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Introduction of Kevin Roose

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President's Convocation
8 September 2015
Introduction of Kevin Roose

At the new student convocation a few weeks ago, I spoke about the role of the founding fathers as public intellectuals who embodied the best spirit of a liberal arts education as lived in service to others. I shared a little about the roles these early political leaders played in the creation of the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a number of leading colleges and universities.

On the 29th of April 1962, President Kennedy hosted a dinner honoring all of the Nobel Prize winners in the Western Hemisphere. In his remarks to the distinguished gathering he said, "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."¹

Of all the accomplishments of our most prodigiously polymathic president, Mr. Jefferson was most proud of having founded the University of Virginia. He even situated the campus to be visible from Monticello.

One would think that a mountaintop home in agrarian Virginia would provide ample quiet time for reflection, but apparently even in the early 19th century, former presidents were plagued with uninvited visitors. Mr. Jefferson's solution was to retreat to Poplar Forest, his own private Arcadia, which he began building in 1806 on land in Forest, Virginia that he had inherited from his father-in-law 33 years earlier. This project occupied the last 20 years of Jefferson's life, and he referred to it as his most valued possession.

The trip from Monticello to Forest was a 79-mile carriage ride along the old stagecoach road that skirted along the edge of Candler's Mountain where Liberty University is now located. I have often wondered what the foremost author of our national liberty would think about Mr. Falwell's university. Mr. Jefferson after all proposed in his draft of the Constitution of Virginia that, "All persons shall have full and free liberty of religious opinion; nor shall any be compelled to frequent or maintain any religious institution."

Every reader brings a personal perspective, and my encounter with *An Unlikely Disciple* was shaped by my own direct experience with Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist Church. I was living in central Virginia when Kevin Roose was enrolled at Liberty. I met Jerry Falwell on a number of occasions and I engaged in both administrative and musical projects with members of the Liberty faculty and senior leadership team.

¹ John F. Kennedy: Remarks at a Dinner Honoring Nobel Prize Winners of the Western Hemisphere. 29 April 1962.

On my first day teaching in Virginia, I heard Mr. Falwell proclaim on NPR that there could not be life on Mars because if there were, God would have revealed it in scripture. He called on the ACLU to defend his university and simultaneously vowed to create a law school to challenge them in court. He repeatedly condemned what he referred to as the homosexual lifestyle, and he once famously denounced my students from the pulpit of Thomas Road. He also turned a mega church into a financially prosperous university.

Kevin Roose has done a remarkable thing. In spite of my personal experiences, and maybe because of them, I learned a great deal from *An Unlikely Disciple*. I learned that a 19-year-old was capable of being much more objective in his encounters with difference than I had been, and that he was more compassionately tolerant of a contrary world view. I also learned that although I disagree with much of the curriculum and mission of Liberty University, their students and faculty have a much clearer shared understanding of that mission and the shaping forces of their curriculum than we do.

I have to admit a few moments of jealousy. I will never take a step back from the pluralism we have achieved as a learning community, but I would be thrilled to be part of a campus with a few more universally held convictions and a clearer sense of a shared purpose.

Each fall when Patti Henderson and I lead our summer reading discussion session, we start by asking the students why they believed the committee had chosen that summer's book. Our group had great responses. One said that it prepared her to think more openly about entering a community of students who were likely to be different from herself. Another acknowledged the importance of recognizing that there may be inherent goodness in someone whose beliefs are at odds with his own. One student said that she felt an even stronger conviction to speak up when she encountered intolerant voices and actions in her community and her new campus. We all struggled with the ethical dilemmas associated with being undercover in any community, and we were moved by the forgiveness shone to the author by his former classmates when he revealed his true story. Some members of our group admitted frustration in feeling that those students were perhaps more tolerant than they would have been.

Illinois Wesleyan strives to prepare cosmopolitan alumni, graduates who are prepared for meaningful global citizenship. We must remember that sometimes the most divided people may be neighbors. As a society, we tend to address differing opinions through confrontation and dissension, or when we are feeling particularly Midwestern, through disconsolate silence. At the first faculty meeting this year, a group of students had the courage to challenge our faculty to promote increased dialog on and off campus about issues of diversity and social justice. Kevin Roose has exemplified for us the importance of developing an understanding of others, particularly when their actions appear to be at odds with our values, and he has

shown all of us that we can learn much more about those with whom we disagree by listening compassionately and with a generous spirit.

Please join me in welcoming Kevin Roose.