

WHITMAN CONVOCATION SPEECH

President Kathleen M. Murray - August 24, 2018

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 137th 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, as you join our community, I encourage you to continue to develop your 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. All of us need to put the theoretical concept into action as we engage in 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 Student Affairs, 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 important dialogues, I hope we will model empathy, grace, and respect.

Now it is my pleasure to introduce to you the president of the Associated Students of Whitman College, Lily Parker. Lily is a rising senior Rhetoric Studies major and Race and Ethnic Studies minor from Seattle. She is the former President of Feminists Advocating for Change and Empowerment, an officer in her sorority, and an appointed member of the college's disciplinary committee. Over the summer, she interned with the Seattle Clemency Project, working to get long-serving prisoners' sentences commuted by the governor. This year she is looking forward to finishing her Rhetoric thesis about OJ Simpson, registering students to vote, and making ASWC a more inclusive and accessible force on campus. Please join me in welcoming Lily Parker.