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2014

President's Convocation Remarks

Jonathan D. Green

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Green, Jonathan D., "President's Convocation Remarks" (2014). *Remarks and Messages*. Paper 10.
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President's Convocation Remarks
3 September 2014
Jonathan D. Green

At our Opening Convocation two weeks ago I introduced this year's campus intellectual theme, "Walls and Bridges," and I encouraged the new students to think about the many analogical applications this theme has for their experiences joining this university.

Over the past few weeks, we have been publicly celebrating the progressively richer diversity of our student population, and especially the new class. We have worked hard to recruit a student body that is a reflection of the world beyond our campus. International students and domestic minorities comprise just over one-third of the incoming class. Also, nearly a quarter of our faculty came from other nations.

Why is this important to us? Our Mission Statement says that, "The Illinois Wesleyan experience affords the greatest possibilities for realizing individual potential while preparing students for democratic citizenship and life in a global society." An increasingly diverse population provides us all with bridges to other cultures, viewpoints, and values. This is the inherent strength of the democratic citizenship we wish to promote.

Engaging diversity is difficult. It challenges each of us to face the fact that we may not have exclusive ownership of righteousness. Finding the moral highroad is easy until one abandons cultural homogeneity and discovers that the path ahead is often a complex gridlock of conflicting ideas. That is why engaging diversity is so important. It allows us to see the map and to take the best route forward. It helps us to find the bridges and to navigate our way around walls.

It can be frightening because we find ourselves moving into ideas that are unfamiliar, and as a result some of us make the mistake of celebrating our ignorance rather than embracing new opportunities to learn from each other.

In the past two weeks a number of members of our community have been the victims of overt expressions of prejudice and xenophobia. As the old saying goes, "When you point one finger, there are three fingers pointing back to you." These behaviors are unacceptable, but we have to remember that they are born of ignorance and fear. They define the actors, not their victims. As a community, we need to work together to foster a true spirit of inclusion and respect on our campus and within our region.

Last week, Brandon Common and Eileen Galvez, from the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, organized a discussion session about the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri. At that event one student said we should have a diversity requirement to graduate. I quickly donned my administrator cap and said our general education program includes two diversity flags. She responded that she meant something

personal, like having a meaningful conversation with someone different from yourself.

This is my charge to us all. Let us live out the theme of “Walls and Bridges.” Build a bridge: seize the opportunity to engage in that meaningful conversation with someone different from you and do it again and again. Be even braver, and break down a wall: be the person who confronts acts of bias when you encounter them. We each bear a responsibility to make this campus a welcoming environment for all who come here. To paraphrase Martin Niemöller, “If we don’t speak out for others who will speak out for us.”

One of the best ways we can address the difficult issues of difference and inclusion can be through the metaphors in literature. Our summer reading, *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, has provided us with a medium for engaging in a number of these topics. During orientation, students in my discussion group of the book said they thought one of the reasons we had selected this novel was that like the older generation of characters, they had come to a new place to seek opportunities and the decisions they made in their new home would significantly shape the rewards they would reap from this leap of faith. We also discussed how much courage it takes for students to come halfway around the world to become members of our community.

The Madonnas of Echo Park, has led us into many thoughtful conversations about the university’s commitment to diversity, social justice and even environmental sustainability. Brando Skyhorse has presented a rich and complex narrative of a place and its people through the voices of eight characters whose lives are interwoven in numerous ways that they often do not realize.

As Martin Luther King wrote in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Brando Skyhorse has brilliantly shown us how difficult aspects of cultural identity can be in a purportedly pluralistic society, and through the art of fiction he has provided us an opportunity to appreciate the “inescapable network of mutuality” in which we hope to become the very best democratic citizens.

Please join me in welcoming Brando Skyhorse.