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Nugent Addresses Quest for Truth at President's Convocation

Sept. 4, 2019

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Interim President Georgia Nugent addressed the complexities of “Fact or Fiction” — [the 2019-20 intellectual theme](#) — during Illinois Wesleyan University's President's Convocation on Wednesday, Sept. 4 in Presser Hall's Westbrook Auditorium.

Nugent quoted late Harvard President James Bryant Conant who, more than a hundred years ago, said, “He who enters a university walks on hallowed ground.”

“In what sense is a university ‘hallowed ground?’” Nugent asked.

“I think it's because of the purpose that brings us together,” Nugent continued. “We might describe that purpose as the pursuit of knowledge or the quest for truth. Even if we think of our purpose here as growing personally and becoming more complete and fulfilled selves, that, too, is a kind of striving after knowledge and truth.”

Nugent shared four stories to illustrate the difficulty and danger of pursuing truth. These tales included: Sir Isaac Newton's discovery of gravity (finding truth isn't usually as easy as the apocryphal apple), Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (human life becomes accursed because of the search for knowledge of good and evil), The Apple of Discord (the search for answers results in disputes, discord and The Trojan War), and the execution of Socrates (due to Athenians becoming annoyed by his pesky truth-seeking).

“If I claim that the purpose of a university — of our University — is to seek truth, why would I tell these tales where that's a dangerous thing to do?” Nugent said. “The point is, truth doesn't land on your head like Isaac Newton's apple. Unfortunately, most of the time it doesn't hit you over the head. It's not self-evident. It's contested. It's elusive.”

Nugent continued, “In some ways, the search itself is what's valuable, even if certainty may never be attainable.”

Equipping students with a set of tools for gathering information, weighing evidence, making judgments and life choices is part of Illinois Wesleyan's educational mission, Nugent told the audience.

“To move forward together effectively, to face challenges that confront us, to chart an exciting course for the future, I believe it will be critical to return to (late U.S. senator Daniel Patrick) Moynihan's principle: ‘You are entitled to your own opinions, but you are not entitled to your own facts.’”

Nugent concluded by inviting the University to consider a message of renewal delivered by her friend and former Yale provost Richard Brodhead to the Yale incoming class of 1995.

“You've come to one of the great fresh starts in your life, one of the few chances your life will offer to step away from the person you've been taken for and decide anew what you would like to become. Far be it from me to say what exemplary life you should propose for yourself, but I implore you not to miss this opportunity to chart one.”



Watch the Convocation



Interim President Georgia Nugent delivers the President's Convocation address.

Photo by Marc Featherly

By John Twork