

Stacey Abrams Address to the Carleton College Community

Monday, September 14, 2020

Thank you to President Poskanzer and the entire Carleton College family for the opportunity to participate in your convocation today. For over 150 years, this gathering has been a time for students, faculty, and staff to congregate and affirm continuity with the past while looking ahead to another successful year.

Nearly 30 years ago, I sat in a chapel at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, eager and excited and filled with trepidation. It too was the opening convocation for our freshman class, for returning students, faculty, and staff. The distance between me and my fellow students felt immeasurable, despite being crammed together on pews and linked by a common decision to join our college family.

For each of you today, the distance is real—a physical barrier borne of tragedy and caution, of miles and necessity. Yet, you are linked by a storied history that began in 1866, in the wake of another moment of national crisis, and you are connected by a diversity of thought, of ambition, and of determination.

Less than a year later, I stood again in Sister's Chapel, this time offering an impassioned plea to my fellow students to join me in a march to City Hall in response to the Rodney King verdict on police brutality. And I set up a table on our campus quad exhorting people to register to vote and cast a ballot in an upcoming presidential election.

The writer of Ecclesiastes warned us that "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." It's tempting to hear these words as ones of defeat—why bother? But instead, I hear them as a call to action, as a challenge of the old answers, as a chance to do it better this time.

You are, each of you, gathered in this collective identity that is Carleton College to defy the notion that nothing new can emerge from crisis. The extraordinary assemblage of intellect, service, and connection that led you to choose this place will be what builds the resilience of your student body.

You are also bound by a perseverance that will carry you across what may seem like insurmountable obstacles. Separated by a pandemic, you are brought together by a spirit of imagination that will see this world made better by your actions.

But we cannot fix what we refuse to acknowledge. Our nation mourns the loss of nearly 200,000 Americans who have perished at the hands of the coronavirus. In your neighborhoods and across our nation, millions face eviction from their homes and others struggle to hold on to what little economic security they have.

And at a time of racial reckoning that is upon us, a demand that we respect Black lives, that we count all Americans as whole and wholly deserving of their citizenship and humanity, this can seem like a terrible burden.

Americans of all backgrounds, and people around the world, bear the scars of these crises, some terribly more than others. But each day, we are tested as a society, and the urge to give in can be overwhelming.

But today is an affirmation of the potential that gives me hope. The potential that is the resilience I know lies within you—the bright young minds of this present age.

Faced with social distancing, you close the gap by pursuing your education virtually. Chastened by images of brutality, indifference, and demonization, you correct our course away from the disparities in education, health care, criminal justice, voting rights, and environmental inaction.

Together, from your earliest moments, you have compelled a new language of inclusion, a new dimension of identity. And as you join your fellow Carleton Knights—you are the ones who will serve as the North Stars for how we do it better this time.

Perseverance is only one part of how we write a new story; resilience is the other. Two years ago, I waged a campaign to lead the state of Georgia, but I did not become the governor. For days, I allowed myself the comfort of grief and the energy of anger. Then I returned to the lessons I'd learned from my parents, from my college: the obligation to do what must be done, even when you are not where you wanted to be.

So while I do not have the job of leading Georgia, I am still obliged to do the work that led me to run for office in the first place: the work of access to justice, to economic security, the work of a shared responsibility for progress.

I do this work anyway because I learned long ago not to confuse power and position.

As students, faculty, and staff, you have the power to shape how you will meet this moment, and the privilege to take real action and create meaningful change.

You don't need to be in a position of authority—or even on the same campus—to foment change. But you do need to make your voice heard. And that is exactly what we have witnessed in the wake of the murders of Black Americans like George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and Jacob Blake—and in the wake of economic disparities and social inequities.

We can look to the strength and tenacity of those willing to take to the streets and demand a society that values all human life. A resilience that does not allow those names to be a litany of loss, but instead a clarion call for change.

Your generation has leveraged the right to protest, to bring attention to the wrenching pain of systemic injustice that has left far too many in a state of anguish and despair for generations. You have used your voices and technology to foster connection in a nation where COVID-19 has disproportionately harmed the most vulnerable. You have been innovative in an economic crisis that endangers the livelihoods of working families. You are driving yourselves to be better than this moment, greater than its challenges and the architects of our needed solutions.

When we combine the traits of perseverance and resilience, we create an alchemy that brings a new reality. In practice, that means that we must protest in the streets, and that we must also protest at the ballot box.

While voting can seem an inadequate solution, it is a necessary step toward progress. We must elect leaders who will cure our society of the ills that have been baked into our republic since its inception.

Over time, we understand that voting in a democracy is not an event. It is a process that inexorably leads to progress, but only if we remain committed to the exercise. Knowing that when we lapse, when we take a break, when we turn away, those who oppose our progress rush to fill the silence in the space of our absence.

But in 2020, when you show up to cast your vote, you won't be alone: young Americans are the greatest untapped bloc of voters in this country. In my 2018 campaign for governor of Georgia, we increased youth participation by 139% because we knew we had to rely on young voters to guide our campaigns and listen rather than lecture.

When young voters blend their voices at the polls with others of like minds, that's when democracy is at its finest. Regardless of age, voting gets us everything: from whether the pothole on our street is fixed, to whether our country goes to war, and everything in between.

America is a republic that relies on representative democracy to choose who guides our government. For the vast majority of us, then, voting is the one lever we have the ability to pull in setting the future of our nation.

So we have to be honest about how much work voting requires. Across America, would-be voters continue to turn away or opt-out, discouraged by the permanence of inequality and the persistence of voter suppression.

Their fear is again and again made real by stories of neighbors denied provisional ballots in Georgia and lines that wind around city blocks in Milwaukee and Las Vegas, because polling locations are shut down and alternatives never arrive.

By undermining confidence in the political system, modern-day voter suppression has swapped rabid dogs and cops with billy clubs for restrictive voter ID laws and tangled rules for

participation. And those who are the most vulnerable to suppression become the most susceptible to passing on that reluctance to others.

Voting is not only our right, it is our proof that perseverance and resilience works—but only if we protect our rights by exercising them. If your vote didn't matter, there wouldn't be forces at work desperately trying to take it away.

A spate of strict state voter ID laws enacted over the past decade has made it much harder for many young people to vote around this country. Address requirements tripped up students in some states, requiring them to have only one legal address—rather than a dorm and their parent's home where their financial aid is granted. And polling places on campuses have been shuttered at alarming rates.

But it has been young people who have fought back, who have forced laws to change and rules to be unmade. We know that when young people are fired up, the world changes.

But we need to ensure the electoral systems in place allow students in all states to be able to cast their vote in a free, fair, and safe election. The terrible truth of our democracy is that a great number of young people who wanted to vote have been prevented from doing so because of legal or administrative barriers. But that cannot stop our voices from being heard—*your* voices from being heard.

While suppression of the voices of young people who are entering our democratic process for the first time is especially insidious, I launched Fair Fight Action to combat voter suppression across the country in all its forms.

While we certainly did not know that our democracy would face the challenge of a pandemic, we knew voters would face unprecedented challenges. And that's why we built a voter protection infrastructure so early. Fair Fight 2020 has voter protection teams across the country to make sure we are ready for November, and for all the elections to come.

When we all have access to the ballot box we are able to elect leaders who reflect our communities, share our values, and see our struggles. These leaders are the ones who know how critical it is that we work to eliminate disparities by investing in public education, infrastructure, rural health care, broadband, increased economic opportunity and more.

We can address the problems right in front us, from the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent economic impacts to the enduring demand for justice and equality. We can tackle the fights we know are coming, from the looming student debt crisis to the perils of unmitigated climate change.

Voting will not immediately solve all our problems, but the right to vote is our most fundamental tool when it comes to building a better country. Our votes determine who wields power to shape policy that impacts us—and impacts generations to come.

The right to vote isn't the only tool at the disposal of those who are ready to answer the call and lift up the voices of our communities: it is of critical importance we are all counted in the 2020 Census, which is why I also founded Fair Count to fight for an accurate count in this year's census.

If you or your family has not filled out your 2020 Census, please go to census.gov as soon as possible and do so. Those who have been hardest hit by COVID-19 are typically the hardest to count. And recent reports show an alarming undercount of students; that will affect Pell grants and other financial aid.

We need to redouble our investments to help folks amid this pandemic and ensure these communities do not face an undercount. The message is simple: the Census matters because it determines how your money is going to get spent and how your political power is divvied up. The Census allocates \$1.5 trillion every year based solely on the numbers collected this year. If people of color and young people do not get counted at the rates they should, we will lose \$8 billion or more every year for the next ten years.

Those are dollars that don't go into Pell Grants or public hospitals, or economic development to create the jobs you'll seek upon graduation. Those are the dollars that make up your future.

And the reality is the money does not disappear, it just goes to the people who are overcounted. Those who are already doing well will do better, those who do poorly will do worse. The solution is to answer your Census and make sure your friends and family do the same. If you don't get counted, you don't count.

In 2020, we have the opportunity to transform this nation. We have the opportunity to elect leaders at every level of government who see us, who hear us, and who are willing to act on our demands. We have the opportunity to complete the 2020 Census and ensure that we get the resources and political representation that our communities deserve.

I know that at this moment, voting and filling out the census can feel too small to bring about the change we need. But I know that these actions bring us closer to the future we deserve.

Our focus now is on how survival and recovery can be made real. But you are embarking on the journey that will transform our society into a nation that is stronger, more vital, and more robust in its pursuit of good.

Here at Carleton, you will prepare to not simply learn your lessons over the next few years, but harness your education to break down barriers for yourselves and future generations. The truth is it will not be easy: study sessions may be lonelier, extracurricular activities may be canceled, and the fun that is college may be less than you envisioned.

But your willingness to face these challenges head-on is proof already of your capacity to overcome, your adaptability to meet the moment, and proof that time will only strengthen your formidable resolve.

Beyond the tumult of this year, I urge you to think about the world you intend to shape with your minds, your service, and your legacy. I am confident that better is coming because students like you are preparing to enter the arena.

Whether the test is our 2020 politics, the impact of social justice, or how to approach this upcoming academic year—remember to hold on to your resilience and your perseverance.

Your capacity to overcome the adversity of this moment, and your force in shepherding us to a reimagined future is real. You are knights, defending your right to be stronger and more capable than these crises believe you can be—possessed of a resilience that sees our current urgency as a summons to persist. Each of you, together and as one, will chart a course that will change the future. So let's get it done.