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A View from Melrose

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Inaugural address

March 8, 2019

The first live performance I saw of Phylicia Rashad was at the Kennedy Center. She was part of the National Symphony Orchestra: Portraits of America series. In particular, she spoke the words in Copland's "Lincoln Portrait." I had no idea how meaningful either Phylicia Rashad or those words would be in my life.

The 39 words that entered my brain and heart like the words of a lullaby whispered into a child's ear are:

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise – with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew."

Abraham Lincoln made these remarks in his annual message, sent to Congress, on December 1, 1862. This was four years after Linfield College was founded and three years before the end of the Civil War. The world of 2019 is indeed a different world than 1858. I doubt the American Baptist Churches, who were the founders of Linfield College, or anyone of the time, could conceive of the world or Linfield College as it is today.

A world of increasing technological innovations and socio-logical shifts. A world where people can speak to and see each other on a handheld device. A world where a major currency of social standing is how many people follow you on mediums that did not exist even a mere 20 years ago.

One hundred sixty-one years ago, when Linfield was founded a few blocks from here and did not even offer degrees, who would have imagined the two campuses we now have, the 54 unique programs, 79 buildings, 159 faculty, over 1,900 students, which includes 32 percent of U.S. students of color?

And Lord knows that there was no one who imagined someone looking like me becoming president of Linfield.

Linfield is anew, and the world is anew. And while we are gathered here to celebrate my inauguration as the 20th president of this great institution, I cannot ignore the difficult challenges that lay ahead of us. Those challenges exist on a global scale, even as they require local action.

The world is in need of leaders who can rise above tribalism and engage on our shared humanity.

The world needs people who are both technologically proficient and morally developed.

The world needs those who can think beyond the needs of their own self-interest and ego and act for the greater good.

The world needs the kind of people who are educated at Linfield College. The kind of education that is rooted in inquiry and curiosity. An education that is rooted in something more than job preparation. W.E.B. Du Bois stated:

"Education must not simply teach work - it must teach life."

Du Bois, in his article "The Talented Tenth," published in 1903, foresaw where the state of higher education would be today and why institutions like Linfield must exist if we are to move our communities, our nation and the world forward. DuBois wrote:

"If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans, but not, in nature, men."

I encourage all of you to read W.E.B. Du Bois and his thoughts on the purpose of education. But even more than reading the writings of the past, we must support the work being done in the present to help create a world that connects life, learning and community.

I challenge you, who have come from near and far to participate in this time-honored tradition of presidential inaugurations, to find within you that one thing that you need to transform in order for you to reach your potential. Because the world needs what you uniquely have to offer.

You are a child of the God Most High and have greatness within you.

And in the words of Margaret Mead:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

It is time to think anew and act anew!

Be well. Be blessed.

– Miles K. Davis