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## New Student Convocation

Jonathan Green  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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**New Student Convocation  
Jonathan Green - remarks  
21 August 2012**

On behalf of the faculty, it is my pleasure to welcome the class 2016. We are excited to teach and guide you and we look forward to learning from you. You have come to Illinois Wesleyan because it is a great university, and it is a great university because you are here.

Each August we called together the incoming class to symbolically launch the academic year and your collegiate careers. It is an opportunity to reflect upon why we are here and what we aspire to do together. As an academic community, we are all committed to a perpetuating cycle of learning, study, reflection, and teaching. Each flows into the next, all are intertwined, and dependent upon clarity of communication.

This year our academic theme is "Human Rights & Social Justice." There are many wise people who would argue that social justice is a fundamental human right. It is not tied to a time or place. Right is right, but life and the world are messy endeavors that constantly challenge our understanding of right and wrong, and often make the high road a lonely thoroughfare.

You have now read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and I know you look forward to hearing author Rebecca Skloot's speak at the President's Convocation next month. It is a story of remarkable failure and triumph that presents numerous ethical quandaries with no true villains except cancer and ignorance.

There was no malicious intent among the physicians who collected a cell culture from Henrietta Lacks as a routine procedure connected to her cancer surgery. The biological supply companies that created a business growing and selling HeLa cells did so from replicated cells generations removed from the originals, and in most if not all cases were ignorant of their true history. The fact that these cells had properties that have allowed scientists to conquer numerous maladies and better understand many others is a rightful point of pride for her family. The fact that many of Henrietta's descendants cannot afford the medical care they deserve, in some cases developed through research using her cells, is tragic, and the anger some of her family members have that people they will never know profited from those cells is well earned.

Much of the pain experienced by the Lacks family was a failure of communication, of education. Had the physicians and researchers at Johns Hopkins been as dutiful in communicating with Henrietta and her family about their practice of biopsying tissue and of the unique outcomes of their work with Henrietta's cells as they were about protecting her identity, decades of their suffering could have been averted, and a fair relationship between the family and the biological suppliers might even have occurred.

It is hard to know which barriers prevented this communication from occurring. Was it race, was it class, was it a caste system mentality within the medical community of the time?

As Henrietta's daughter Deborah said when the author explained that Viktor Musick had taken blood samples from Deborah not to test for cancer, but to compare their DNA, she stated:

"Now you tell me! When I started asking him about them tests and my mother's cells, he just handed me a copy of his book, patted me on the back, and send me home...Would have been nice if he'd told me what the damn thing said too."<sup>1</sup>

By the time Henrietta was being treated in the black wards of the Johns Hopkins hospital, Vivien Thomas, an African-American, had already been working in its medical laboratories for a decade. The depression had forced Thomas, the grandson of slaves, to drop out of college after his first year. He took a menial job in the laboratories of Vanderbilt University where his dexterity and intelligence soon attracted the attention of Dr. Alfred Blalock. The two men formed a remarkable partnership developing treatments that saved the lives of thousands of critically wounded soldiers and disaster victims.

When Blalock was offered the Chief of Surgery position at Johns Hopkins, he agreed only if Thomas could accompany him. It was here that the pair developed the procedures that cured blue-baby syndrome and other diseases of the heart, primarily using surgical techniques and tools developed by Thomas.

Three decades before Johns Hopkins would admit its first African-American surgical resident, Thomas was teaching operating techniques to white staff surgeons at the university's hospital.<sup>2</sup> As the renowned surgeon Denton Cooley told *Washingtonian* magazine, "Even if you'd never seen surgery before, you could do it because Vivien made it look so simple. There wasn't a false move, not a wasted motion, when he operated."<sup>3</sup>

For many years, Thomas was sorely underpaid. He would sometimes supplement his income by bartending parties, and Blalock regularly hired him in this capacity. Thomas preferred these parties, serving drinks at night to the same young doctors he was teaching by day, because it allowed him to keep up with the social news of the medical school.

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<sup>1</sup> Skloot, Rebecca: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, 239. New York: Crown, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.answers.com/topic/vivien-thomas>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.washingtonian.com/articles/people/5649.html>

Human rights do not change; segregation was just wrong. How many times when presented with issues of prejudice; whether they be race, religion, ethnicity, politics, or scientific belief; do we say that the wrongly biased person is ignorant, or it's not their fault, they don't know any better?

Human rights do not change, but our understanding of them may. In many ways, that is the foundation of our academic enterprise. A liberal education (literally the education of free people) prepares us to think critically and gives us the tools to make informed ethical appraisals, but it is perilous to assume that an education produces an accurate moral compass. The stories of Henrietta Lacks and Vivien Thomas took place in the halls of a great university populated by highly educated people, and yet the injustices of segregation would persist for decades.

For the academy to effect meaningful change in our community, it must foster understanding, not merely convey information. It must inspire reflection, not merely interpret data. We have a responsibility to communicate zealously and clearly, not just proclaim. As Deborah Lacks's husband said, "You need to talk to us like we're regular folk. You need to tell us what's goin' on."<sup>4</sup>

In a constantly more interdependent world, we must exercise our global citizenship in order to foster meaningful understanding and respect among all peoples by clearly communicating our best thinking. As Martin Luther King wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."<sup>5</sup>

As in so many other times in history, we stand at a critical crossroads. Ours is a planet in peril, riddled with religious and ethnic wars, corporate greed, intercultural paranoia, and for the first time in our history what appears to be an endless stream of information, but it is a treacherous and polluted stream that can only be navigated and filtered by education. We must learn to filter good from bad, and we must learn to discern the voices of the noble from those aimed at luring us from our path.

Over 250 years ago, in his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, John Adams wrote:

"The poor people, it is true, have been much less successful than the great. They have seldom found either leisure or opportunity to form a union and exert their strength; ignorant as they were of arts and letters, they have seldom been able to frame and support a regular opposition.

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<sup>4</sup> Skloot, 304.

<sup>5</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther: "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

This, however, has been known by the great to be the temper of mankind; and they have accordingly labored, in all ages, to wrest from the populace as they are contemptuously called, the knowledge of their rights and wrongs, and the power to assert the former or redress the latter. I say RIGHTS, for such they have, undoubtedly, antecedent to all earthly government—*rights* that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws—*rights* derived from the great Legislator of the universe...

We have a great privilege and a greater responsibility to discern these rights for ourselves and convey them with generosity and humility to all of mankind. As Adams further wrote:

“Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator, who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know...Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write. Let every order and degree among the people rouse their attention and animate their resolution...”<sup>6</sup>

Today, as we begin a new year, and you embark upon your collegiate journeys, let us too commit, to use the privilege of citizenship in this great university to realize our better citizenship in the world. Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write; and, as Gandhi implored, let us be the change we wish to see in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Adams, John: *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765)

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi: “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.”