that form the framework for many societies around the world.

As you would expect given his experiences and commitments, Rupp is passionate about the role education can play in changing this dynamic. He hopes that, "one outcome of our education will be that we develop what psychologists call 'tolerance of ambiguity'." Not certainty, not knowledge, but ambiguity. He believes that "We need to compare what is generally accepted here and now, with what has been different elsewhere or might one day be different here. Such constructive criticism is the opposite of cynicism. It is engaged. It searches. It cares." He wants us to foster learning environments that help us "To engage in a lover's quarrel with our world, a quarrel that expresses restlessness with what is, on behalf of what might be." Can we sustain this "lover's quarrel" and also provide a welcoming and supportive community for all of our members?

Like hundreds of other college presidents this fall, I wish I could offer you more answers, fewer questions today. But I believe we are in the heart of an important process that requires all of us to move forward. I believe you join me in the desire to feel confident again in the strength of our community to support all its members. I believe we all desire to strengthen the rigorous and challenging education that is a hallmark of the Lawrence experience. We need to trust that we are together in this process. I know we have what it takes to recreate our learning community to meet our aspirations. This challenge need not weaken us. Rather, we are strengthened by the shared search for new and better answers.

Finally, I thought back to my own liberal arts education and the impact it has had on my life and choices I have made. As a history major at Vassar, I was required to take at least one class beyond the staple of European and American history offerings. My first foray in this direction, which at best I came to ambivalently, was a course on modern African history. As we at Lawrence would hope, the course turned into one of the most important of my undergraduate career. Through this survey course I fell in love with the nation-building period, especially with

Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere, the first leaders of Senegal and Tanzania. Senghor's combination of literary and political mind, and Nyerere's steadfast vision for his nation and people inspired hope and awe in me.

In his 1971 commencement address at University of Vermont upon receiving an honorary degree, Senghor spoke movingly of the promise of America: “. . . you have all the necessary ingredients, it is you who can give it a truly universal dimension. Your population is composed of every major European and Asian ethnic group, but even more important, those from Africa as well . . . Thus it is the Americans, more particularly the United States, which already anticipates the world of the twenty-first century and holds in its strong but faltering hands not only its own destiny, but the destiny of the entire world.” Senghor's life, in two worlds, African nation building and French culture, led him to an understanding of the promise we still need to realize.

If we teach and learn anything together it is the power of overcoming doubt and uncertainty. This skill is essential at a time when much is unclear about the future. We need to have confidence that considering a wide range of ideas, of debate, and change will make us stronger. I hope this vision can guide our work this year. I am honored and glad to join you in a continuing endeavor to reach Senghor's lofty goal for us and to sustain this learning community we call Lawrence. I look forward to seeing how we, together, engage this year with the challenge he described.

Thank you.