

BACCALAUREATE MESSAGE 2018: *Like Water*

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“The day comes,” says Phoebe Eng “when remaining the same becomes more painful than the risk to grow. And when that happens there are many goodbyes. We leave old patterns, old friends, old lovers, old ideas, and some cherished beliefs. Loss and growth are so often one and the same.”¹

This weekend you are in that threshold between commencing and letting go; between new beginnings and goodbyes. Yes, it’s a time of joy. And we are proud of you. No doubt, you are relieved and excited for what the future holds. Yet there may also be this thing Phoebe Eng points to involving risk which comes with change and growth. Fear of unknowns. An occasional self-doubt. The discomfort and a sort of mini-death whenever we, no matter our age, transition from one stage on the life journey to the next.

Cut open a cocoon and you don’t find a peaceful caterpillar sprouting wings. It’s a slimy mess of caterpillar stew in there. Amid life change, it can feel that way on our insides too.

Early in the Marvel film, *Black Panther*, the newly appointed King of Wakanda must be buried and die to his old life in order to be resurrected into something new. Ceremony and ritual assist him. There is a priest-shaman who accompanies amid his transformation as elders and sages, family and friends gather round offering encouragement, love, and support.

Now, looking around, we clearly are not in Wakanda.And I have no heart shaped herb to offer you. Still, we are here in a chrysalis moment making ritual for helping you let go and rise into something new. Though I can’t offer you supernatural powers, maybe something offered can assist the power of your agility; your strength, hope, and endurance when afraid; also the power of your love and healing service—not only for those in your family, friend, and political group but also for helping those who, in these national times of great divides, you may struggle

to love. I'd like to offer that spiritual medicine by speaking about something we normally think of as poison: namely fear. To offer a way of working with fear so that instead of being intimidated or immobilized by it, you can transmute that poison into good medicine—not only for what may ail you, but also so you can better live and serve as an instrument of healing peace.

Lyla June, the activist and performance poet of Diné (Navajo) and Tsétséhestâhese (Cheyenne) lineages is the young woman I met at Standing Rock who came here last fall as our Small Thomas Lecturer. Maybe you heard her speak of life as ceremony; of every action as prayer. Or when she read a poem about living with her grandmother who tells her to get up; to rise at dawn and to pray. To go stand before fear and hate... and sing to it.

I know. Rising at dawn to stand before whatever Death Eater or Dementor-like situation of your life you hate or fear—and singing to it as a prayer? Not avoiding. Not attacking. Not armoring up, shoving away, or numbing. But responding with beauty, compassion, and gentleness??? That's about as instinctive and easy as Rev. Martin Luther King's scripture inspired social principle about hate not overcoming hate; how only love can do that. That's the same message given at a training the day after rubber bullets were fired at protesters at Standing Rock when we as several hundred clergy prepared to take our turn on the line. Lyla June reminded us that night, as did a Sioux Nation Grandmother Elder the next morning how we are not use violence, not even in speech. How those people on the other side of the line are our brothers. And how “when we fall into hatred we become the very thing that hurts us.”

We did not lose the battle at Standing Rock, said Lyla June on our campus a year later. We did not lose “because we maintained our prayer.”

We fought in a beautiful way. Standing Rock started as a prayer with young people running to Washington because their drinking water was at stake.... We had 400 clergy burn the Document of Discovery.... We had peaceniks in unity with war vets. Native Americans in unity with Anglos. We did not lose our

*allegiance to our prayer. To beauty. To honoring life: To honoring what the Creator has made. You take out your gun and shoot an oil executive, you will have lost the war. You will have lost your soul.*ⁱⁱ

Whether it's a threat to safe drinking water; violence of all kinds including the shootings of children and unarmed Black males; hate crimes rising 40 times higher than two years ago according to The Southern Poverty Law Center's reference to government reportsⁱⁱⁱ; or maybe it's a personal health crisis or loss you or your loved ones have known: Amid such wounds we're allowed to grieve. Like Jesus Christ himself and 1/3 of the psalms, we're allowed to get angry and lament. And we're definitely summoned to work toward a cure. As is named in the Henry Louis Gates PBS documentary *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise*^{iv}, large parts of Dr. King's Dream remain unfulfilled. At the same time, as The Rev. Al Sharpton noted toward the end of that documentary, when his mother entered this life there wasn't an inkling that one day she would get to vote yet at her exit from this life the first black president of the United States sent a letter to her funeral. So I guess there's a step or two forward for each step or two back. Thing is, I have no doubt that your humanity; your heart; your intelligence and life wisdom especially from all you've learned here—even from the painful times—will be needed to help heal these and other wounds in the fabric of this nation and world. But it will only work if: A) we don't become the hatred that hurt us, and B) we learn to work with fear in the way Steven spoke of when reading from the *Tao Te Ching*. Namely: the wisdom of being like water. How water, which is soft, fluid, and persistent, wears away the rigidity of rock; how softening overcomes, and is stronger than, the hard.

I think such Taoist wisdom is counter-intuitive partly because we're biologically wired for fight or flight when anxious and afraid—a reason committing to a secular or spiritual mindfulness practice like meditation matters, even if it's only for ten minutes a day. Doing so literally rewires the brain to help you be more skillful with difficult situations and emotions like

fear. But maybe learning to soften and be fluid, like water, is also counter-intuitive because we live in a time when armoring up and getting out the arsenal—whether its on Tweeter feeds or what have you—is the growing norm rather than dialogue and face to face listening. My hunch is that most folks in U.S. society also think leaning into discomfort, then softening, is the same thing as covering or weakness. This despite practices like martial arts, meditation, tai chi, centering prayer, the several thousand year old wisdom from the Yoga Sutras, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Buddha; even those Chinese finger puzzles that only free trapped fingers if the person’s attitude becomes one of softening or relaxing into the fear. In other words, relinquishing or surrendering—not to the person or situation that’s the source of the pain—but rather, our thoughts about whatever is causing our suffering. Like the finger puzzle, the more resistance and trying to shove the fear away, the more trapped a person can be.

Maybe you know of University of Houston research professor Brené Brown’s books, or her Ted Talks that went viral on the power of vulnerability.^v Brené’s social work research began with wanting to understand the human need for connection. But when interviewing hundreds of people she kept running into narratives on the fear of disconnection; the fear of not being liked; not being good enough; thin enough. Smart enough. From the data of what is now some 11,000 interviews the key issues that arose were around vulnerability and shame. When categorizing data, Brene filled her living room with wall size Post-Its, and piles of paper until her home looked like a Jackson Pollack painting. What emerged from categorizing the data were two types of people. There was one category of what she called whole hearted people: folks who—though they have imperfections, stretch marks and struggles just like the rest of us—don’t put on armor. Nor do they overly worry about what people think, or engage in proving, perfectionism, or being exhausted as a status symbol. The reason they don’t worry about these things is because they

have a strong sense of their own worthiness. Worts and all.

The other thing these people had in common? They fully embrace vulnerability. “They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable... They just talked about it being necessary.” Turns out that courage, according to the data, is also born of vulnerability. In other words, courage is not derived from fearlessness and putting on armor. Nor is vulnerability weakness. When Brené looked at that wholehearted category but didn't see her own life on that list, she says it shook every perfectionist, performing, people pleasing, Texan load-and-carry bone of her being.

But here's the thing. The embrace of vulnerability not only turned out to be the core attribute of these wholehearted people and of courage. Vulnerability, according to the evidence, is also the birthplace of creativity, compassion, joy, resilience, a sense belonging, and of love. With that discovery and not seeing herself fitting in that wholehearted category, Brené said she ended up having a bit of a personal break down. Her therapist called it a spiritual awakening. Either way, it was an invitation to relate to fear in a different way.

The person I wanted to be like when I grew up was a chaplain and Irish-American Catholic priest named Father Campion. Father Campion embodied that Saint Francis line: “Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words.” Though I wasn't Catholic, the mere sight of Fr. Campion was enough to make my soul sing. His pastoral presence was a reminder of Divine love, giving me a sense of reassurance and peace. He was founder of The Apostolate to Persons With Disabilities in the Greater Madison, WI area which works to promote their full inclusion of persons with mental and physical disabilities. He'd often say things like how all of us have handicaps; some of ours are simply more visible. That normalizing was something I needed as an often inadequate feeling teenager very skilled at self-shaming: it was my response to having been pulled out of

class for learning disabilities from 1st through 6th Grade, as well as from a trauma I silently endured from ages 8-10 at the hands of my grandmother's second husband.

Thing is, Father Campion—this superhero saint to many of us—ministered from his own vulnerability. Every year when the high school principal gathered seniors onto the bleachers of the gym to vote on whether A) we wanted an optional baccalaureate service commencement weekend, and B) if we did, who we'd want to speak—the vote was always the same: Didn't matter whether or not you were Catholic, some other variety of Christianity, a religious person of a different faith, or secular. We wanted Fr. Campion. From sitting through previous commencements we knew his message would be the same. But we needed it for ourselves. He'd briefly reference his own failings and fumbles; his struggles at times as an alcoholic on skid row. We figured that if the Force of Love many of us call God could use this flawed man for doing great things, then there also was hope for the rest of us.

Vulnerability fueled Fr. Campion's greatness—just like it did for Abraham Lincoln whose lifelong struggle with depression, as Joshua Wolf Shenk argues, prepared him with night vision for leading this nation during one of its darkest hours.^{vi} I have no doubt the same is true for any struggle you've endured. You are here for purpose. Even when you don't feel it. And your adversity will be put to use as a gift.

“Joy is not made to be a crumb,” says the Mary Oliver poem George read for us. Brené Brown's research points to the same with the greatest lessons she's learned about joy coming from people who have spent time in sorrow and darkness. They have taught her that joy comes to us in ordinary moments and that we “risk missing out on joy when we get too busy chasing the extraordinary. Perhaps like Elijah who amid his great struggle experienced the Divine not in the loud, powerful, or extraordinary but in the still and small. “People who have survived great

losses,” says Brené... “without exception, say what they miss the most are ordinary moments.” She adds that the people she’s interviewed who have lost a child, or who are survivors of other traumas like genocide are also the ones whom she has learned the most from about daily gratitude practices.

We don’t get to choose joy, resiliency, and courage without sorrow and fear. It’s all connected. So, how does one learn to stand before fear ...and sing to it? Of course as an Episcopal priest I’d like to suggest, as Lyla June’s grandmother did, doing it through prayer; by tapping into a power or life force larger than yourself. But even if that’s not your thing, I end with three suggestions you can take or leave for when it feels like the Dementors are circling. First: Those daily gratitude practices. They help our hearts remain open to tenderness and joy; to soften—like water—rather than harden. Second suggestion is an image my spiritual director, Mary, offered for when my own insecurities or occasional old wounds I thought were healed occasionally circles round: The image is of a small child she saw with his mother in a park. The child was getting tired so that, when his mother told him it was time to go, he began to lose it yelling No! and kicking and screaming on the ground. Instead of scolding at him, the mother bent down, embracing him until he finally let go into her arms. Mary invited me to be like that mother, not berating but using tenderness toward those difficult thoughts and emotions until they soften, like that child. Indeed. As both the Buddha and the great Christian mystic, St. Teresa of Avila put it, if it’s peace we seek we won’t find it outside ourselves; we must seek it within.

Which brings me to a the final suggestion or guidepost: Brené Brown says we will not finding clarity on how to work with our fears and vulnerability in ways that fuel creativity, courage, service, and joy unless we take time to get quiet. Can you commit to even 5 minutes daily of quietness even if its to prayerfully or mindfully sip a cup of tea? That’s less time than

most of us mindlessly put into surfing the internet. Can we, as the *Tao Te Ching* says, be still long enough for our mud to settle and our water clear? Perhaps we can do that through the most ordinary action—like sipping tea, or simply breathing—though with the intention of doing it as a meditation or prayer.

There is, in the spacious vastness of a silent pause, a powerful fullness. A fullness like what Elijah encountered in the sheer silence. Or what Rey in the film *The Last Jedi* was learning to tap into as Luke Skywalker trained her through meditation to skillfully face inner and outer battles; to not only become like fluid water before fear but also to tap into the power of The Force dwelling so close as to be inside her—and inside you. Not Jedi School material, you say? Horrible with silence? No worries. As psychotherapist and former Christian monk, Jim Finley put it when giving instructions for our minds when facing difficult thoughts which arise during silence be it in meditation, or amid our daily lives: “Remain present, open, and awake without clinging to, or rejecting anything.”^{vii} His instruction for attitude? “Remain present, open, and awake with non-judgmental compassion toward yourself as you discover yourself clinging to and rejecting *everything* (ibid).” Not berating. Just being like that mother embracing her child. Practice gentleness, tenderness, and consenting to the “Life Force”—the Breath within the breath” of which the poet Kabir speaks—as it flows, like water, through you.

Class of 2018, when struggling, may we find healing in sensing our oneness and solidarity with all who have ever struggled. Which is everyone. Even those we may struggle to love. From that and other blessings which, no doubt, will flow from your lives, I am humbled and grateful for you. Grateful for your life purpose emerging from your accomplishments and joys—and also from your vulnerable places so you can paint the world with beauty; so you can live and use your education as an instruments of healing peace. Thank you. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

Go forth in loving beauty, joy, hope, and peace.

ⁱⁱ Eng, Phoebe. Warrior Lessons: An Asian American Woman's Journey Into Power (NY: Pocket Books, 1999) p. 287.

ⁱⁱ Lyla June Johnston, *Honoring What the Creator Has Made: Standing Rock & The Growing Pan-Indigenous Movement for life*. Small Thomas Lecture, Nov. 8th 2017, Cornell College.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.splcenter.org/news/2017/11/13/hate-crimes-rise-second-straight-year-anti-muslim-violence-soars-amid-president-trumps

^{iv} *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise*, 2016 <http://www.pbs.org/weta/black-america-since-mlk-and-still-i-rise/about-the-film/>

^v https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

^{vii} Shenk, Joshua Wolf. Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).

^{vii} Finley, James. *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God, A Guide to Contemplation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) p. 24.

SACRED READINGS

Don't Hesitate by Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver

George Zimmerman

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of it's plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

Romans 12:10; 12-18

Hannah Robertson

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer...extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Tao Te Ching:

Steven Coburn

There is nothing in the world as fluid, soft, and yielding as water.
Yet water will wear away rock, which is rigid.
As a rule, the soft overcomes the hard;
the gentle overcomes the rigid.
This is another paradox: what is soft is strong.

I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty. [pause]

You don't grasp the fact that what is most alive of all is inside your own house; and so you walk from one holy city to the next with a confused look! Kabir will tell you the truth: go wherever you like, to Calcutta or Tibet; if you can't find where your soul is hidden, for you the world will never be real!

[Kabir cont'd...]

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat. My should is against yours.

You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals; not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding around your own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables. When you really look for me, you will see me instantly—You will find me in the tiniest house of time. Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God? The breath inside the breath.

First Kings 19: 3-13a

Shecharya Flatte

Frightened, Elijah fled for his life.... he went a day's journey into the wilderness, sat down beneath a solitary broom tree, then asked that he might die....Then he laid down and fell asleep. An angel touched him saying, "Get up and eat. Elijah looked, and there was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. The angel came a second time saying "Get up or the journey will be too much for you." With the strength from that meal he walked forty days and nights to Mount Horeb and went into a cave.

....Then the word of the LORD came to him saying, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He replied... I alone am left, and they are out to take my life." "Come out," called Adonai "and stand on the mountain for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.