

Primannum Honor Society Induction Ceremony  
University of Maryland, College Park  
November 2016

Keynote Address

Good afternoon. It's wonderful to join with you at this Primannum Honor Society Induction Ceremony.

Congratulations to all of the inductees. I applaud you for your diligence, discipline and commitment to academic excellence.

45 years ago I started my sophomore year of college. I'd done well academically during my freshman year. I'd settled into college life. But there was part of me that was unsettled, anxious, uncertain.

It was 1971 and the country was roiling. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated three years prior. The movements for Black Power, Women's liberation, and gay rights AND the movement against the Vietnam war were all in full swing.

It was a time when, as a nation, we were wrestling with big questions: Who are we? What are our values? Will we and how will we address the marginalization of various groups? How do we fulfill the vision of a society where all have an equal opportunity for access and success?

This was a time when I and many other college students were contending with: What's my role and responsibility in all of this? How can I make a difference?

It's striking how similar these questions are to those we face today.

Much has transpired since your middle school days:

A global recession. The first Black president of the United States. Arab Spring. A spike in income inequality. The Occupy movement. The Tea Party. ISIS. Ebola. Trayvon Martin. Ferguson, Charleston, Orlando, Dallas.

And we've had this deeply divisive presidential election. And for most of us, regardless of which candidate we supported, the degree of rancor and polarization is very disturbing.

And this election has unleashed a virulent, in-your-face, racism, misogyny, homophobia, nativism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism. There's been a huge uptick in bias incidents and hate crimes just since Wednesday morning.

Some of us are very angry. Others of us are fearful. Many of us are trying to figure out what happened, what it means for us, for our country, for the world.

During this difficult, complicated, deeply fraught time, I want to offer a lens to guide your thinking about the life that you are forging.

I want to talk about Roots, Wings, and Voice.

### \*\*\*FIRST – ROOTS

A very small percentage of people in the world have the opportunity to earn a college degree.

Those of us who have that privilege stand on the shoulders of many others.

We stand on the shoulders of those who broke down barriers AND of those who gave us support and love and the dollars to make it happen

It truly takes a village to earn a degree.

Our **ROOTEDNESS** is important – our ties to our family and forebears; our connection to our heritage and culture; our awareness of how our life mission grows out of that which came before us.

Our ROOTS help to anchor us, to keep us focused on what's really important, to remind us of our core values, to provide spiritual sustenance. They give us a reason to keep on, keepin' on.

Our ROOTS also provide a source of self-acceptance and self-love, especially on those occasions when we get the message that we're not as good as, or that we're the wrong skin color or sexual orientation or religion.

- ❖ When we're firmly rooted, we can better withstand these assaults.

For many generations, the norm in America was for immigrants to check their heritage at the door – for example, by leaving the Polish or Korean name in the old country and taking on an English name - 'Kowalski' became 'Cramer', 'Cho-Hee' became 'Christine'.

But social scientists now realize that uprooting oneself in this way - disconnecting from our identity – is not healthy – that when we assimilate, we may gain a few things, but we typically lose much more.

Instead, when we stay connected to our roots, we find an important source of inner strength and resilience.

What's my story? What's yours? How does your life build on your family's history? Your mother's story? Your grandfather's journey?

- ❖ And no, I'm not pretending that it's all pretty. There's usually some crap in our personal and family histories. Any self-respecting psychologist will tell you that.
- ❖ But how do the good, the bad, and the ugly, the struggles and the triumphs, help to guide you? To frame your best life?

I know that I stand on the shoulders of COUNTLESS villagers – some seen, many unseen; some who're related by blood, others who're kinfolk by circumstance.

- ❖ I think about the people who built this country, particularly those whose contributions have often been marginalized –

- Native Americans, Slaves from Africa, Chinese indentured servants, Mexican farm workers, and many others.
- ❖ I stand on ALL of their shoulders. They form part of my ROOT SYSTEM.
  - ❖ Our ROOTS are not thin and shallow. They are THICK and DEEP and intricately ENTANGLED. Mine with yours. Yours with mine.
  - ❖ We may look very different. Our forebears may have come from different continents in different ways. But there are important underlying connections and intersections that can sustain us.

\*\*\*IN ADDITION to roots, we need WINGS.

Being well-rooted doesn't constrain us; it doesn't limit us. Quite the contrary, being firmly planted helps to free us to take on the world.

- ❖ When we're well-grounded, we're more able to explore, to dream, to create, to innovate.

The world has SHRUNK. Being successful means navigating across cultures, ethnicities, and national boundaries.

- ❖ We're called to be bridge builders and connectors. To communicate respectfully and work effectively with those who're quite different from us.

We need professionals who will go into the impoverished community that's a mile away – the one that we've whizzed by many times —and be able to connect and engage and be of service.

And we need practitioners and scholars who will fly 5,000 miles to another land and teach or develop programs or conduct research -- in a culturally competent manner.

Having WINGS also means having the COURAGE to try something new, to do it differently from everybody else, to find our own path.

The world needs leaders who can take risks, think outside the box, question the status quo, imagine new possibilities, and envision a better place.

With WINGS, we can do this. With WINGS, we can soar.

\*\*\*IN ADDITION to roots and wings, we need VOICE.

Those of us who have degrees have opportunities to speak where others are silenced.

About 15 years ago, when I was teaching at a university in California, I was at the final doctoral project meeting of one of my clinical psychology students. My student's project focused on Mexican American youth. In the discussion of her work, we started talking about the political context of these youths' lives. It became clear that my student didn't know who the current governor of California was.

I was mortified. It wasn't so much that she couldn't pull up his name, but rather that she wasn't tuned into the broader context that impacted the lives of Mexican American youth – a group she was deeply interested in and concerned about.

And though she had done a good-enough job on her doctoral project and she was well trained, in a narrow sense, as a psychologist, I had failed her; the School had failed her.

She didn't have the knowledge or skills or inclination to speak up.

I'm hoping you do it differently than my former student.

Our nation and the world can't afford for us to live in a bubble, to hunker down. We need to speak up and out for what is right.

And this is true whether you're studying to be a psychologist or a teacher or an engineer or an entrepreneur.

If we are to solve the pressing problems of the day -- food insecurity, lack of access to clean water, global warming, terrorism and violence, religious conflict, inequality and injustice -- we need to be deeply rooted and grounded; we

need to see beyond our particular cultural perspective and engage effectively with a diverse and complex world; and we need to speak up and out, to advocate, to shine a light on the way forward.

Students, I applaud you for your academic achievements. As you continue to strive for excellence, I hope that you will reflect on and deepen your roots, spread your wings, and hone and develop your voice.