

A Community of Character

By Washington and Lee President Kenneth P. Ruscio

Fall Convocation

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At the beginning of a convocation address it is customary to thank the president of the University for the invitation to speak to the assembled body. That's a little awkward at the moment. Instead let me explain why I invited myself.

There are a few things I want to say – to our students primarily but also to the entire Washington and Lee community, to my colleagues on the faculty and in the administration, and to my fellow alumni. I am going to issue a challenge to the students but one that will call upon all of us to support me and the students as I work with them.

The challenge is to renew our commitment to the values that are at the heart and soul of Washington and Lee University – this place, which as alumnus Tom Litzenburg has so perfectly described it, is a place like no other.

A little over three years ago shortly after I was named president and before I formally took up my duties, I made a series of visits to the campus to listen to our students and faculty and learn what was on their minds. On the first of those visits, the Lee House was offered to me as a place to spend the night. Acting President

Harlan Beckley and his wife Debbie had stayed in their beautiful home on Jackson Avenue during their year watching over things.

So I had the house to myself – the house that Kim, my wife, and Matthew, my son, would soon call our home.

I decided to be blasé about this. It was, after all, a house. And like any house, it had a kitchen, a television room, living room, a few bedrooms and bathrooms. It was made of bricks and wood, and nicely furnished.

I went about my usual routine. Dinner, a little television, reading a few chapters from a book, and then off to bed as usual at 10:30. (Students should feel free to express astonishment at that time.)

But after considerable tossing and turning, sleep just wouldn't come. And gradually, slowly I began to realize the significance of where I was. Sometime in the early morning hours, I got up and explored, this time with a much different approach than earlier that evening:

... into the room where Mrs. Lee taught her daughters to play the piano and where her artwork now hangs;

... Robert E. Lee's bedroom on the second floor positioned so that he could look over Traveler's stall;

... the parlor where the famous Stuart portrait of George Washington then hung over the fireplace;

... a brief, if chilly, walk on the wraparound porch built so the wheelchair-bound Mrs. Lee could enjoy the outside air;

... the dining room where Lee entertained distinguished guests and where, after suffering a stroke, he rested looking out on the campus during his final days.

This was not a mere arrangement of bricks, wood, and plaster, but a reflection of the history and values of the University, one of the buildings that creates a powerful sense of place at Washington and Lee University. This was not just a house; it was the Lee House.

In our society today, we don't spend enough time thinking where or how we acquire the values that will guide our lives. But as my fellow political scientists like to say, institutions matter; and the institutions that matter the most are the ones that boldly stand for something.

The Lee House is not just a house, and in a similar way Washington and Lee is not just an organization, not just a university. It is an institution that shapes the values of those who are educated here, who work here, who teach here, and who return here to remind themselves of the lessons they learned while in its firm embrace.

This sensibility has deep and complex sources – as it must if its values are deep and complex. It is not my purpose today to explore those origins, except to cite one. More than any other college,

including those with Washington in their names, we exist only because of our nation's first president. He gave us a generous gift with the message now displayed on the entrance to the Lenfest Center, "To promote literature in this rising empire, and to encourage the arts, have ever been amongst the warmest wishes of my heart."

Even in these modern times when it is fashionable to debunk the mythology of great historical figures, Washington's legacy stands firm. The historian Gordon Wood calls him the hero who made it possible for our democracy to thrive without the need for heroes. Garry Wills, in his assessment of Washington's leadership, harkens back to Rousseau's observation that every democracy needs lawmakers who are, without the laws, what the laws would have people become.

The significance of our connection to Washington is not that our values derive from him, although I think some of them do, especially our hope that students and alumni grasp the meaning of self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good.

Washington's influence is more than that. We accept as our own institutional duty the obligation to educate students for character, to prepare them for the moral responsibilities they will face as citizens and leaders.

If you were to plunge into the world of the liberal arts philosophy, the mission statements of colleges like us, the many late afternoon

faculty debates, and the many letters from alumni keeping their alma maters in check, I believe you would resurface with two fundamental questions in hand.

To the students, here is the beginning of the challenge I mentioned earlier. You need to answer these questions. The search for these answers should be the reason why you came to Washington and Lee rather than somewhere else, for the answers, while not unique to Washington and Lee perhaps, have sharper definition here and are part of our fabric, our traditions, our history, our purpose. The answers will guide your choices as students and profoundly shape your lives afterwards.

The first is what do we owe to future generations?

If this is not one of the questions that immediately comes to mind when you think about your education, it should be, for I truly believe that intergenerational justice will be one of the central ethical and public policy questions of your lifetime.

Consider the current fiscal and budgetary predicament in our nation. My generation has unjustly borrowed from your generation to make our situation better. It will be small consolation to offer you my gratitude, even as I apologize for our inability to make some difficult choices. It is undoubtedly frustrating for me to insist that our failings do not entitle you to do the same to those who will come after you. You don't get a pass because we have let you down.

Consider also our current environmental challenges. We have made your choices more difficult than the ones we have faced, and we show few signs of reversing our course.

There is a famous letter by Thomas Jefferson. He wrote to James Madison from the comfortable salons of Paris soon after Madison's grueling long hot constitutional convention summer in Philadelphia. Jefferson was in a meditative mood.

He put forth a proposition: "the earth belongs to the living," and during our time on this earth it is given to us not with a license to do whatever we want with it, but as a trust. It is our responsibility to pass it on to others, free of debt, with resources and opportunities at least equal to that which we enjoyed. Otherwise, the earth would belong to the dead, to those who had used it up during their time of stewardship. They would have staked their claim as if it were theirs and theirs alone, and left nothing for the living.

Like many thinkers of his time, Jefferson was sensitive to the apparent tendency of individuals to capture benefits for themselves while imposing the costs on others. I suppose this self-interested disposition is hard-wired; it is what it is, and since the emergence of human consciousness it has been a problem that many of the brightest philosophers, economists, political theorists and, recently, biologists have tried to understand and resolve.

But because the scale of our actions today is wider and deeper and more durable, there is simply so much more at stake. We can do much more damage to the future than our ancestors could. And transferring the costs to those not yet born is an irresistibly easy route.

They have no way to assert their rights, or to mount any kind of opposition. So the normal means of sorting out competing political and economic interests don't work very well. Our ethical awareness therefore needs to be greater; it's the only hope they have and the only check on our self-interest.

I will do everything I can during your time here to make you sensitive to your obligation to the future. You will hear more in the weeks to come about a variety of measures we will take here at Washington and Lee, right now. For example, but only as an example, we will dedicate ourselves to reducing our energy consumption by 25% over the next four years.

That may sound ambitious. But when I recently learned that in a study of energy usage on thirty college campuses we came in at number 30, I was embarrassed for an institution with a motto "not unmindful of the future."

Our actions need to be consistent with our values.

Along the way, I will remind you of certain symbols. Behind you is the Colonnade, a national historic landmark. Newcomb Hall is

the scene right now of a careful restoration, and gradually over the next four years we will undertake one of the most challenging but also most meaningful projects in the history of this University as we move from Newcomb to Payne Hall, then Washington, then Robinson, and finally Tucker Hall.

It has fallen to us, to this generation, to ensure that future students will have the opportunity not only to gaze upon that vista with all the emotion we feel, but also to receive the kind of education that will prepare them for the world of the 21st century.

Let that project be a constant reminder that we are not unmindful of the future. Let it be a physical expression of how we honor our past by building for our future.

At Washington and Lee, we have an implicit intergenerational contract. Only an institution with a past as rich and complex as ours can truly appreciate what we owe to the future, for we experience daily the inheritance we have been blessed with.

Of all people, those of us here at Washington and Lee should be among those who rise up to proclaim this ethical principle: if we benefit from the sacrifice of those who came before us, as we surely do, we must sacrifice equally on behalf of those yet to come.

The second question is what do we owe to each other?

Washington and Lee has a statement of philosophy. It reads, in part, that we will “pursue our educational mission in a climate of learning that stresses the importance of the individual, personal honor and integrity, harmonious relationships with others, and the responsibility to serve society through the productive use of talent and training.” I take that very seriously. Having graduated from here, having taught here, and now serving in this position, I also take it very personally.

If I have one single, driving passion and commitment to all of you and to this University, it is captured in that aspiration.

Go carefully over those words with me...a climate of *learning*...the importance of the *individual*...*harmonious relationships* with others... the *responsibility to serve society*...(and at the center of it all)...*personal honor and integrity*.

I am often amazed at the qualities of this University. I recall an editorial from the Ring-tum Phi in 1995 by Sarah Gilbert. She described a time when she was alone one evening in her dorm room, facing the challenge of a take-home exam. In her own words, “I had my books and notes near me in a backpack, and I came upon a question I could not answer. I knew that I could find the answer in a matter of seconds in my notes. I knew no one would ever know that I cheated. I could do so, turn in the exam, tell no one, and graduate unscathed. In high school, I would not have to think twice. But my sense of honor was too strong.”

I recall a conversation with a trustee from a liberal arts college in New England, who was here on campus a couple of years ago for a meeting. We were comparing our schools and finding many similarities. Good students, good faculty, good athletics. Then he stopped and said there was one big difference. On his way from the parking deck behind the Warner Center to the meeting on campus, every student he passed greeted him and offered to show him the way. That, he explained, would never have happened at his school.

I know firsthand of the enduring bonds of friendship this place fosters. As I did, you will meet the best friends of your lives during your time here as students. Most will be your classmates, but some will be your teachers and some will be members of the staff who prepare your food and provide the security for this campus.

I am constantly struck, too, by my conversations with alumni. No matter where they live or when they graduated, no matter the profession they have chosen, all can eloquently express how integrity has been so central to their lives. This is a place of virtue and character.

As Sarah Gilbert concluded from her experience with her take-home exam, "I will leave Washington and Lee a much better person than when I came." Faced with the decision to cheat or act honorably she was guided by her fidelity to a set of values rather than her own self-interest.

At no other time in your life than when you are a student at Washington and Lee will you grow so much as an individual yet feel so much a part of a community. She became a better individual by understanding what she owed to others.

But our success in some areas is also why, I believe, we are so disappointed when we fail in others. Our conversations often begin with a deep appreciation for honor, and we are so much better an institution because of that. But that cannot be the complete measure of our values. It is the foundation. Our ability to fashion a community of honor should demonstrate how we, more than any other college, have still higher aspirations, among them to build a community of respect for all individuals, no matter their backgrounds, their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their ethnicity, or their religious beliefs.

To take one example of how we sometimes fail: malicious words anonymously posted on internet sites are cowardly and shame all of us.

Or another example: the mistreatment or disrespect of women is completely antithetical to our fundamental values. There should be not just a lower incidence of sexual assault on this campus; there should be no incidents.

Or another example: for the life of me and my fellow members of the Board of Trustees, we cannot understand why students today labor under the strange belief, sometimes dangerous in its implications and sometimes just silly, that the road to fraternal brotherhood must pass through a stage of servitude.

Don't take my word for it. Take Lee's in his famous description of a true gentleman, setting forth a principle that applies to all of us, men and women alike:

The manner in which an individual enjoys certain advantages over others is the test of a true gentleman. The power which the strong have over the weak, the magistrate over the citizen, the employer over the employed, the educated over the unlettered, the experienced over the confiding, even the clever over the silly – the forbearing or inoffensive use of all this power or authority, or a total absence from it when the case admits it, will show the gentleman in plain light.

What we as members of the Washington and Lee community owe to each other is mutual respect, a respect borne from recognizing that we share a common humanity with everyone in this community.

The mark of a Washington and Lee man and woman – during your student days and later in your life long after you leave here--should be that anyone who comes in contact with you, no matter the setting, no matter their agreement or disagreement with you, no matter how different they are from you, walks away saying they were treated with respect. That lesson has been learned by others before you; it should be learned by you as well.

I know the hour is late. So let me close by making just a few points.

First, as I have said before, Washington and Lee offers not just a college education, but a particular kind of education, one that sends you on your way with a sharper intellect, to be sure, but also with a deeper soul and a gentler heart.

I am not one who spends a lot of time asking students to “find themselves” during their time in college. There’s frankly too much of that nowadays, too much a focus on the self, too much preoccupation with our perceived entitlements. I hope you discover instead the needs and interests of others, and in so doing come to understand your obligations to this community and to the communities you will join when you leave here.

Our community of character is, first and foremost, a community where we look out for each other and where our own preferences are softened by a commitment to something greater than the self.

Second, your individual character will grow as you learn how to widen the gap between impulse and action. Not every thought needs to be immediately spoken or emailed or twittered or posted on your Facebook page. Not every desire needs to be immediately fulfilled, especially if it means taking advantage of someone else.

But widening the gap is merely the first step. The next step is how to fill the space you've created. One way is for us – the administration, the Board, and the faculty--to fill it for you with rules and regulations, a list of do's and don'ts crafted by those of us wiser and older than you. If you leave us no alternative, which you would be doing if you showed no sensitivity to W&L's values, we would be forced to do it for you, not happily and not easily but of necessity. That's not my preference, however; it really produces moral conformity, which is not what we, as educators, want for you.

Far preferable for me is the path of moral autonomy, where you draw upon the best this community has to offer to fill the space with a rich set of values and principles. That asks a lot of you. Your choices must be your own, dictated not by what others tell you to do but by a refined sense of what you owe to others.

That is what we seek here at Washington and Lee – to educate morally autonomous individuals, guided by the virtues of integrity and civility, deeply aware of their responsibility to each other and to the future, and driven by the same compulsion of duty as Washington and Lee.

Third, we rightly point to our honor system as a hallmark of this University. But because of the honor system's durability, and because we take it as self-evident that learning occurs outside the classroom, we pay less attention to other ways of exploring complex ethical and moral questions. Developing habits of the heart requires developing habits of the mind. The way to one's heart should be through the head. You will do good, if you reason well. That is why, in the end, the signature strengths of Washington and Lee – our academic excellence and the development of the character of our students – are so intertwined. You come here to learn in common what you cannot learn alone.

That is why I call upon you this year to work with me as we re-dedicate ourselves to the values and the traditions of Washington and Lee, and to think carefully about how they guide our actions here and now, how they shape our lives, and how they guide our relationships with each other.

There are many liberal arts colleges in this country. There are many law schools in this country.

But what has distinguished us, I firmly believe, is not a rhetorical commitment to character, but a deeply effective history of students becoming aware of their responsibilities to others, and later leading lives of service that bring distinction to themselves and to this University.

I am not asking anything of you that has not been asked of others before you. But from time to time, institutions like Washington and Lee need to remind themselves of what matters. Let this be one of those times. Let us embrace the beauty of the differences we bring to this place, as we also embrace the virtues that bind us together in this place of learning. Let us fashion an even stronger community of character, a community of honor and respect.