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Walls and Bridges
Opening Convocation Remarks 19 August 2014
Jonathan D. Green

On behalf of the faculty, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Illinois Wesleyan University.

This year we are celebrating the theme of “Walls and Bridges.” This is a remarkable university and I am thrilled to watch you all embark on a tremendous journey. Each of you will encounter obstacles, metaphorical walls, but by building connections you will learn to transcend – to bridge – those impediments. That is why we are here. You will learn much from the faculty and staff as well as your fellow classmates, and we will learn from you. This year’s incoming class is the most diverse in the university’s history bringing experiences from many traditions and places. We have much to learn from each other and each of you provides a connection for the rest of us to your experiences, perspectives, faith traditions, and cultures.

This year we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the opening up of much of Eastern Europe to democracy. Walls may be obstacles, but they also provide security. The opening of the Berlin Wall also made the concept of unemployment a reality for a generation who had never known it in a state-run economy. Access brings risk and openness can be frightening. Much of what you will do here is to develop the tools to assess the benefits and risks of building connections.

Some of the activities we have planned for the fall include a Human Rights Workshop on September 7th. Soon after, we will host Valerie Kaur who will speak about the “Groundswell Movement.” Kristina Kahrl will present, “Becoming a Woman in a Man’s World,” and Brando Skyhorse, author of the summer reading, *Madonnas of Echo Park*, will be our featured speaker at the President’s Convocation two weeks from tomorrow.

I encourage you to think about the theme of “walls and bridges” as a lens for that novel. How many of the characters’ lives are shaped by societal and economic obstacles they encounter as they wrestle with the

seeming contradictions of ethnic identity and the American Dream¹. I think one of the most important lessons for us is to reflect on the many “bridges” Angela misses in the final chapter as she encounters her grandmother, grandfather, and half sister and they both pass their shared father in the course of a few hours and don’t know it. How often do we fail to recognize profound connections we encounter in our own lives? How can your experiences at Illinois Wesleyan help you learn to see connections that are invisible now?

I’m sure a number of you have been wondering about the parade of proud peacocks we appear to be in our academic regalia. We are proud to wear them because these robes are a symbol of our academic training and because they serve as a bridge to our teachers and their teachers. We are now a bridge for you to the generations who came before us, and you are a bridge for us to the future.

I suspect many of you are wondering what the various characteristics of these robes mean.

Our academic regalia are representations of the robes worn in the earliest European universities where the masters, or teachers, gradually converted their monks’ robes for use in cold ill-equipped institutions. They serve as symbolic bridges to our academic past. The dangling box sleeves of today’s master’s robe represents where early scholars shifted their hands for warmth. The doctoral hoods are an adaptation of shoulder bags in which they carried food and scant supplies.

Most of our faculty members wear robes from American universities based upon two styles, the designers of which were Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Some institutions have elected to create their own distinct regalia, for example, President Wilson’s robe is unique to the University of Michigan, and when you graduate, you will wear green baccalaureate robes specific to Illinois Wesleyan.

¹ Paraphrased from the Simon and Schuster website:
<http://books.simonandschuster.com/Madonnas-of-Echo-Park/Brando-Skyhorse/9781439170847>

For those of us with more generic robes those with dangling sleeves indicate the master's degree and those with three velvet stripes on the sleeve are doctoral robes. The color of any velvet that is not black is an indication of the degree (dark blue indicates the Ph.D., or Doctor of Philosophy) or the scholar's discipline: scarlet for theology, pink for music, canary for library science, etc. The satin on the hood is in the colors of the school from which the degree was granted.

We wear these robes on occasions of academic significance because they visibly connect us to our alma maters and our own teachers.

As a composer, my principal teacher was Robert Stern, one of his teachers was Lukas Foss, who studied with Paul Hindemith, who studied with Seckles, who studied with Humperdink (the composer of this fall's campus opera). He studied with Hiller, who studied with Hummel, who studied with Mozart, who learned the symphonic form from J.C. Bach, whose father and teacher was J.S. Bach. Every member of this faculty has an equally rich lineage of teachers and mentors, and by joining this community they become your heritage too. As Isaac Newton said, each of us is "standing on the shoulders of giants."

Our faculty will help you to bridge a world of ideas and to be a bridge for your ideas to the world.

You are fortunate because the assembly of scholars with whom you will work are truly expert guides, and today it is my pleasure to introduce one of our very best, Professor Kathleen Montgomery, recipient of the 2014 Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.

Dr. Montgomery...