**Sojourning for Truth**

Opening Convocation, September 2018

It is my great honor and pleasure to welcome the Class of 2019 and the Class of 2022 to this opening convocation. To the Class of 2019, we welcome you back, and to the Class of 2022 we welcome you for the first time to this community. As your senior classmates will tell you, this is special place with special people—people who are committed to your learning, to your development, to your success, and to your making a difference in the world. We are especially excited to welcome the Class of 2022 not only because it is the second largest new class in Hanover history but even more because it is the most racially and ethnically diverse.

We are excited to welcome you because we have been doing so much to get ready for your arrival. For our returning seniors, you have already noticed many changes, but please let me highlight a few—

If you have not noticed, our food is a little different here, and I hope you have noticed that it is greatly improved. We are excited to welcome Parkhurst Dining as our new foodservice partner. This partnership has resulted in several changes to the main dining room, including a new breakfast station and a new pizza oven, and soon the renovated Underground will be open with a new coffee shop, grill, Mexican themed venue and a grab and go market.

We are also in the process of making several improvements in the Old Science Hall to make it look nicer and to provide space for our new engineering program. It looks great, but we are even more excited to welcome the first two engineering professors in Hanover’s history, marking a major development in our curriculum and our ability to reach a new group of students and serve growing needs in our community and region.

We are excited to welcome Hanover’s first intercollegiate swim team. The class of 2022 has 24 students who have committed to wear the red and blue for Hanover as we compete in our conference and regionally. This is an exciting new development, and we look for great things from our Hanover swimmers in the year ahead.

We have been doing a lot of work that you may not notice but you will certainly appreciate. New roofs on several buildings, completing drainage work around our first-year residence halls, and improvements in the Center for Fine Arts--all make Hanover a more attractive place to learn and grow. But the more important unseen work is the efforts by our faculty and staff to prepare for your arrival—reimagined syllabi, new campus activities, and a great deal of planning for a great year ahead!

At least for me, the summer was also a time to read and reflect. I will be honest and admit that some of my summer reading was not worthy of much reflection, and this included detective novels and thriller stories. However, I will note that a Hanover alumnus a couple of those books; he was a philosophy and math double major from the Class of 1990. My more serious reading included Ron Chernow’s thick but wonderful new biography of Ulysses S. Grant, but my other serious summer read was older—20 years older--written by Dr. Nell Painter. Even more, this second biography was different, unique, and transcendent. It is what I would like to reflect on today.

The book’s subject was an African-American woman named Isabella … but I should be more precise. Her slave name was Isabella when she was born sometime around 1797. The place was not in the Deep South as we might expect for an American slave but was instead in the Hudson River Valley of New York. We like to think that slavery—and even the worst forms of racism—were “southern problems,” but they were and are the nation’s problem, and Isabella would become their most vocal and well-known opponents.

For her first 30 years, she lived and worked as a slave, and she was bought and sold between New York families. She was married but was denied her husband because his master forbade it. She had children born into slavery, and she was beaten when her master chose to do so. Her first language was Dutch, and she never learned to read.

The State of New York did not outlaw slavery until 1827—the same year that a young Presbyterian minister and abolitionist named John Finley Crowe began teaching school here on bluffs overlooking the Ohio River—but Isabella chose not to wait for the law to free her. She instead freed herself, fleeing her master a year earlier than the law would have allowed. She fled slavery, but she also fled her slave identity. She would later claim a new name for herself and then shortly afterwards begin to make a name for herself. The name she chose for herself was Sojourner Truth.

Today we would likely call Sojourner Truth a religious or spiritual seeker. She was frequently looking for an authentic spiritual life as well as an authentic spiritual community that would welcome her as an equal. For many years, the groups she found were perfectionist religious groups seeking to live communally. Later she would find groups of abolitionists who shared her hatred of slavery while welcoming her and her passionate preaching on both the Christian gospel and the anti-slavery cause. They welcomed her into their causes, into their homes and into their communities. Still later, she would align with groups of suffragists seeking the vote and rights of women after the civil war. She would find community there as well, but she also experienced a harsh racism from the elite white women who resented that black men had achieved the vote before they did.

Today Sojourner Truth is known for many things: for her autobiography, for biographies written about her during her lifetime, for a famous sculpture made not as much of her but about her, for meeting Abraham Lincoln, and for the enormous number of famous people she met and knew. The great Frederick Douglas said that she had a “strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense.” I would love to be described similarly.

She is famous for her speeches. She was famous for her work with freed slaves immediately after the Civil War and when reconstruction crumbled as Jim Crow arose. She confronted racism almost everywhere she went, and she was especially proud eventually to own her own house in Michigan from the efforts of her mind and free labor, selling copies of her self-published autobiography.

However, as I read this wonderful biography of this remarkable American woman, I could not get out of my head the tremendous power in choosing a new name for oneself, and I was fascinated by the name she chose. Picking a new name for yourself is not unique to Sojourner Truth. People change their names all of the time—historical figures, people in show business, and just everyday folks upset with their parents’ choices for them. Consider the biblical Saul who became Paul. Or consider other great African-Americans as when Cassius Clay became Muhamad Ali and Malcolm Little became Malcolm X. But Isabella found in Sojourner Truth a name that described and would continue to describe her life. I also wondered if it might describe ours as well.

A sojourner is a traveler, someone who is not fully at home. The Christian scriptures used the term to describe immigrants or religious outsiders who still lived among the Israelites. A sojourner is thus unsettled, dwelling beside but not fully integrated in the larger community. A sojourner exists in a liminal space—betwixt and between—offering a unique perspective on others. At the same time, it can be a place of discomfort because this place on the journey may just be temporary.

Standing before our new students as well as our seniors, it is hard not to think of sojourning. For our seniors especially, the reality that your journey here will end is probably starting to sink in. You have traveled alongside us for 3 years. This is your home, but you know that it will probably not be your home forever. For our first-year students, you may not even feel fully unpacked from your journey here. You probably still refer to the place you came from as home. You may be thrilled to be here; you may be homesick; or you may be a little bit of both. Friends, family, pets, stuff and certainly the comforts of your old home—comforts like air conditioning--that have been left behind.

And left behind for what? What has prompted you and others to become sojourners at Hanover College? What has prompted you to live and work among us, knowing that this will likely not be your forever home but instead only one stop on the long journey of your life? Well, it is one of my greatest hopes that—amidst the many motives and reasons--that you came here as a sojourner for truth.

In my own mind, a sojourner for truth is never fully at home because she is looking for even more, for something deeper and for something richer. It is not just a journey but also an adventure of discovery. It is a journey of the mind as well as for the body, and it I s a journey away from simplicity and towards the complexity that makes life beautiful, exciting and even a bit terrifying.

In your sojourning here, you may explore the complexity of proteins with Dr. Steiner, the complexity of a sacred text with Dr. Patterson, the complexity of language and communication with Dr. Young, the origins of a historical document with Dr. Murphy, the mushy ground of a wetland with Dr. Gall, the complexity of policymaking with Dr. Turner, or the meaning of a novel with Dr. Goertz. You may seek to understand a piece of music with Dr, Mruzek, the difficulty of a defensive play with Coach Collingsworth, try to understand human nature and human community in a Greek organization, or explore your own determination and endurance in an athletic context. In addition, in all of these, you will be a sojourner for truth, but also a sojourner for beauty, a sojourner for self-understanding, a sojourner for the common good.

Perhaps you came here with other sojourning purposes in mind, and that is OK. We understand your need to make a living, and we applaud your desire to make a difference in the world. However, our deepest desire for you, our students, is that you see your sojourn with us not as a transactional relationship but as a transformative one. We hope that in your sojourn for truth—just like Sojourner Truth before you—that you will be open to changing your mind and perhaps your very way of being.

I have long admired the sociologist and educational critic Parker Palmer whose writings have spoken of learning as a communal spiritual journey. In To Know as We Are Known (1983), he writes:

An abstract idea is a word. Words are spoken by a human voice. When we study an idea, we need first to treat it not as an abstraction but as a human sound. Our opening question should not be “How logical is that thought?” but “Whose voice is behind it? What is the personal reality from which that though emerged? How can I enter and respond to the relation of that thinker to the world?”” These questions do not exclude logic and critical intelligence, but they remind us that true knowing involves more than a disembodied intellect computing data. Knowledge of truth requires a personal dialogue between the knower and the known, a dialogue in which the knower listens to the world in obedience.

In this way, we do not master truth as much as sojourn with it, even as we sojourn with others in its pursuit.

 Please do not get me wrong. I am not saying that the idea of truth is up for grabs, and I am no fan of alternative facts. Now, perhaps more than ever, that is a dangerous position. But here in this place we have committed ourselves to a certain type of truth-seeking, a truth-seeking that is communal and a truth-seeking that is disciplined. We refer to our subjects as disciplines not because they punish us but because they impose upon us a certain obedience in our communal truth seeking. When we sojourn together as historians in a history class, we do so with a certain discipline—a discipline that is likely different from what we do when we are truth-seeking in the chemistry lab or voice studio. We do not say that one discipline is a better path to truth than another, but what we hold inviolate is our commitment that we practice these disciplines in community—as a community of scholars, as a collegium. And like the children of Israel who followed the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night during their sojourn in the wilderness, we travel together as a community—a community of sojourners seeking truth, seeking beauty, seeking self-understanding, and seeking the common good.

 Nell Painter’s biography of Sojourner Truth is filled with instances in which communities failed her, but what is even more remarkable is that she never did forsake them. This community too has its failures; in fact, we have confronted one of the vilest just this week in the form of a racist social media post. However, let us make our shared love and our shared journey for truth, beauty, and the common good unite us even more strongly as a community. Let us follow in the example of Sojourner Truth and let us sojourn for truth together.

Thank you.