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Pulitzer-Prize Winning Poet Calls for Empathy in Founders' Day Address

February 23, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Imagination and empathy are, perhaps, our last hope, said Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Jorie Graham during her address at Illinois Wesleyan University Founders' Day Convocation on Wednesday.

The Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, Graham lamented that in this lifetime, we are forced to imagine connections to places and even people. “To see what it is we are, to see what it is we have, and to see what it is we stand to lose, we have to use our imagination,” she said.

Graham challenged the audience, as members of a pivotal generation, to ask themselves if they will settle for imagination instead of reality – for viral posts of cute animals while the real creatures go extinct, or for a view of the ocean, knowing just below the picturesque surface the reefs are choked and toxic. “Is the world still the world if it is silent?” she asked.

For current generations, said Graham, imagination is no longer isolated to pure invention. It is now a vital connection in a world in which we are isolated from ourselves and from one another. “Imagination is the only instrument we have in which we are brought to actual fact – to see in the face of another – the there that is there,” she said, noting we must rely on our imaginations to break down the barriers of an instant society.

Imagination at its core is empathy, said Graham. “Empathy is the foundation of any learning,” she said, “and is a course most needed in a time of spiritual, ethical, political and ecological crisis.” She explained researchers have found that the part of the brain that is triggered with empathy, is the same part that registers sensation in the fingertips. “This means the brain feels the otherness of the other, the creation, the species. It is reaching out with its hand and touching the other,” she said. “Another name for this is form of imaginative empathy is compassion.”

Graham encouraged the audience to truly interact within their lives and “to bring ourselves body and mind to what we study, to undergo life and its journeys, rather than to bypass it,” she said. “It is a constant choice and task everyday to undergo one’s life rather than go around it.”

An internationally acclaimed poet, Graham is known for encouraging people of differing views and ideas to engage in dialogue. She entreated those seated in Presser Hall to emulate the founders of the University, who looked beyond themselves, and instead carved out hope for future generations. “The founders of Illinois Wesleyan imagined sharing illumination,” she said, noting they looked “through time to bring blessedness upon those they could only summon in imagination.”

Founders' Day honors the 30 founders who signed the charter for the University in 1850. In commemorating the founding of the University 161 years ago, University President Richard F. Wilson also invoked the memory of those founding members, as well as the challenges they faced. “As I read our history, the roadblocks were especially formidable for those who sought to establish an institution of higher learning,” he said, adding that subsequent generations have continued to face challenges in sustaining the vitality of Illinois Wesleyan. “We are no different,” he said, referring to the economic crisis facing the entire nation. “Yet I believe we have positioned ourselves to not only survive, but to thrive.”



Jorie Graham
Photo by Madison Roberts

Like the founders, Wilson said he dreams of seeing the legacy of Illinois Wesleyan continue. "I hope you will do the same. Because it is through those dreams that we bring life to our 'incalculable responsibility,'" he said, quoting the text inscribed on the Founders' Gate.

Other events at IWU celebrating Founders' Day included a viewing of the documents from the University's founding – including Illinois Wesleyan's "birth certificate" at The Ames Library – and birthday cake at locations across campus.

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