

WHITMAN CONVOCATION SPEECH – 8/25/17

Good afternoon.

Please join me in thanking Kraig Scott for opening our celebration with his wonderful organ prelude and processional, and please be seated. [applause] For those of you I have not yet had the opportunity to meet, I am Kathy Murray, and I have the great privilege of serving as Whitman College's 14th President. On behalf of Whitman's faculty, staff, continuing students, and governing boards, it is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the 136th opening of the academic year.

There are many important rituals that colleges like Whitman embrace. This convocation marks the beginning of your academic career, and it will be bookended by commencement four years from now. Today's rituals involve greetings, introductions, charges to the new students, reassurances to the

parents, and lots of excitement about future possibilities. There will be many similarities when we get to commencement. Let's begin today with the greetings and introductions.

Will the members of the entering class, first-year and transfer students, please rise? You are at the center of our work over these next few days and years. Your presence here today is a reflection of your high level of intellectual and artistic curiosity *and* the extra effort you have expended as you have begun to satisfy that curiosity, all of which resulted in impressive academic success during your high school years. We reviewed each of your files very carefully and are confident that you have the potential to be successful here. It's OK if you're a little nervous right now. Just know that we believe you have what it takes to be strong contributors to this intellectual community.

Many people in this auditorium, most especially your parents and family members, worked very hard to make it possible for you to be here today. Please join all of us in showing appreciation for their efforts. [applause]

The rest of the people in this auditorium, the faculty and staff of Whitman, have been looking forward to your arrival and are anxious to get to know you and to work with you. We love the rhythm of the academic calendar and the energy and excitement that comes with late August. We applaud your arrival on the Whitman campus. [applause] Please be seated.

Your most important resource over the course of the next four years will be your faculty, an extraordinary group of scholars and artists who are dedicated to your learning. Will the faculty of Whitman College please stand? Get to know this group of people. Don't just learn their names. Don't just show up for

class. Go to their offices, have conversations outside of class, invite them to have lunch with you and your friends. They will push you beyond what you have ever imagined you were capable of accomplishing, and they will provide the support to make it possible for you to achieve at that very high level. But you will have to put forth the effort; they will not do the work for you. They have dedicated their professional lives to student learning, and they want you to succeed. Please join me in applauding the work of this faculty. [applause] Please be seated.

The other group critically important to your success over the course of these next years is the Whitman staff. Would the staff members present please stand? From taking care of our beautiful grounds and buildings, to preparing food for you, to helping you think about what internships and study away experiences will support your emerging passions, to making

sure the budgets balance and the lights stay on, these people have dedicated their careers to student learning at this college. Please join me in applauding the work of our staff.

I am joined on stage by several members of the Whitman community. Their names and titles are in the program. I think you will find that most people at Whitman, including me, have an “open door” policy. My door is open unless I am in a meeting, and I encourage you to stop in and say hi. I also hold open office hours for students several times each semester, so please come in and let me know how things are going. Tell me what’s going on around campus that excites you or concerns you. And, get to know the campus leaders who are up here with me.

Now that we have all been introduced, I want to share three things with you as you begin your career at Whitman. Now I

realize that if every person you meet in the next few days shares with you even three things, you will be overwhelmed, so I'm actually only going to ask you to try to remember the second and third things. The first is a story from personal experience that I hope will give you some confidence over the course of the next couple of days. You need to know that many of us who are gathered here this evening, even those of us who are more than a few years out of college, have pretty vivid memories of our first days on campus as undergraduates. I remember arriving, a very nervous and shy 18-year-old, at another small liberal arts college, with my parents. This was a big day for all three of us because, since I am a first-generation college student (meaning neither of my parents had the opportunity to go to college), none of us knew exactly what to expect. And, we were pretty sure we were the only people on that campus who didn't know the insiders' rules of the game. We were wrong, of course, but we certainly weren't going to

betray our discomfort by asking any questions. I know that a number of you sitting here this afternoon are having that same experience, and I just want to make sure you know that you are not alone and that you should ask your questions, both now and as you navigate your way through your Whitman career. Now back to my story.

That college, like this one, had a tradition of having parents and students on campus together for the opening of orientation. My parents and I were together at a reception – I, of course, was hoping against hope that nobody would notice us – when the president of the college walked up, introduced himself, and, just to make small talk, asked my father what he did for a living. Convinced—like any normal teenager—that my parents, more specifically my father, would do something to embarrass me that day, I breathed a sigh of relief, believing it was a safe question and that my dad would simply tell him that he

managed a small printing shop. Well, without missing a beat or cracking a smile, my father announced that he didn't like to work, had never worked, and didn't really see the value of work. Now that particular college president, unlike your own, did not have anything that resembled a sense of humor or even a small amount of compassion for the teenager melting into the floor in front of him, so he pretended to catch the eye of someone else and excused himself. I stand before you today as absolute living proof that, no matter what happens before they leave campus, your parents cannot embarrass you to death.

The second thing I want to share with you – and this is one of two things I'm counting on you to remember – I borrow freely from a very important mentor in my life. I heard him give this sort of address to new students many times during the early years of my career, and I've never forgotten his main message. It came through almost as a mantra throughout the talk: "Your

business here is to learn. Your business here is to learn.” You are extraordinarily bright and talented, you bring a wealth of diverse experiences to our community, and you are about to be challenged in ways that you have not yet imagined. Don’t ever forget that your business here is to learn. You may be the first in your family to go to college, or both of your parents might be college professors, but all of you will face uncertainties and doubts during your career here. Seek out and get the support you need so you can stay focused on the fact that your business here is to learn. You are about to enjoy a level of freedom and personal choice that you probably have not experienced in your life. You will be faced with choices that could be life-altering. Don’t forget that your business here is to learn. You come from different regions of the US and many different countries around the globe. Work to understand both what is different across geographic boundaries and what is universal, because your business here is to learn. You have arrived at

Whitman with strong views about politics, religion, music, sports, and did I mention politics? You will be invited to express those views in productive and sometimes unproductive ways. If your views are not challenged during your time here, and if you don't learn how to meaningfully express your views, if we do not make you uncomfortable at times, we will have failed you, and you will have failed to remember that your business here is to learn. Colleges like to distinguish between a curriculum and a co-curriculum, but you have a single life at Whitman, and you will have opportunities to learn both within and beyond the classrooms. Take advantage of all of those opportunities and always remember that your business here is to learn. Now, my mentor would have gone on at some length until the fact that your business here is to learn was imprinted on your brain, but he was a college president for 25 years, and that longevity carries with it certain privileges. I'll simply encourage you to take advantage

of everything this special place has to offer you in the next four years and remember that your business here is to learn.

Finally, I want to say just a few words about some particular challenges and opportunities that the year ahead will almost certainly bring and that I hope we will embrace together, as a community. Just over a year ago, during the summer of 2016, I sent a message to the entire Whitman community acknowledging what a difficult summer we were all experiencing, with too many horrific moments of tragic violence across our country and around the globe. I could have sent the same message this summer, and I fear that the compounding effect of multiple events over many months is taking its toll on all of us, adding to feelings of insecurity, exclusion, and fear. The challenges are clear; the opportunities perhaps less so.

I plan to take advantage of every public speaking opportunity this fall to remind our community about some of our core values that are not up for debate. Racism and bigotry, hatred and violence are antithetical to our values as a nation and as a Whitman community and will not be tolerated or ignored.

Sexual assault and drugging others without their knowledge or consent are violent forms of assault that will not be tolerated or ignored. As a community, we need to continue to develop our capacity for empathy, for the ability to understand, even to share the feelings of others, to experience life as if we are standing in someone else's shoes. You have read Jennine Capo Crucet's *Make Your Home Among Strangers* and will have numerous opportunities to think about this concept of empathy in the coming days and weeks. We need to put the theoretical concept into action as we engage in what will almost certainly be difficult dialogues within and beyond this campus community. These difficult dialogues will be even

more productive if we remember to extend grace to each other.

Grace is a concept that Kazi Joshua, our Vice-president for Diversity and Inclusion, speaks about with great passion. He has deepened my understanding of what it means to maintain a generosity of spirit toward others, recognizing that we all makes mistakes, and allowing each other the opportunity to acknowledge and apologize for our mistakes without coming under attack and without shutting down the dialogue. As we find our voices and engage in difficult dialogues, I hope we will model empathy, grace, and respect.

With this Convocation, we are launching what will be at least a year-long discussion that we will have here at Whitman around issues of freedom of speech. I want to begin with four basic principles that we will return to often:

1. We want more speech, not less.

2. Silence, and especially silencing others, is antithetical to intellectual inquiry.
3. We want dialogue, not monologue. Listening is as crucial a part of dialogue as talking, and we expect speakers to create ways for other people to speak.
4. We want intellectually responsible speech.
Assertions need to be supported with evidence, and other speakers' evidence needs to be considered.

Please watch for other opportunities in the coming weeks to engage with these issues. I will return to these ideas during my launch of the academic year address on September 14, and I look forward to continuing the conversation with all of you.

Now it is my pleasure to introduce to you the president of the Associated Students of Whitman College, AnnaMarie McCorvie. AnnaMarie is a politics major and film minor from Boulder, Colorado. She has served on ASWC throughout her Whitman

career, and she was on the executive team for the Power and Privilege Symposium last year. This past summer, she worked at Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper's office and the Constituent Services Department. Her goal for ASWC this year is to work on bolstering their role as a line of communication between students and the administration, between different student organizations, and between Whitman and the other two colleges in Walla Walla. Please join me in welcoming AnnaMarie.

Presentation of the class of 2020 – Adam

Introduction of convocation speaker – Alzada

Convocation address – Keith

Thank you, Keith.

For our musical interlude today, we have the pleasure of hearing a Mozart aria performed by senior Olivia Caldwell-Nepveux, accompanied by Jan Roberts.

Thank you, Olivia and Jan.

The final ceremonial piece of this convocation is the official opening of the academic year. You explored many institutions before deciding Whitman would be your home for the next several years. Then you waited months for this day to arrive, and now you are here. Professor Farrington has high hopes for all of you incoming students; he wants you to remain (or become) concerned citizens. AnnaMarie McCorvie invites you to take naps so that you're ready to tackle "global climate change and growing wealth inequality and a whole host of other overwhelming issues." I suggest that you make time, regularly, to reflect on the personal narrative you are creating

throughout these next years. Explore multiple paths in order to identify your passion, seek out advice from different perspectives (faculty, staff, other students, alumni, family, friends) about how best to pursue that passion, choose your major to support that passion, and figure out what other courses will broaden your insights both within and beyond that passion. Recognize that your passion will likely take you in many different directions throughout your life. As an undergraduate, I knew my passion was the piano, but I came to realize over time that my focus would be on education. That passion for education has been at the center of every decision I've made about my career path, and it has taken me in some wonderful directions. I am confident that you will have an equally compelling narrative to share if you take advantage of all the wonderful opportunities this place, this community, has to offer.

Now, as is our tradition at Whitman, my final message is to give you your first homework assignments for the year. There are three:

- 1) Tomorrow morning, come prepared to register for classes at your appointed time.
- 2) On Monday, you will discuss our summer reading, *Make Your Home Among Strangers*, in small groups with your resident advisors and student academic advisors. Be prepared to contribute to that conversation.
- 3) Before classes begin next week, you should wrestle with the Preface and Chapters 1-3 of Volume I of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* so that you are prepared for the second Encounters class meeting on Friday.

And now, with great pleasure, on this 25th day of August, 2017, I declare Whitman College officially open for the 136th academic year.

Thank you. Before we depart, I want to invite you to a reception outside on the Cordiner Lawn. Please join me there. And now please stand and remain at your seats for the faculty recessional.