Convocation Address

Global Citizenship and Responsible Leadership in an Election Year

Grant H. Cornwell

2016


Introduction

Today we begin, officially and in earnest, a new year of liberal inquiry. It is an honor, a privilege, and a joy to launch our noble work together.

Let me extend a special welcome to those students, faculty, and administrative staff members for whom this is their first new beginning at Rollins College. Know that you are joining a community of learners that has been committed to the enterprise of liberal education for over 130 years. In my own case, this is the beginning of my sophomore year; this means that I have been around just long enough to have opinions, but that I still have a lot to learn.

What I want to do in my remarks today is talk about our mission, our common purpose as a liberal arts college. I think it is important to remain mindful that our work here together is a social investment into the future, not just of our students, but of global civil society. This is why we are gathered here. It is why
Rollins College was founded in 1885 and why it exists today. Though we have a variety of roles in this undertaking, we are each here to engage in this noble work. 

Students quite often refer to “the Rollins Bubble,” the phenomenon of feeling isolated in our small campus community, which can seem self-sufficient and disconnected from the larger world. In one sense, this is both true and intentional; liberal arts colleges were founded in bucolic settings, with the idea that these four years were a time to be removed from the distractions of modern society for the purpose of being immersed in liberal learning.

In another sense, though, this gets it all wrong. As our mission statement says, we exist to be educate for global citizenship and responsible leadership. The world beyond our campus is complex indeed, and an essential element of our mission is to help you make sense of it, not just for the purpose of abstract understanding, but for the purpose of engaging that world - to help guide its direction, shape its future, and solve its problems.

**Liberal Education for Global Citizenship**

The title of my reflections this morning is “Global Citizenship and Responsible Leadership in an Election Year.” Don’t worry, I am certainly not going to spend my time trying to tell you how to vote. There is enough of that around. And it is a good thing, really; it is how democracy works, and I encourage you to listen to the arguments of others and to offer your own in return. That, too, is how democracy works.
My project this morning, however, is something larger in scope. I would like to offer some thoughts on the immediate and urgent business of liberal learning, on the larger global context within which this American presidential election is taking place, and to offer some things to think about as you reason about how to vote.

Let me begin with the very concept of liberal education. There is not a person here who does not want, or value, a good job, a meaningful and prosperous livelihood. The good news is that an outstanding liberal education, while it is a substantial investment by any measure, is the best preparation for working one’s way to the most meaningful and prosperous livelihoods in today’s global economy.

But our work here is not about job training, but rather about something much more fundamental and profound. This is something of an irony of liberal education; it is the most effective launch pad for access to leadership and a rewarding career and yet that is not the first purpose of our mission.

I often find myself drawing on the work of the contemporary philosopher and legal scholar, Martha Nussbaum. The project of liberal education is, as she says, nothing less than the cultivation of humanity. In a book by that title and elsewhere, Nussbaum advocates an education designed to produce “citizens of the world,” people of cosmopolitan subjectivity, who see a world full of equally valuable human persons, all of whom have a claim on our sense of moral obligation.
Nussbaum believes that the task of liberal education is to enable us to imagine the realities of peoples distant in time and space, to understand both what humanity has in common but also the variety of ways in which it manifests itself. Through the reading of history, literature, and poetry, through the study of the social and natural sciences, liberally educated persons develop empathy without borders.

There is absolutely no better way to prepare yourself for this world than with a solid liberal education. To understand globalization, to understand your place in this complex world at this moment in history, your moment:

- You need to devote yourself to the study of language, so that you can communicate with people who see the world differently than you, so that you can listen to them and share your views.
- You need to study history, sociology, political science, and economics so that you can discern and analyze the larger social dynamics that form the context for every issue or problem you need to grapple with.
- You need to study math and science because so many problems can only be understood and so many solutions can only be imagined with a deep grasp of these disciplines.
- You need to study the world’s religious and philosophical traditions, arts and cultures, because in the end humans are innately
motivated to make meaning out of their experience, and meaning is always systemic, narrative, and historically situated.

In other words, you have a hell of a lot of work to do in your short time here.

As you think about the presidential election, ask yourself who is better equipped to lead this nation forward in this age of turbulence. Who is better equipped to understand the dynamics of the emerging world order and to make wise choices about how the United States and its citizens can prosper even as we strive to contribute to the prosperity of others?

I am profoundly optimistic about the world’s future, not the least because of the potential that you and your global peers have to lead it forward, to take all of the incredible tools of mind, technology, and industry that you have to work with and to apply them with more wisdom and insight than those who have come before.

The Ethics of Liberal Learning

Let me offer some thoughts now about the ethics of liberal learning and on the honor pledge to which you just committed yourself.

One of the biggest transitions you are going through right now is the change from living in a family to living in a community. There are some similarities between the two: there will be playfulness, a sense of belonging, loyalty, and, of course, conflicts. But the differences between the two are very significant.
Rollins is a community of learners; we are not a religious community, an agricultural community, a military community...we come together in this time and space for one reason, and it is to foster your liberal education. What this means, though, is that we are not only a community that is diverse in every way you can imagine, but that diversity is sought and welcomed very intentionally as part of our mission.

I love the GPS on my iPhone. At any given time it can tell me exactly where on earth I stand. Do you know how a GPS works? It triangulates your position from orbiting satellites. Here is what is so important: a GPS cannot tell where you stand if it is receiving information from only one satellite...it needs to be getting data from three or four satellites to get a clear and accurate sense of location.

This is the way liberal learning works. If we were a homogeneous community, composed of people who see the world the same way, no one would be able to really know where they stand. It is only by listening to ideas and opinions from different points of view that one can locate one’s own position.

Thus we are ...importantly and intentionally...a community with all kinds of differences among us. Liberal education happens when we learn to listen across those differences, learn to understand them, discern common grounds and probe the meaning and rationale of the differences.

The key thing I want to offer tonight is the idea that all of this can only work if we treat our differences, and each other, with respect. This is the foundation of a learning community.
Immanuel Kant is one the most influential philosophers in Western intellectual history. I hope many of you will cross paths with his work during your time here. In 1785 he wrote a short treatise on ethical theory the title of which we translate as “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.” It is fair to say that this is one of the most significant books in the Western intellectual heritage, and many trace it as the philosophical ground zero of our concept of human rights.

In this work, Kant is searching for the fundamental principles to guide human relationships: **how do people deserve to be treated, and why?** These are very basic questions. After a great deal of very careful reasoning, he comes to this basic principle:

\[
\text{So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.} \tag{2}
\]

Later he says that whatever degree of freedom you might have, it never extends to treating another only as a means to your own ends. What does it mean to treat other persons as ends-in-themselves and never merely as means?

**The central idea is that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect,** that in all of our interactions, even, or especially with those with whom we disagree, or who we don’t like, or even who disgust us in some way, that we must engage them in ways that recognize their humanity.
Why do this? What is the nature of this obligation? What is the basis of human dignity? For Kant, what is metaphysically distinct about humans is that we have free will, that is, we can make choices and control our behavior according to the exercise of reason. It is only because of this that humans have the capacity for morality; if you can’t choose, you can’t choose otherwise, so creatures that are not capable of rational choice are not capable of ethical deliberation – that is, they are not capable of critically reflecting on how they ought to act.

We can. And for Kant this makes all the difference. The capacity for choice, for ethics, gives humanity a rare quality of dignity. We have what he calls “intrinsic worth.” This dignity, or worth, imposes limits on how others should treat us and on how we should treat others. That is, to repeat, we should always treat another person as an end, as a being with worth and dignity that must be respected.

Why do I share this basic idea with you today? Because as I reflect on some of the ways people treat one another globally, nationally, and here on our campus at times, I despair at the disrespect, at the cruelty, at the neglect to recognize the humanity of the other and treat that humanity with its proper respect. I despair at the harsh and crude rhetoric that is in play in this presidential election, at the prejudice that is seething in popular discourse.

Notice that all forms of prejudice choose some surface feature of identity – race, ethnic or national or sexual identity, religious confession – and focus on
this as a purported grounds for not deserving equal respect. Kant helps us see how shallow and wrongheaded all forms of prejudice are.

This campus is but a particular place in a larger society. For almost all of you, whatever your background, this will be the most diverse community in which you have lived. You will be living, eating, playing, and studying with peers who have different backgrounds and identities...different races, different nationalities, different sexual orientations, different religious beliefs, and about all of these, different conceptions and misconceptions.

Remember what I said earlier: we have sought this diversity on purpose! It is a critical dimension of excellence as a liberal arts college. Living in a campus community as diverse as Rollins is rich with opportunity but also challenging. It is something of a field of practice where mistakes are more generously indulged as part of the process of learning.

As you go about your life in this community, I am urging you to aspire to always recognize the ideal of human dignity. This will mean acting with respect and compassion. It will mean looking for these qualities in others and honoring their intrinsic worth even when – or especially when – it is hard to see.

It will mean exercising your own dignity, your own capacity for ethical choice. In the end, the quality of your life will be measured by this above all else.

This is my understanding of the honor pledge you made this evening.
I want to recommend something to you which, on the face of it, might not seem like good advice. It is this. As you make your way in this community, I urge you to look for opportunities to listen, to spend time, ideally even to collaborate, with people who don’t think like you.

Our culture is drifting the other way. In popular media and in politics, both national and global, I see an alarming gravitation of people into like-minded groups, at once isolated and self-affirming; blogs can be a prime example of this phenomenon. Fundamentalist organizations, of any kind, are another. There is a great deal of talk within these groups that can reach a fever pitch. The problem is that the only ones listening are others who agree.

Democracy only works if its members have both the skill and commitment to listen across differences. The theory here, which both history and my own experience prove true, is that ideas become changed through the negotiation of differences, and that the thinking that emerges from this process is better, richer, more complete, than any one of the contributing voices.

This is the work you are here to do and we are eager to get on with it.

Therefore, will the members of the Class of 2020, and all new students, please rise.

By virtue of the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees and on behalf of the faculty of Rollins College, I do hereby matriculate you as candidates for the degree Artium Baccalaureus and Artium Baccalaureus Honoris.
With great respect for our common purpose and profound optimism for our common future, the 132nd year of liberal education at Rollins College is hereby convened.

Notes