Baccalaureate Address
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Thursday, May 23, 2019
St. Paul’s Chapel

Hello, everyone--

Let me start by opening up space for unfettered gratitude. Thank you **seniors**, for giving me one last chance to think out-loud with you. I can’t decide which is a greater honor—your putting me in this high pulpit or Targoff’s risking his physical safety just to impersonate me for Halloween. Thank you **parents** for sharing your kind, curious, creative and determined children with us. Thank you **colleagues** for making this school a place where if you have a question about ANYTHING...someone in the building will have an answer -- whether it’s be about how to make aspirin in your own kitchen or the physics explaining why my cat survived a fifteen-story fall--completely unscathed (Ask Mr. Schober or Lucas Sheridan...it’s something about terminal velocity and feline parachuting.) Thank you to the **people, here and back at Trinity, who really run the show**--the dining, facilities and security teams. Thank you, **Samira and Heintzy** for bringing the Word to us tonight. And I would like to acknowledge that our ceremony is taking place on the ancestral land of the Lenape people.

When Leyla Giordano asked me if I’d speak tonight, I did what any Jew would do. I answered a question with a question. Will you be our Bacc. speaker? And you want me to talk about what? A meeting of the Bacc committee was convened and shortly afterwards, this was their response:

So...Muniz,

1. What is a good education and, once we have it, how do we use it?
2. What have you seen in us that gives you faith that we can put a good education to good use?
3. What do you want us to think about as we leave Trinity?

A tall order, I’d say. Essentially, you kids have left it to me to help you understand the shape and purpose of an informed life with enduring meaning. That’s no surprise. For centuries, if blessed with the luxury of time for thinking, human beings have sought this understanding in all manner of places-- theology, philosophy, history, art, literature, law, drama, science...and the list goes on. You seniors have been and will continue making your way into this community of hungry thinkers and seekers. **I know this** because over the last four years, I’ve come to know you well. I’ve studied words with you, I’ve read your stories and essays, helped you shape thrilling senior speeches, travelled with you, helped one of you learn to ride a bike, watched a persistent bunch of you mobilize to demand fairness, and...occasionally we’ve streamed American Ninja Warrior together. **And I know this** because you answered my question... with THREE questions...not one. So I owe you at least a partial answer.
The last time I was honored with this talk—ten years ago—I offered that a good education was about cultivating suppleness of mind and the capacity to pose brave questions, accept honest answers, and respond accordingly. A good education, I said, should be put to work in the life-practice of parrhesia—which Cornel West defines as “clear, fearless, unintimidated speech, speech that flows from your soul... not to show that you are clever and smart, but to show that you are courageous and wise.” I let them know that we had seen their fears and their bravery, their despair and their hope, their faltering and their triumphs. I reassured them of our faith in their capacity to wrestle with these competing forces and from that struggle wrest voices powerful enough to speak truth to power. That was a useful enough charge TEN YEARS AGO. But YOU kids face a vastly more divided and divisive world now. You don’t need me to tell you that. More than fifty years ago Baldwin said, in words still relevant today, we are living through a very dangerous time... Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. ...The nation in which we live is “dangerously menaced...from within.”

I ---and I know many of us in this church fear for the future of this country and this world—ethically, politically, environmentally. So I owe you more than words on good intentions. It’s time, as Jimmy says, for us who feel responsible for global human dignity and survival to “go for broke.” What I owe you now is honesty, a re-fuel of your determination and hope, and a call to action. Just to be clear, when I speak of hope I do not mean temporal happiness or glib optimism. I’m speaking of hope that is realistic, vitally insurgent and mobilizing. And the action I’m calling you to is not prescriptive. I can’t tell you WHAT to do. All I can ask is that no matter what work you seniors ultimately choose to devote your minds, hearts, voices or hands to, please let it serve, as MLK puts it, not the just the “narrow confines of individualistic concerns” but “the broader concerns of all humanity.”

As some of you know, I am studying for my bat mitzvah. So I spend a lot of time thinking about the reassuring suppleness of ancient text. How for centuries, it has rewarded deep study with timely wisdom. I asked Samira to read the story of the rebellious midwives (from which, by the way, I chose my Hebrew name--Shifra) because I see it as analogically relevant to the confounding historical moment we’re living through.

What we have in this story is a face-off between Pharoah’s audacity of power and Shifra and Puah’s powerful audacity. This is analogous in my mind to the face-off between an education that unscrupulously propels individual ambition and empire building and one that protects collective human dignity and global solidarity. The latter, it seems to me, is the clear definition of a good education put to good use.

Let’s start with Pharoah, whose “shrewd” dealings with what he believes to be a growing Israelite threat are pretty contemptuous and unimaginative when you think about it. The moment this man “rises over Egypt,” he foresees enemies--real and potential--joining forces and “rising from the ground” to threaten his empire. Immediately he concentrates all his political might on national defense, economic exploitation and general ruthlessness. There’s
nothing “shrewd” about this--it’s textbook... despotism 101. And, ok, it works for a bit--Pharoah gets a couple of walled garrisons out of Israelite labor. But the text is shrewder than Pharoah. Listen to the cause and effect in this language

“The more the Israelites were oppressed, the more the Israelites increased and spread out.”

See, even with all their political power, Pharoah and the Egyptians still live in dread of the Israelites whom they hold in bondage. Why? Because as ruthlessly as they work to embitter and destroy life, the more the Israelites insist on creating and sustaining life. The more the Egyptian empire oppress through fear and theft of freedoms, the more the Israelites “rise from the ground” “increase” and “spread out.” Pharoah is confounded, I imagine, by the collective resistance of these people--by his colossal failure to wrest from them the belief that, even when and perhaps because life is “desperately menaced” it is worth surviving and preserving for ourselves and the future of humanity. So, he “shrewdly” -- audaciously -- figures he’ll go to the midwives--women RESPONSIBLE for safely bringing forth life--and simply order them to become murderers. He audaciously assumes that Shifra and Puah will submit to his political authority. (And they let him think that...) He audaciously assumes that the baby girls he allows to survive will never protest his power once they become grown women. And he audaciously assumes that his power is ultimately... incontestable.

But Shifra and Puah “fear and answer to God,” not Pharoah. These women, perhaps because they see miracles happen every day--fix their hope on a divinely-sponsored moral universe beyond Pharoah’s ken and power. A universe that THEY are PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE to... and that they audaciously confirm by protecting the lives of those in danger or pain... precisely because the world outside the birthing-room will not. This is insurgent, mobilizing hope in action. And it is ALSO the first act of civil disobedience in the Hebrew Bible.

I like to think these two ladies scared Pharoah. Sure, he called them to the office and demanded an explanation for their failure to carry out his order for mass infanticide. But their response, no matter how many times I think about it, seems pretty flimsy as an excuse... and actually... is there maybe a little shade in there too? Oh, we get there too late, Pharaoh. The babies are born without our help. And Israelite women... they’re just “more vigorous” than your women. How is it that Pharoah has no answer to this? He’s the great and powerful. He could easily “oppress them with” some “forced labor” as is his way. But he remains speechless before these cool, fierce women. Frakata. God, however, speaks clearly... by “dealing well with the midwives” who feared Him... and “establishing households for them.”

I don’t want to leave without pointing out one crucial detail. The midwives’ civil disobedience is recognized and rewarded but not compelled by God. Moses, as an example, is called, sent forth and guided by a divine hand as he contends with Pharoah. But Shifrah and Puah, led only by their shared moral conscience CHOOSE to use their minds and voices and hands to, as King puts it, “take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular... but RIGHT.” One midrash tells us that had these women NOT acted so, baby Moses may never have lived and Pharoah’s
despotism might never have been stopped. That’s the enduring revolutionary power of one act performed at one critical moment.

And so...tomorrow morning, you 106 smart, brave and capable young people will leave that cathedral holding a diploma that well-equiops you for “gallant living” sure, but also for making a decision. Will you’ll join hands with the Shifra and Puah or will you join the ranks of Pharoah’s army? That choice is entirely yours.