



CONVOCATION

AT THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL • THE OPENING OF THE 211TH YEAR

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On Truth

"Dogmatism rests on a conviction of certainty, not absolute truth."

— Israel Scheffler, Conditions of Knowledge

"The truth" is an ideal we tend toward, though, like the asymptote of a curve, we never quite touch. Put differently, pursuing an unassailable, perfect, single distillation of facts is a fool's errand, or worse, the root of dogmatic belief. It is precisely when we seek conflicting perspectives, challenge our own assumptions, allow for multiple truths, as it were, that we find ourselves moving ever closer to this ideal of understanding and clarity of vision.

Filmmaker Ken Burns interviewed James Baldwin about the Statue of Liberty on the occasion of its centennial some 35 years ago, and his first question was, "What is liberty?"

With more than a hint of wry irony, Baldwin responded, "Well, I can always quote the Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident that all Men are created equal.' And the moment I do that, I get into trouble ... because obviously I am not included in that pronouncement."

Baldwin goes on to reflect on his own experience and the implications for the famous statue dedicated in New York Harbor in 1886: "For a Black American, for a Black inhabitant of this country, the Statue of Liberty is simply... a very bitter joke."

Burns drew from that conversation what he refers to as an indelible lesson, that "our monuments are representations of myth, not fact." He goes on further to say that as we consider the role that monuments play in our culture, "it is the history, not the mythology that we must remember." And of course the history of this particular statue is not a single, settled narrative. The inspiration for the work by French sculptor Auguste Bartholdi was the abolition of slavery in the United States, and the truth is, it was intended as a celebration of democracy and liberty.

But as Baldwin reminds us, there is the promise of liberty — some would say the myth of liberty — embodied in this monumental sculpture, and then there is the lived experience of whole sectors of our society who have not been granted in equal measure “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and there is important truth there as well. To see one perspective and not the other, in either case, is to see through a limited lens. One does not negate the other, one is not more true than the other — together they amplify our understanding. One shows what we might aspire to, and the other teaches us, if we are serious about our aspiration, **how far we fall short**.

Other monuments provoke even more divisive and irreconcilable reactions. At first glance, the 26-foot-high statue of Robert E. Lee located in Market Street Park in Charlottesville, Virginia might seem to some to be simply a tangible display of local history, a tribute to a loyal son of this southern commonwealth. While Lee is an historical figure and is indeed a Virginian, the view that the statue merely represents Civil War history is dramatically incomplete if not all but incorrect. The statue was erected in 1924, at the height of a second resurgence of Ku Klux Klan membership — estimated by the Southern Poverty Law Center to be 4 million strong at that point, a time when the Klan had broadened the target of their violence to include Catholics and Jews, and a time when the tale of the Civil War had been deconstructed and rewritten as a glorious “Lost Cause,” as Henry Louis Gates describes in his recent book, *Stony the Road*. No, that is not simply a statue of Robert E. Lee, loyal Virginian and reluctant participant in “The War of Northern Aggression” ... and furthermore, two years ago, in the streets of Charlottesville, the inability to see beyond the myth of that statue led to violence and the death of a young woman.

Our country is in a far more polarized state two years after gangs of armed militia and white supremacists, doggedly clinging to a myth, descended upon Charlottesville to protect the statue of General Lee. These divisions are exacerbated by the firm belief on the part of the various factions that they have the truth on their side. Trust, mutual understanding, the assumption of good intentions, empathy for what some have endured — all feel in short supply at the moment. And this fracturing of our society is being felt within our own community, and for many, quite painfully.

To try to understand our situation, let alone resolve it, by looking through only one lens is to see things incompletely, and while safer and easier, doomed to fail. James Baldwin’s biting observation on liberty goads us to see complexity, to see contradiction, to see irony — if in fact we seek to see more clearly, to understand more deeply, and to tend closer to truth. If we want to begin to understand what divides us in the present, both at the national level and as a school community, we must have the courage to see beyond simplistic stories and to explore the multiple, often contradictory layers in our historical narratives and our historical figures.

Echoing a message I have shared in the past, intentionally diverse communities such as ours serve a fundamentally important purpose. More so than in our neighborhoods, our churches, the restaurants we prefer, our social clubs, here at Lawrenceville we come into contact with an enormous range of individuals — as roommates, as Housemates, as classmates, as teammates. And we will get it wrong at times, we will misunderstand each other and sometimes hurt each other. This is not a sign that we are broken — these moments of imperfection are the inevitable result of coming together, here on this campus, **and having a go of it**. And we show our strength as a community when we avoid pulling back into retrenched single-minded factions the moment we stumble. We show our strength when we have the will and resolve to trust, to listen, and to see competing truths.

If we can see the divisions we are experiencing as opportunities, if each of us can work to see the kernels of validity in the views of those seemingly at odds with us, we can and will find a way to come together and to heal, and show the nation how it’s done.

* * *

So let's start by considering how we identify what we feel is "true," let's say, in an historical account. In his essay "Age of Amnesia," Joel Kotkin, Prof. at Chapman College, writes "We live ... in 'an age of amnesia.' Across the world, most notably in the West, we are discarding the knowledge and insights passed down over millennia and replacing it with politically correct bromides cooked up in the media and the academy."

Is that so? Do we imagine that once upon a time we had an agreed-upon, objectively established set of knowledge and insights, we had the truth, so to speak, and now that people are introducing new insights, divergent perspectives, alternative understandings, **"knowledge" is under attack?**

Just as monuments are built to convey a kind of immutable, enduring message until we unpack them and realize there can be layers of contradictory meaning, some would have it that knowledge is an aggregation of unassailable, proven facts carved in stone. As philosopher Israel Scheffler reminds us, "It is one thing to believe the truth is an absolute...it is quite another to suppose that we can ever be certain that we have the truth." (p.47) What we refer to as knowledge must be under frequent reassessment, refinement and debate, and when we fall into complacency and fail to challenge "the facts" routinely, it is at our peril.

No one knew this better than German physicists of the early years of the 20th century¹. Someone outside that scientific field might imagine the physical laws governing space, movement, and matter to be a rather durable, rigidly rule-bound set of givens. Yet in the late decades of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, European physicists were learning that while the universe might be rule-governed, each new and exciting discovery was turning previous knowledge on its head. They were understanding the need to approach their grasp of the forces at work in nature with flexible thinking and a completely open mind.

And when a dictator rose to power in the 1930's declaring one nation, one race, one leader, one truth, these scientists, many of them Jews, saw the absurdity immediately and fled Germany.

And in subsequent decades, haven't we continued to enrich our understanding in so many fields, precisely because we were not complacent with our current understanding and were willing to challenge prevailing assumptions and broaden our thinking?

In the 1950's, as the Cold War was escalating, if a student from a working class family studying the rise of American industry in a history class were to ask, "If we really want to understand more fully the growth of capitalism, don't we need to study the lives of the workers as well?" — the questioner might have been dismissed as a Marxist, a Soviet sympathizer seeking to digress from mainstream history. Certainly the study of unionization and events like the massacre of coal miners in Matewan, West Virginia in 1920 are not "politically correct bromides cooked up in the media and the academy" — we now view this as critical to a more complete understanding of forces that shaped the modern American economy.

In the 1970's, if a female student studying Hamlet were to ask, "Would it change things if we were to consider Ophelia's view?" Or if in studying Macbeth she asked, "Why is Lady Macbeth portrayed with such one-dimensional misogyny? The men are morally complex — she is simply evil" — she might well have been called a "feminist" by her male professor and be accused of seeking to distort our settled understanding of a classic work of literature by peering through the lens of gender.

And in the 1980's, if a student from an urban context were to say in poetry class, "I'd like to study these new rap lyrics as an emerging genre of poetry because I hear authentic voices expressing rage against police violence." The response might well have been met with initial skepticism if not outright mockery, suggesting that the art form was not worthy of serious study. Now, in 2018, Kendrick Lamar has been awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his lyrics.

¹ <https://physicstoday.scitation.org/doi/10.1063/PT.6.4.20180926a/full/>

Knowledge is not diminished or being discarded when we add depth and additional dimension. Part of what allows an idea to pass for knowledge or to be considered “true” at a point in time is the ongoing process of rigorous review and re-examination. This leads to new understanding of the laws of Physics, it broadens and shifts the literary canon, and we understand history more deeply and more thoroughly.

Now, that’s all well and good, but how might this notion help us confront our current, profound, national racial unrest? As our nation continues to grapple with what some call the largest protest movement in our nation’s history, which has been further inflamed by ongoing examples of police brutality against Black citizens, Jacob Blake is only the latest example, and vigilante-style attacks on protesters from the backs of pick-up trucks, I am struck that part of the problem is that some of us have tried to understand the issue through a narrow lens, unable or unwilling to challenge prevailing assumptions.

In a recent article published in *The Atlantic*, Yale sociologist Jennifer Richeson refers to the mythology of racial progress. This distorted narrative, according to her “...starts with slavery, ascends to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, speeds past segregation and Jim Crow to the victories of the civil-rights movement, and then drops us off in 2008 for Barack Obama’s election.”

Other writers recently have echoed this phenomenon, observing that previous generations, Black and White, often looked at the notion of “progress” as positive. If you came of age during 1930’s Jim Crow and witnessed Harry Truman’s post World War II integration of the military and some of the early efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, that felt like progress.

Brown v. the Board of Education in the 1950’s certainly was a landmark, and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the 1960’s were steps forward. Schools slowly but surely integrated, access improved in the 1970’s and ‘80’s — all of this is arguably progress.

But to many, especially those who came of age during the Obama presidency or after, “racial progress” sounds a whole lot like “hurry up and wait”: “hurry up and wait” for our justice system to improve, for income inequality to actually move in the right direction, for our education system to serve *all* of our children equally.

This belief in progress, while true, has clouded our view of the systemic racism that also exists and that has caused the progress to be glacial at best. Other groups have overcome obstacles and flourished in this land of opportunity, some would contend. My ancestors were Irish, they were enslaved by the British, forbidden to own property and deprived of their culture and language. The Irish Potato famine was a genocidal catastrophe tolerated by the British as a means of population control, and yes, for a time, Irish Catholics were targeted by the Ku Klux Klan in America. **But they were not subjected to the enduring systems in place that have historically, profoundly impacted the Black community.**

I’ll offer just a few examples from a much longer list of elements that create cycles of deprivation, that create generational systems of poverty and marginalization.

- Let’s start with our criminal justice system. Whether you look at research demonstrating longstanding patterns of racial bias in determining the length of prison sentences or mandatory sentencing policies that disproportionately affected Black defendants, mass incarceration breaks up family structure, has effectively been a source of slave labor, and was a purposeful tool to deny voting rights to citizens who had paid their dues.
- Or the G.I. Bill. Following WWII, this sweeping legislation paid for college and subsidized home ownership, catapulting millions of white veterans, and therefore their children and grandchildren, into the middle class.

- Unfortunately, over a million Black veterans who had served their country failed to derive much benefit because colleges largely refused to accept African-American applicants and banks systematically denied them loans.
- Or how about national patterns of urban zoning and housing policies that created generational inequities? According to a recent study published in *The New York Times*, “In the 1930s, the federal government created maps of hundreds of cities, rating the riskiness of different neighborhoods for real estate investment ... Race played a defining role: Black and immigrant neighborhoods were typically ... outlined in red, denoting a perilous place to lend money. For decades, people in redlined areas *were denied access* to federally backed mortgages and other credit, fueling a cycle of disinvestment.”
 - 90 years later, these neighborhoods remain blighted “hot zones” – literally visible on a heat map in summer, because lack of investment led to fewer trees and parks and a largely inhospitable, concrete landscape.
 - And let’s not forget the lead in the water supply of Flint Michigan.
 - As James Baldwin reminds us in *The Fire Next Time*, “This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish ... You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason.*”

So while the progress we have made toward racial justice may be real, it is indeed merely a mythology, if viewed alone and if it impedes our ability to see a more complete, truthful picture.

Now, let’s finish closer to home. Lawrenceville by many measures has come a long way over the decades — I do not believe we have been complacent. I believe, we are a far more humane and inclusive community than ever — that is not to say we don’t have important work ahead of us in addressing issues right in our midst, but ask Darrell Fitzgerald, one of the first two Black graduates of Lawrenceville and former Vice Chair of the Board, what it was like to be here in the late 1960’s — ask him to describe as he did for me what it felt like to be sitting in the Lawrenceville Chapel and learn that Dr. Martin Luther King has been murdered.

Ask Mr. Washington what it was like to be here in the late ‘70’s — how it felt to be challenged for being Black on his first day here. He taught that young man a quick lesson, and he didn’t bother him after that, but that was his “welcome to Lawrenceville.”

I believe we are a different school now, but I have learned in recent months just how far we still have to go, and how much work I have to do to continue to see a bigger picture, to see past “the progress” we have made, and to see a more complete truth about the experiences that so many of our students of color have had here.

And I am aware, as I look at the broader community, how divided we are on this question.

As you can imagine, I have been inundated with emails from alumni in response to my “Calls to Action” over the summer, both letters with concrete action steps and webinars with Dean Holifield. While I have had many supportive messages — I have had just as many or more from those who disagree — on both sides, which reflects on some level the polarization the country is experiencing.

Some feel I have not done nearly enough and fall far short in my messaging and understanding of the situation. As one said, “Sounds like a change in leadership would be an important action step...”

Others feel I have gone too far, that I have caved in to pressure. Here are a few memorable lines from those graduates:

- “Murray — You are genuinely nuts. Off your rocker.”
- “The premise that there is systemic racism is false! ... This is all total hype and Lawrenceville School is playing right into it!!! Answering the call? What a joke!”

- “I consider your email an anti-white, anti-common sense, anti free-thinking micro-aggression ... Have you really drunk the BLM cool aid? ... How do we navigate or find solutions if we can’t discuss truth and facts?”

Well, whose truth, and whose facts?

As I read the stubborn resolve in their emails, peppered with strong language, I am quite sure I won’t be able to convince them to see a different perspective — they don’t sound inclined to re-examine their assumptions or broaden their thinking any time soon. And that’s probably not my responsibility anyway.

This immediate community, however, is my responsibility — all of you are my responsibility, and with that in mind, I would like to conclude where I began. Our nation may be divided, and even our alumni body may not all agree, but we have a choice, we don’t have to live divided.

We don’t simply have an opportunity here, we have an obligation — we have worked so hard to reopen this campus so that we can actually be together, and it will take hard work and discipline to keep our campus open — but that gives us a shot, and let’s not squander it. We cannot be afraid to hear each other, to respect each other, and yes to love each other, and show the rest of the world how it’s done.

Thirty five years after Baldwin’s searing condemnation, his reflection on the “bitter joke” of liberty in this country, his words still jolt us, demand that the systems of oppression and injustice be recognized and acknowledged as true and real. Clinging to mythologies, viewing older historical narratives as somehow objective, immutable truths, traps the mind.

And if Baldwin jolts us, Maya Angelou invites us and inspires us, in her poem, A Brave and Startling Truth,” to work on building the community that is worthy of our ideals.

*“We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear”*

Thank you very much.