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2019 Commencement Address: Jane Dammen McAuliffe

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Commencement Address - Jane Dammen McAuliffe

Friday May 24, 2019
Jane Dammen McAuliffe



Father Boroughs, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty and staff, families and friends, thank you for the honor of addressing you today. And Class of 2019, thank you for letting me share this celebration of your achievements. Here you are; it is finally happening; your parents, relatives and friends are beaming; your brothers and sisters are awestruck – for the first time in their lives – and you, you are joyful and nostalgic and a bit sleep-deprived, all at the same time.

I would like to say a special “thank you” to Father Boroughs. I am so grateful to him for inviting me to speak at your commencement. Father Boroughs embodies the best of Jesuit leadership. At Georgetown he brought Jesuit values alive across the university. Campus banners blazoned with “Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam,” “Cura Personalis,” and “Community in Diversity,” still wave a continual reminder of why Jesuit colleges like Holy Cross and Georgetown are so special.

I hope that college commencements never lose their pomp and circumstance, their robes and rhetoric, their processions and pageantry because they do mark such an important moment in our lives. Today we focus on you, the Class of 2019, and on all that you have accomplished at this splendid college. But many in this arena also remember their own graduations and the countless surprises that life has brought in the years since. Certainly, at my own commencement I had no idea that I might one day be speaking at yours. To be honest, I don’t remember much about that day except that my fiancé was in the audience and our wedding was just a week away. My husband Dennis is with us today, so obviously we keep making this a team effort.

Today I want to talk to you about intercourse. Great, now I’ve got your attention! The venerable Oxford English Dictionary provides the Latin etymology and the original meaning of “intercourse” as “communication between individuals, frequent and habitual contact in conversation—frequent and habitual contact in conversation.”

My office at the Library of Congress looks directly across the street at the United States Capitol. It is a beautiful and inspiring sight but also a deeply disheartening view. To gaze at the United States Capitol is to look squarely at the epicenter of political polarization, a place where communication frequently fails, where genuine social intercourse, meaningful conversational exchange rarely happens.

In an effort to foster bipartisan conversation, the Library of Congress regularly hosts dinners for Members of Congress. A generous donor funds these and they are off the record—no press in attendance. Each dinner features a prominent American historian. Last week it was David McCullough discussing his latest, *The Pilgrims*. These evenings have become hugely popular because they are one of the few, if not the only place, where Senators and Congressmen can sit together, share a meal and simply converse.

Every issue facing our legislators, every issue facing this nation – whether it’s climate change, economic inequality, migrants and refugees, or international conflicts – requires reasoned discourse. And that is in very short supply. Instead we live in a world of media siloes, of pundits shouting across each other, and of tweets—endless, mindless, tweets.

It know it sounds odd to talk about conversation or dialogue or social intercourse at a college commencement. Your beautiful Holy Cross motto, “In hoc signo vinces (in this sign, you will conquer)” seems to demand loftier topics. I’m reminded of that commencement exhortation that went viral when the speaker declared, “If you want to change the world, start by making your bed in the morning.” After all, what have you been doing for the last four years but conversing, in the classroom, in the dining room, in the dorm?

But that’s just the point, as your remarkable valedictorian demonstrated so well: you know how to do this. It is one of the core accomplishments of your liberal arts education. You have learned how to listen to another person’s point of view; you have learned how to make a persuasive argument without resorting to personal attacks; and because of the breadth of your liberal arts education, you have learned how to find and analyze the information you need. These proficiencies are now such a part of you that you may not realize how rare they are becoming in the world you are about to enter.

At the College of the Holy Cross, you have also lived in a diverse and inclusive community. I think residential liberal arts colleges create intentional communities, living laboratories of democratic practice and civic discourse. Consequently, you know how to have dialogue across differences, whether differences of religion or culture or race or gender or class. That is a vital skill for our fractured America. We cannot begin to deal with the enormous problems facing our nation, and our entire world, unless we can talk to each other.

You will choose those causes and concerns where your talents in dialogue, discussion and advocacy can make a difference. To get you thinking about that choice, please let me propose three for your consideration. The first is Muslim-Christian engagement.

Last fall I flew to Cairo to speak at an international conference hosted by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Al-Azhar is the most prominent university in the Muslim world and its head is often compared to the Roman Catholic pope. The conversations were intense and sometimes difficult but at least they were happening. People were reaching across religious and cultural divides. They were trying to establish the trust necessary for us to tackle the world’s problems together. To sustain that momentum, Pope Francis met with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar soon after in Abu Dhabi and said the first papal mass on the Arabian Peninsula.

Your education at this Jesuit and Catholic college has allowed you to develop a religious sensitivity that prepares you for such interreligious engagement. This is not a common feature of American higher education. Yours is a campus where conversation can flourish freely among believers and nonbelievers, where people can speak comfortably about religion in ways that are foreign to the stridently secular cultures of most colleges and universities.

Secondly, I seek your compassion and conversation about our Catholic church. I realize that you are a graduating class of different faiths and spiritualities but right now we Catholics are having a tough time. So many of us are hurting; some of us are suffering grievously. Our friends and relatives are walking away in disgust and discouragement. But I beg you, the Catholic graduates of 2019, to hang in there. Support the tens of thousands of good priests whose lives remain beacons of selflessness. Your skill in

conversation and dialogue can begin to bridge the divisions and heal the wounds. Your lay leadership is our hope for the future.

Finally, I would like you to think about the education of girls and women. In your graduating class, as with most American colleges, you women are the majority. But in many parts of the world you know that girls and young women never have the opportunities that you've had. Many just manage a few years of elementary education; others suffer a lifetime of illiteracy. Can you be their advocates? Can you push the conversations for cultural and social change that will open doors for your sisters?

Next month the Library of Congress will mount a major exhibit commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Constitutional amendment that guaranteed women the right to vote. Looking back, we can be proud of our progress but let's make sure it doesn't take a century for young women around the world to join your ranks as college graduates.

A few years ago I gave the commencement address at a women's university in Saudi Arabia. To the beat of powerful drums, three hundred graduates processed into the auditorium wearing academic regalia just like yours. Looking out at the audience, I saw what I see today: proud faculty, elated parents, and excited friends all sharing the conviction that the education of these young women was a gift to their nation and to the world. So, let's make that scene come to life in many more places.

You are graduating as Holy Cross celebrates its 175th anniversary. Before you return for your 10th reunion, this nation will celebrate its 250th anniversary. Please use the skills of informed conversation and genuine dialogue that Holy Cross has given you. Please speak to important issues even when it's awkward and uncomfortable to do so, so that our 250th anniversary can celebrate the renewal of our nation and of our democracy.

Congratulations to the Class of 2019!

Jane McAuliffe, Library of Congress