

**What Does It Mean to Be Free in a World Such as Ours?
University of Michigan 2018 Honors Convocation
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Thank you, Professor Philbert. It's really a great honor and privilege to address all of you. Your accomplishments are remarkable and it gives me great hope to see all of you out there. I, too, am going to address our question, "What does it mean to be free in a world such as ours?" No small topic.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

With liberty and justice for all. What does that mean?

I grew up in western Massachusetts, saying those words every morning in public school. Right after the Pledge every morning, we recited the Lord's Prayer. I was the only Jewish child in my school and I knew the Lord's Prayer was not mine.

I felt anxious and I felt ashamed. And when it was my turn to lead the pledge and the prayer, I whispered the words, hoping no one would notice. But I didn't at that point understand how deeply ironic it was that I was being forced to recite someone else's prayer right after invoking the ideals of liberty and justice.

I didn't really understand what liberty or freedom meant, and I didn't really understand what justice was either. I didn't yet know the horrifying history of the country that had murdered my people. But I also didn't yet know that the country to which my family had fled to escape the Nazis and their White supremacist agenda was founded on dreams of liberty and justice but had systematically denied those rights to whole groups of people. I didn't yet know that this country had denied freedom to the indigenous people on whose lands we stand every day. And I also didn't know that this country had enslaved Black people on those stolen lands. I didn't yet know how deeply intertwined were the promises of liberty and justice. Liberty and justice for all?

I'd like to read one stanza from a poem by the brilliant Black poet Langston Hughes, written in 1935—more than three quarters of a century ago. His words, I think, offer some insight for my question:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me.)
O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

What would it mean for life to be free? And what would it mean for equality to be in the "air we breathe"?

One thing freedom means is self-determination. Being able to decide what you want to do, where you want to go, what you choose to say, the actions you choose to take. Freedom is speaking truth to power. Freedom is speaking out and speaking up.

But freedom also means being able to live without fear. Without the fear of being pulled over for a traffic stop because of the color of your skin, not the speed of your car. Without the fear of being assaulted and being told it was because you wore a top with spaghetti straps. Without the fear of losing your job because of who you are or whom you love. Without the fear of persecution because of your religion. Freedom is not having to worry about your safety. Freedom is not being so vulnerable that you try to hide or make yourself invisible.

The challenge is that freedom can lead to injustice. And that's a tension that we have to confront.

Let me tell you one other story.

It was September 1989, at the beginning of the school year. That year I was teaching third grade. On the first day of class I asked the children to introduce themselves by sharing what they wanted to be called, where they were born, how old they were, and anything else that they wanted to tell us about themselves.

Everything was going along smoothly until Tina, a Black girl in my class, introduced herself and said she was nine years old and was born in Michigan in 1979. A White boy in my class named Shea immediately interrupted to tell Tina that she was wrong, she couldn't possibly be nine. Shea was convinced that Tina had to be ten if she was born in 1979. Tina insisted that she was nine, and explained that she was born in December and hadn't had her birthday yet. But Shea remained incredulous. And he spoke up, telling the other children, "She's so mixed up. She doesn't even know how old she is or where she was born."

Shea was exercising his freedom to speak up, to critique, to question claims. But in this very small moment of third grade, Shea's freedom to speak compromised Tina's. Shea's freedom positioned Tina as not-knowing—as not knowing her own age or where she was born. And in this very small moment a White boy used his freedom—and in being free, without regard for Tina, he reduced her freedom. He reduced her.

In classrooms such as the one I just described, or the one that I grew up in, or the ones that you as students are in every day on our campus—it's in these spaces that we construct the world in which freedom is possible. It's in these spaces that individuals—young children like Shea and Tina, or people like every one of you—learn now to exercise agency, voice, and their right to self-determination.

But for us to have a civil society, where "life is free" and "equality is in the air we breathe," it is in these spaces—public schools, public universities—that people must also learn to respect others' rights to agency, voice, and self-determination. And it is in these spaces that we can learn that freedom is a collective responsibility, not merely an individual right.

Liberty, or freedom, I now understand better, must be constrained by the commitment to justice. There cannot be justice without freedom. Nor can there be freedom without justice.

As members of the University of Michigan community, on campus and way beyond, we must fight for justice. And we must continue to struggle with the challenges of freedom. These are our rights. They are also our shared responsibility. Our individual liberties to speak, to act, and to choose must be checked by our commitment to justice. Our commitment to justice requires vigilance about others' freedom, their rights to safety and self-determination. There's no formula for this. But this is why public education is so important to our society.

If we commit ourselves to it, we can learn to meet the challenge of "liberty and justice for all." And meeting that challenge—each of us, in our day-to-day lives, in our actions, our decisions, and our interactions, in the policies we create and practices we enact—meeting that challenge is the core of what it really means to be truly free, as individuals and as a society.

Go Blue!



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