

Fall 8-28-2017

President Bergeron's 103rd Convocation Address - "Homegoing"

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Recommended Citation

Bergeron, Katherine, "President Bergeron's 103rd Convocation Address - "Homegoing"" (2017). *Convocation Addresses*. 15.
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CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

“Homegoing”

Remarks by President Katherine Bergeron

103rd Convocation

August 28, 2017

Good afternoon. How wonderful it is to see so many of you here today for this special ceremony. And before I go on, let me take a moment to thank all those who made it possible: Trina Learned and the facilities staff, for setting up the grounds; Ingrid Bushwack, Merrill Collins, and the staffs from dining and catering, for preparing the dinner that follows this event; Deb MacDonnell and Rob Richter from Communications and the Office of the Arts, for arranging the program; and finally, the musicians who have joined us — the Constitution Brass Quintet and the Manchester Pipe Band — for setting such an exuberant tone for this occasion.

Convocation is an important annual tradition, the formal act of calling together the College community at the start of a new academic year. So the first thing I must call on all of us to do is to extend our most generous Camel welcome to the newest members of our community: the 18 new staff members; the 13 new faculty members; and the 469 new students who have recently arrived on this hill, including 24 astute and perceptive transfer students, and 445 brilliant, talented, and resourceful members of the beautiful class of 2021! It is my duty and my honor to declare this new year — the 103rd year of academic exercises at Connecticut College — officially open.

The start of any academic year is always an exceptional moment, a time of celebration, expectation, and renewal. This one is no different. And yet, as I wrote in my letter to the campus community today, this year also feels exceptional in a different way, both heightened and shaded, perhaps, by the tragic events in Charlottesville just a little over two weeks ago. And so I thought I would spend a few moments during this Convocation ceremony reflecting on those events and on how they might frame our work together in the coming year.

The deadly violence, spawned by racial and religious animus, presented us with a spectacle of hatred, shocking in its blatency, that terrified participants, sickened observers, and revealed to all not so much how far this country has come as how far we still have to go to achieve the ideals of justice and equality that we espouse. Many leaders, myself included, were moved to respond publicly through [statements](#) that repudiate the violence or express solidarity with the victims or both. One statement stands out among them: it is the declaration published by the [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights](#) on August 18. I value this account not, or not only because the Commission includes among its members Connecticut College alumnus and trustee Debo Adegbile '91, but also because the statement itself goes further, placing the weekend's violence squarely within the context of our country's long and complicated racial history. “As a nation,” it says,

we have marched through legally sanctioned slavery, secession, Civil War, Reconstruction, KKK terror, internment of Japanese-American citizens, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights era, all in pursuit of equality. Progress has come only through the courage of individuals, not all of whom are remembered as they should be, and with the resolve of our leaders and the people alike to stand for the rule of law, for equal protection, and for human dignity.

The statement then goes on to urge federal law enforcement to bring those responsible to justice.

There is something reassuring, to be sure, about such declarations of common institutional values. But the statement of the Commission, with its longer historical view, raises another question for us, a question that is relevant not only to our purposes today as we are called to begin another academic year, but also to our mission of educating students to put the liberal arts into action. If progress in the pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity is dependent on the “resolve of our leaders and the people alike,” then what must we, as individuals, resolve to do to achieve it? What must you resolve to do?

It may be tempting, of course, to see the events in Charlottesville as not our problem. Virginia is not New England; Civil War monuments are not to be found on our campus; Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and the KKK are not welcome here. And even while all this may be true, it misses the larger point of the history that the Commission sets before us. The issue we have to deal with is not whether we reject the hatred and intolerance we saw on display in Charlottesville but whether, in some way, we are ready to own it. Are we prepared to think about our own relationship to the histories of racial and religious injustice that brought us to this moment? And if so, how? That is the more difficult question.

It also happens to be the central question of the book we asked all incoming students to read over the summer, *Homegoing*, by the young Ghanaian-American writer, Yaa Gyasi. For those in the audience who have not yet had a chance to read it, *Homegoing* is Gyasi's debut novel telling the story of two half-sisters, one Fante, one Asante, whose lives were shaped by the West African slave trade in both Ghana and America. The story traces the fate of their descendants over six generations, challenging us to think about the connections that bind vastly different cultures and how those connections inform the legacies of race and racism in the world we now inhabit.

There is one chapter, near the end of the book, that spells out the challenge with particular saliency. We meet Yaw Agyekum, fifth generation in the Fante line and son of Akua Collins, the great-great granddaughter of Effia Otcher Collins, the first of our two half-sister protagonists. The last time we encountered Yaw, two chapters earlier, he was a baby in Edweso, having barely survived a deadly fire set by his own mother. Now he is a grown man, a British-educated academic with an unsightly scar, unmarried and working in Takoradi as a schoolteacher around 1950, before Ghanaian independence.

The chapter begins with a history lesson. Yaw is standing before his class at the beginning of a new school year, his blackboard bearing a single sentence: "History is storytelling," it says. Then he dares the new students to tell the story of how he got his scar. The boys reluctantly pass on the things they had been told: that his mother had been possessed; that his father had raged against vengeful gods; that he intentionally burned himself. When he asks them which story is true, he begins to reveal to them the problem of history. "The one who has the power," he says, "is the one who gets to write the story. When you study history, you must always ask: whose story am I missing? Whose voice is suppressed. . . ? And then you must find that story, too" (*Homegoing*, 226-227).

The teacher ultimately answers his own challenge. At the end of the chapter, an even older Yaw finally returns to Edweso, after a 50-year absence, to see his estranged mother. And there, he hears the missing story. It is not a story that would be told in British history books. No, it is his mother's story. She tells him of her haunted dreams; of how an ancestral spirit had come to her at night to lead her home, to the Gold Coast, to the slave castle where, some four generations earlier, her great-great grandmother Effia had been stolen in marriage by a British governor. Akua had been told there was evil in her line, and, through her dreams, she comes to understand the truth: the history of iniquity and human suffering that had been suppressed. She tells her son, "sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home" (*Homegoing*, 242).

And here, we begin see the deeper meaning of the novel's title, and also, perhaps, its relevance to this Convocation, as we are called to begin a new year together. Going home, we learn again and again, is not such an easy road after all, for home in Gyasi's novel is never just about warmth and comfort and sweet reunions, although it is certainly all of those things. Home is also history and responsibility; home is commitment; home is truth. The theme of this year's orientation, as you know, is "welcome home." And I would like to propose that we understand that welcome in the broadest possible sense, as both an invitation and a challenge, just as Gyasi's novel presents it to us: an invitation and a challenge to enter into the complexity of history, to tell the missing stories that inform our present; an invitation and a challenge to take responsibility for what we have yet to learn; an invitation and a challenge to make a commitment to our communities and to be the change that we seek; an invitation and a challenge to hold ourselves accountable, and to pursue the truth in everything we do. That is the size of the welcome we extend to you. That is the home promised by your Connecticut College education.

Which returns us to the questions I posed at the beginning of these remarks. How do we begin to deal with our relationship to the inequity that we see in the world? What must we resolve to do to achieve progress in the pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity? Just three things, my friends: study deeply; engage authentically; live honorably. There are exceptional faculty at this College who will help you both to uncover and to tell the missing stories. There are unique centers for scholarship and student support where you will advance that

understanding, change the narrative, and change yourself, by living with and learning from people and communities who are different from you. And, very importantly, there is a nearly one-hundred-year-old honor code that will serve as a personal compass and guide along the way.

Later in this ceremony we will recite together the words of a pledge that represents our common observance of that code. It is a simple but beautiful aspect of Convocation at this College. You new students just today signed the matriculation pledge. And in a few moments, everyone — staff, faculty, and students of all classes — will renew that pledge together. This is not an empty ritual but an affirmation of our history as a community, as a *home*, bound by integrity, trust, and truth.

And this brings me to a final point, about that history. The end of this academic year will mark the 100th commencement exercises at this College. When Connecticut College opened its doors in 1915 to welcome its first class, it did so as a college with a very significant mission: to be the first and the only institution in the state of Connecticut dedicated wholly to providing advanced baccalaureate education for women. In other words, it was established, some five years before women had earned the right to vote in this country, with a conviction to achieve progress in the pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity. Let us hold that memory and that conviction in our hearts as we begin this new year together. And let me say once again, and with renewed conviction in our common purpose, welcome home.