

The 156th Commencement of The City College of New York

Friday, May 31, 2002

Address by President Gregory H. Williams

Distinguished members of the platform party, Senator Schume, honored guests of the College, CCNY faculty, staff and alumni, parents, family and friends; and members of the Class of 2002:

Welcome on this beautiful morning to the 156th Commencement of The City College of New York. To the graduates, and to your loved ones, who have guided and nurtured you through your study, I offer my heartfelt congratulations on your achievement!

You have worked hard and you have done well. We salute you – and we expect great things of you.

Now, for some of you, this Commencement marks the end of your years at CCNY. For some it marks the end of the beginning, as you will return for graduate study, or to teach, or perhaps even one day to address another graduating class as the President of the College.

But in any event, your “last” year at The City College coincides with my first year here. And I believe I can speak for all of us in saying that it has been a difficult and trying time.

The defining event of this past year, of course, not just for us but for our city and our nation, and in many aspects, for the world, was 9/11 and its aftermath. Thousands lost their lives and literally millions of were directly affected. Many of our assumptions were turned upside down, and the attendant emotions and actions and politics have touched us all in ways that are still to be determined. The repercussions – emotional, political, economic and international – of that fateful day will be with us for a long time to come.

Today we honor the men and women of the uniformed services who gave so much in their response to the disaster. It is our privilege to do so. They will always be in our hearts.

We must not forget the countless others who worked selflessly on that day. Many EMS personnel, for example, who worked and even perished in the Twin Towers came from hospitals and private organizations. It is an honor to introduce to you one of these brave men and one of our own, Mr. George Contreras, who was working in Tower one on that fateful day and lost many of his colleagues. Mr. Contreras is currently doing his post-Baccalaureate work in Pre-Med here at City College.

In the midst of these world-changing events, we have also been consumed with the personal and parochial events of our “ordinary” lives: taking exams and writing papers, working to put food on the table, having and taking care of our children and of our families, spending time with our friends. We have gotten up and gotten on with our normal lives – as we must – in abnormal times.

What can usefully be said that can bridge the personal and the impersonal inflections of such a year? What advice could possibly be up to the enormity of events we have come through together and the intimacy of our lives lived separately?

I turn to one of the great men of our time and in fact of all time for inspiration. Thirty-nine years ago the Reverend Martin Luther King spoke at City’s 117th Commencement.

Commending the graduating class of 1963 for reaching this milestone, Dr. King continued:

“As you move into your various fields of endeavor, you will be moving into a world of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty. Indeed, we live in a day of grave crisis...[which] presents a real challenge to all men of good will. We are challenged to develop a world perspective. No nation or individual can live alone in the modern world. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools. All life is inter-related, and all men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

These words were spoken, of course, before anything like the attacks of September 11 had been conceived. They were uttered long before personal computers and cell phones – before you could speak to someone in Finland or Taiwan over this thing called the Internet – before the end of the Soviet Union – before smallpox was eradicated – before the genome was mapped – before men walked on the moon. They were spoken before most of you who are graduating today were even born.

Dr. King spoke at CCNY in a far different time:

He spoke only a few hours after Medgar Evers, the 37-year-old Director of Mississippi’s only NAACP office was murdered in front of his wife and small children.

He spoke a day after Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, set himself on fire to protest the policies of the American-supported government of South Vietnam in what was to become a awful icon of that war.

He spoke slightly more than a half a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis – when the world stepped to – and back from – the precipice of nuclear holocaust.

He spoke only three months before four little girls would die in the unthinkable bombing of a Birmingham church that has only now – this past week – come so late to resolution.

He spoke only 5 months before – unimaginably – John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Martin Luther King was only 34 years old when he spoke here at The City College. In five short years, he was too was assassinated.

Today we are also indeed in the midst of “catastrophic change” – of “calamitous uncertainty.”

What are we to make of the fact that that these urgent words of so long ago seem to be so appropriate for the post September 11th world today?

Is each generation condemned to face its own calamity?

Is each possibility of technological or scientific advance necessarily twinned with a ratcheting up of the scope and possibility of destruction?

Has there been no change? No progress?

The question is whether men – and women – of goodwill are up to the challenge that Martin Luther King laid out almost 40 years ago in Lewisohn Plaza: Can we learn to live together as brothers? Is the force of good will stronger than the currents of history and circumstance? Is good will up to a post-September world?

That answer, I would suggest – is not yet written. It is not yet “Yes” and not yet “No.”

It is yours to write.

And there is no small amount of evidence for both answers. Clearly, if 9/11 teaches us anything, it teaches us that we have the technological – and scientific – and political – and moral ability to affect millions for good or ill.

Now, you – the class of 2002 – have spent some years here learning the substance of your chosen field of study. You will leave here to pursue careers in education, medicine, law, journalism, engineering, the fine and performing arts, research, public service. You will have families, raise children, vote, go to movies and travel abroad. You will have ordinary and some even extraordinary lives.

In addition to this, however, it is my deepest hope and proudest expectation that you have also learned to ask – again and again and again – the hardest questions:

What must men and women of goodwill do now to develop a “world perspective,” to learn to “live together as brothers...tied in a single garment of destiny.”

As you ponder these questions, I hope you will ask yourselves and others: What is your evidence? Who says so? Why? Who benefits? Who is harmed? What other questions is this question related to?

Each of us answers these questions out of the particular substance of our own lives. Out of our own personal stories. I know my worldview is shaped by the formative experiences in my life.

In 1963, when Martin Luther King spoke at CCNY’s 139th Commencement, I was 19 years old.

Some of you may know that my own life had been in some turmoil for several years. My mother was white and my father was Black. That union was not able to survive the hard racial divide of that time in America and my home state of Indiana. So my youth was spent struggling along with my father’s very poor family in the Black housing projects of Muncie, Indiana. In the vernacular of the time, overnight I became a “colored boy.” I often went to bed hungry; much of my world was segregated; and little was given to me or expected of me from the “white” power structure of the time.

When I was eighteen years old, I sat in a white lawyer’s office where my dad worked as a janitor from time to time. My dad and the lawyer were trying to figure out a way that I would be able to go to college since I had no money. The lawyer suggested an appointment to a military academy—but being the son of an unemployed black janitor, I had no political connections.

Yet that afternoon the lawyer picked up the phone and began to dial the Indiana congressman in Washington, D.C. As he made that call, I sat there in a state of shock. Because of the razor sharp racial division and the experiences I had in that divided society, I had come to believe that, to most people in the community of my youth, my life was not worth a long distance telephone call.

It was at that moment that I knew I really wanted to be a lawyer. Because one day I wanted to be able to make the same call for a kid who had absolutely nothing but dreams. I wanted to be able to show another human being that his life was of value and merit. That was my answer to Dr. King’s challenge to men and women of good will.

Thirty-nine years later, I stand before you as President of one of the truly great universities of the world. And you – the graduating class of The City College of New York in 2002 – look rather different than the class that Martin Luther King addressed in 1963.

That Class of 1963 went on to do great things in the world, as I am confident that you will accomplish as well. The Class of 1963 was overwhelmingly white and male. Today we celebrate publicly the great diversity of the world in our own graduating class. You come from every corner of the globe. You reflect all the colors – all the religions – all the possibilities of humanity. I believe that Dr. King would beam with pride were he here today to see the richness of background and experience you represent.

I believe that the crystalline fact of your graduation – your multi-hued, multi-storied success – is also the beginning of an answer to the challenge that Dr. King voiced nearly 40 years ago here on this campus. You stand for humanity's capacity to live together as brothers, as men and women of good will, in a single garment of destiny.

I thank you for what you have brought to the university. But more importantly, I applaud the potential that you now bring to the world. Each and every one of you has the ability to make a difference in the world. I urge you not to shrink from that opportunity. It will enrich you forever.