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Commencement Address, "Just in Time"

Linda Gregerson

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Commencement 2011

Address

Linda Gregerson

Caroline Walker Bynum Distinguished University Professor of English Language and Literature,
University of Michigan

"JUST IN TIME"

When I graduated from college, from an excellent, enlightened, human-scale liberal arts institution very like your own – roughly the same size, very much the same ideals, and the same proud tradition of a co-educational, integrated student body – the population of the earth was just over three and a half billion souls. Forty years later, that population is just under seven billion. The US Census Bureau projects that it will reach nine billion by the year 2044. I used to have recurrent nightmares about what we called the “population bomb” – I would imagine the whole world covered with humans standing side by side on allotments the size of a phone booth: standing room only, no space for sitting or for lying down, and the only way I could quell the panic was to say to myself, we’re not there yet. I’m out of here before we come to that. This was well before we had begun to understand the full dimensions of depleted fisheries, before we knew a thing about the hole in the ozone or the melting arctic poles, the myriad ways in which our unprecedented success as a species has been a calamity for the earth that sustains us. It was also before I had children of my own, and realized that my death – that escape hatch I was counting on – was a pretty trivial measure of meaning. Things were in worse, not better, shape than I’d imagined. And it mattered more than my little world of self could apprehend.

My generation – my exceptionally privileged post-war generation – has not failed you altogether. We’ve worked hard for civil rights, rights for racial and sexual minorities, rights for women, rights for the disabled. We’ve struggled – often too bluntly but mostly with genuine good will – to imagine and implement a transition from global dominance to global cooperation. We finally got the message about the fragile ecosphere. But we need your help. You have worked, and worked very hard to reach this moment of transition. We often talk about college as though it were preparation, and we hope, we parents and we educators, that it will serve you in that capacity, that the skills and information and, above all, the habits of inquiry you have honed and assessed will serve you well when you move beyond these laboratories and classrooms and studios. But we know as well that what you have accomplished here has been much more than preparation: it has also been an intense experiment in collective living and community formation. For many of you, most of you perhaps, these years have been the first you have lived primarily outside the context of family. You have shared dorm rooms and cafeterias and seminar tables with people both like and unlike yourselves, people of different ethnic and linguistic and cultural backgrounds, people who may not share your taste in music or who loathe the pizza toppings you find essential to life and happiness, people who do not vote as you do in elections, people whose assumptions have seemed strange to you, and who have found your own assumptions strange, have found them, stunningly, to *be* assumptions, rather than simply the way things are. And, while these encounters are unsettling and sometimes profoundly uncomfortable, you have had the wisdom to recognize them as opportunities, as what you came to college for. You’ve learned that people of intelligence and good will can see things through different lenses. You’ve learned to see your own allegiances as if from the outside. You’ve

learned to make conscious – to articulate and defend – the opinions you care most about. You've learned the exhilarating, liberatory higher intelligence of sometimes changing your mind.

And now we need you. We need your skills and insights. We need your energy and even your impatience. You are joining us – graduating to the workforce, the arenas of professional training, the looking-for-work-force, the making-new-families-and-friendships force, the larger public sphere of us, and not a minute too soon. That's the point of my title. We need your pharmaceutical discoveries, your engineering advances, your poems, your concertos, your installation art, your theoretical contributions to physics and epidemiology, your advocacy on behalf of the poor, the ill, and the excluded, your skill with foreign languages, your delight in new technologies, your outrage at injustice, your triage for a battered planet. But more urgently and more foundationally, we need your contribution to the restoration of civil discourse. Civil conversation – the thoughtful, exploratory engagement of heart and mind, collective attention to issues of collective urgency – has taken a terrible hit in recent years in these United States, and we simply cannot afford it. The problems we face are larger than we are. And when language is degraded – when public speech declines to the level of cynical polemic and rote phraseology – the civic sphere is similarly degraded. We cannot afford it. The Roman historian Tacitus observed two thousand years ago that the degradation of public speaking coincides with the degradation of moral and political freedom. The Emperor Tiberius, Tacitus tells us, favored communications that left his subjects anxious and uncertain. The Roman senate became a nest of flatterers and hypocrites. Citizens lost the power of speaking their thoughts in public. More disastrously, they lost the power of discovering and refining their thoughts by means of public speech. The corruption of words is the corruption of political freedom. And tyranny takes many shapes. It can thrive under cover of ostensible democracy, when full and honest democratic debate goes missing.

“Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing.” These are the words of John Milton, writing at the height of a terrible civil war in 1644. Englishmen had, for the first time in their history, arrested and tried and executed a tyrant in the name of liberty, and now they were killing one another; they were frightened of foreign invasion, and frightened of splintering factionalism at home. Parliament, the vessel of hope for freedom of conscience and governance by the many rather than the one, had passed a Licensing Act, for the purpose of suppressing divergent opinion before it could be shared with other people by means of print. And Milton saw this as a terrible, dangerous retrenchment. “As good almost kill a man,” he wrote, “as kill a good book; who kills a man kills a reasonable creature... but he who kills a good book kills reason itself.” There was no internet in Milton's time, bizarre as that is to imagine. There were no talk shows, no chat rooms, no cell phones, no broadcast or online coverage of breaking news. The printed page was a primary unit of public debate. So where Milton says “book,” we must take him to mean the whole resilient spectrum of speaking-in-public, of speaking where others can hear. “Where there is much desire to learn,” and this is Milton again, “there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making... What some lament of, we rather should rejoice at, should rather praise this... forwardness among men, to reassume the ill deputed care of [understanding] into their own hands again.” Ill-deputed: we cannot deputize our responsibility for understanding. For received opinion, Milton had nothing but contempt. Even virtue, he insisted, if it is untried and unexamined, performed by rote, adhered to because we have been told it is good rather than because we have considered and chosen it, such virtue is no better than a blank, its whiteness is

“an excremental whiteness.” If I could generate a phrase like that myself, I’d die happy. “An excremental whiteness.” But the point is deadly serious: we cannot deputize our responsibility for understanding. Understanding is not out-source-able.

John Wesley knew this. John Wesley, for whom this wonderful institution is named, took preaching beyond the exclusionary circle of an ordained and licensed priesthood. He brought public speaking about the matters he deemed most urgent – for him, the matters of faith and social justice – to the places where the people were. Out of the pulpits and into the market towns and mill towns, to the public squares and open fields. He nurtured and sustained community-wide commitment to relief of the destitute and disempowered; he championed the causes of prison reform and the abolition of slavery. His vision was of an encompassing public weal. And you who are the heirs of this vision, the products, yes, but also the makers of a living tradition that says education is for the many, not the few; considered thought is the right and duty of the many, not the few, you are in a position to secure this heritage for yourselves and those who come after. You can sustain – you have the skills to sustain – that one indispensable foundation of commonweal – the practice of good-faith, deliberative public conversation.

The Illinois Wesleyan website rightly boasts about the average class size here – 17 students – and an 11 to 1 student/faculty ratio. And why are these such sterling measures of a liberal education? Because you didn’t come here to be the passive recipients of pre-packaged information or certified consensus. You came to practice the active arts of analytic and creative thought. You came to expand your feel for the shape of the question and the quality of evidence. You came to cultivate limberness of mind and spirit, to practice and assess the arts of persuasion, to refine your powers of expression – on the page, on the living voice, in the mediums of clay and paint and mathematical equations. You came to classrooms of seventeen people, not so that you could be talked at, but so that you could get a feel for thinking-in-company, for lifting the half-formed thought to explicitness, for navigating divergent opinion, for distinguishing the solid from the specious. This is what we mean by a liberal education: it’s not merely a set of subjects; it’s a habit of mind. We celebrate what you have accomplished; we look forward with no little pride to what you will do in the coming years; and we also make a claim on you. Because we need your skills; we need your powers of discernment; we need your voices and your talent for engaged listening. We need your contribution to a better, smarter, more substantive civil discourse. We need you to teach us what we have forgotten.