

Commencement 2022

Speech by President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

Congratulations to all of our graduates, as well as to your families, loved ones, and friends. We gather to celebrate you and your tremendous accomplishments here 'neath the elms. Though it's been a challenging year, there is so much to celebrate. May I ask Trinity faculty and staff and alumni and parents to stand as you are able to be honored by our graduating class?

I think it wouldn't be my Commencement speech—or, for that matter, any of my speeches—if I didn't talk about a book that I've read. Today I want to tell you a bit about the debut novel by African-born Abi Daré. *The Girl with the Louding Voice* describes the tale of Adunni, a young girl born in a small, rural village in Nigeria. Her mother, on her deathbed, pleads with her husband to allow Adunni to stay in school to get an education. Her mother wisely knows that the only way out of poverty, the only way for Adunni to ever have her voice heard, is to get an education. While her father initially agrees, he later sells Adunni into marriage at age 14. She escapes her village, ends up in Lagos, the big city, working as a maid for a family that treats her horribly, but Adunni never forgets what her mother wished for her. She recalls her mother's words:

“Your schooling is your voice, child. It will be speaking for you even if you didn't open your mouth to talk.”

Her mother's words echo in my own mind, as I know that education—in particular an education from Trinity College—will speak for all of you even if you don't open your mouths. And your Trinity degree will speak for itself, long before you utter a word. That says something about the quality of your education, about all you've learned while here at Trinity.

Our young Adunni goes even further. She not only wants a voice but also a louding voice, the name of the novel. What is a louding voice, you might ask? Adunni, with only an elementary-level education, doesn't know the difference between loud, louder, loudest ... or even her made-up word of louding. But I think we all know what it means. She wants a voice that is actually more than just a voice; she wants a strong, *louding* voice, one that exudes accomplishment and confidence. Ultimately, this is a book of hope as Adunni eventually receives a scholarship to continue her education.

I believe that your time at Trinity, shaped caringly and lovingly by your professors, your coaches, and others, has given you that same confidence—that same louding voice—to try new things, to sometimes fail, and to try yet again. Trinity has been a practice ground for you, and we all know that practice does, indeed, make you better. It is through guided practice that you try, you learn, you make mistakes, you are corrected, and you improve. With support, you learn to become more adept at analyzing difficult problems from different perspectives, articulating your point of view to different audiences, and using facts to support your arguments.

And what you have done at Trinity, with this community of support, is practice the person you want to be. You've had the chance to try on different “clothes,” so to speak, through the clubs you were in, the sports you played, and of course, the classes you took—you tried on those different “clothes” to see what fit. And now, with that awareness, and with your louding voice, we're sending you off into the future to transform the world.

Today's Commencement speaker has used his louding voice, albeit sometimes without vocalizing a single word. Raja Changez Sultan, Trinity Class of 1972, is an internationally renowned creative, a poet and painter

from Pakistan who five decades ago sat where you are today. The psychology major, who this morning received an honorary doctor of fine arts degree, once served as director general for the Pakistan Council of the Arts, where he empowered the work of countless other creatives—artists, thinkers, writers, and performers—to use their louding voices.

We all—every one of us here, and, in fact, in the world—have been dealing with a monumental roadblock for more than two years: the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope that through this time, you’ve learned the same lessons that I did from my own education, how to take a different approach to solving a problem, how to be flexible, and how to be resilient and overcome roadblocks. And I also hope that you recognize just how much Trinity community members have helped you on this path; so many people have cared for you here and supported your journey to this day and this place.

Now there’s one more piece of Adunni’s story that I want to share with you today. She doesn’t just want this louding voice for herself. She’s always been a nurturer, a teacher of sorts, even to younger students in her elementary school. She dreams that when she gets older and has her education, she can use it to empower others. She notes:

“If I can go to school and become a teacher, then I can collect my salary and maybe even build my own school ... the girls in my village don’t have much chance for school. I want to change that ... because those girls, they will grow up and born many more great people to make Nigeria even more better than now.”

At Trinity, we hope that you will use your voice to empower others—much as Adunni wants to do, and much as Raja Changez Sultan has done—as that is the essence of education. It’s not just how you use education to make life better for yourself but how you will use it to make life better for others.

This idea explains why we say that education is a public good: it’s not simply what job you get; it’s how society will be better because you got your education. It’s not just your world today, but your world tomorrow—when you may face very real challenges, such as threats to the environment or to a woman’s right to choose—that can *and must* benefit from what you take with you when you leave campus today.

Consider our mission statement: As the preeminent liberal arts college in an urban setting, Trinity College prepares students to be bold, independent thinkers who lead transformative lives. Transformation both happens to you and *through you*. Your transformation and your life ahead will easily influence and inspire others to have their own transformative experiences in ways you might not be aware of.

So remember, at Trinity—as in all of life—your voice is more than what you say; it is what you do. Your voice, your louding voice, will be seen through your actions. We, here at Trinity, want you to make a better world because you were educated, transformed, and empowered at this very special place called Trinity College.

And so I ask you, the graduates of 2022, what do you want to do with your louding voice? Whom will you empower? How will you improve our world? I can’t wait to see the magic that you produce. **MAKE ME PROUD!**

Congratulations!