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Introduction of Rebecca Skloot

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Introduction of Rebecca Skloot
Jonathan D. Green
President's Convocation
12 September 2012

It is my privilege to introduce today's convocation speaker.

As a community we have read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and we have used it as a touchstone across campus for this year's theme of human rights and social justice. In orientation discussion groups, classroom activities, and co-curricular events we have wrestled with myriad questions this text has provoked. Medical ethics, racial equality, intellectual property, healthcare, and educational prejudice have all been features in recent campus discussions.

Many of the tragedies of the Lacks story were failures in communication, and one of the most important elements for us is that many of these failures occurred in institutions of higher learning. How committed are we to assuring that all the members of our community are brought into important conversations as partners? How persistent are we to be sure that underrepresented voices are heard?

One of the greatest lessons of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is the story of the book itself and the role model Rebecca Skloot has provided us all. How many of us would have persisted for ten years to pull together the threads of this remarkable story when they were being unraveled at every turn? Would we have given up on Henrietta's children because it was just too hard?

Many of the critical moments in our history have been those times when against great odds, be they adversity or obstruction, heroes have accepted the call to tell a story. They have spoken for those who could not self-advocate or whose voices were drowned out by the malefactions of intolerance. Martin Luther King, Rachel Carson, Frederick Douglass, Upton Sinclair, Jane Addams, and many others have used the power of words to help us understand the plight of our fellow citizens of the world. Using the tools of their own education and a commitment to a greater good — a tenacity for that which is right and just, they have at flash points in our history helped us to become a better people through the power of their words.

At our opening convocation, I drew the new students' attention to a passage from John Adams's *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* in which he 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...”¹

As a model to this community of scholars and students of how we can use our gifts to live out our mission, this is what Rebecca Skloot has done. She has dared to read, think, speak, and write to rouse our attention.

Please join me in welcoming our convocation speaker, Rebecca Skloot.

¹ Adams, John: *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765)