

Charge to the Graduating Class  
President Joanne Berger-Sweeney

Congratulations to all of today's graduates and to your families and loved ones. We are here today to celebrate you and to celebrate all of our triumphs during this past year that helped us reach this place and this time ... together.

You all know me well enough by now to expect that I might want to talk about a book I've read recently. Just a few weeks ago, when I was reading *Transcendent Kingdom*, a novel by Yaa Gyasi, I thought of the Class of 2021, of what we've all been through, of how we've persevered. It might take a minute for me to explain, but bear with me.

The novel tells the story of Gifty, a native of Ghana whose family moved to Alabama. Gifty is a Ph.D. candidate in neuroscience at Stanford—see how I might have related to that piece; her brother, Nana, a gifted high-school athlete, found himself addicted to OxyContin after suffering an ankle injury and initially taking the medication to manage the pain. Gifty looked to science for the answers to addiction and mental illness.

Toward the end of the book, Gifty notes, “It took me many years to realize that it's hard to live in this world. I don't mean the mechanics of living, because for most of us, our hearts will beat, our lungs will take in oxygen, without us doing anything at all to tell them to. ... But to be alive in the world, every day, as we are given more and more and more [to deal with], as the nature of ‘what we can handle’ changes and our methods for how we handle it change, too, that's something of a miracle.”

As all of us in the Trinity community wove our way through the twists and turns of the COVID-19 pandemic, trying desperately to keep some semblance of the life we had before, we learned just how much we can handle. And as with Gifty, we learned how to adapt. We dug down deep, and we adjusted continually, and together—even though separated by six feet and cloaked in face masks—we made it through this tunnel of darkness to the light of a new day. This is the miracle of what we have done this past year.

That feeling of being together, that unification ... We knew that we were going through difficult times, but we also knew that others were going through these challenges, too. We developed new habits, we spent more time at home with our immediate family, working and schooling from home, eating at home. We spent more time alone. My own Thanksgiving with my husband and two kids was not the big production it usually is; it was just the four of us sitting together, minus the stress of entertaining. In many ways, despite everything going on around us, the stress was reduced and the quality time more precious.

I also was extremely grateful for where I was during this pandemic, which was on one of the most beautiful college campuses in the country. While at first it was hard to get our heads around the initial lockdown and continuing restrictions, little by little, just as Gifty explains, what we could handle changed, and we started to adjust. My husband and I—and our dog, Minty—grew accustomed to our 45-minute daily walk around campus. We found the time for these strolls, recognizing the importance of nature, the sheer awe and inspiration that beautifully placed flowers can provide when everything else seems to be dismal.

Yet while we did find glimpses of hope to keep us going, we missed hearing students' laughter and even some of the shenanigans—after all, a little college craziness is a part of life—that there were a little less of here on campus when you were not around.

I've heard it said that some of what binds us, some of the “stickiness” of Trinity College, is, of course, the shared experience of how you engage your mind. But it's also how you connect with other people, how you interact, how you live and breathe and experience the world together. I hope that this time has helped us understand more of our own common connections versus what divides us. And it's not just that people came together this past year ... I found that people also were more forgiving of one another. We all realized that everybody is trying their best, nobody has a roadmap, and there's no playbook telling us how to get through this. This year—more often than in my previous six years here—people said, “Thank you.” “Thank you for keeping us safe.” “Thank you for reopening.” “Thank you for trying to bring us all together.”

That common humanity that we shared is why it's fitting that we have Jeffrey Flaks, president and CEO of Hartford HealthCare, with us here today as our Commencement speaker and honorary degree recipient. I see our organizations—Trinity College and Hartford HealthCare—as innovators, as nonprofits who care deeply about humanity. We're both caring for the mind and body, albeit in different ways. We both make our home in the heart of Hartford, and we both came into being during the same era; Trinity, as you know, was founded in 1823, and Hartford Hospital, the seed that grew to be one of seven acute-care hospitals in the Hartford HealthCare family, was founded in 1854, out of humanitarian concern for Hartford residents who did not have a general hospital at the time.

In challenging times, we need people to serve as reminders of our humanity. For me, a few of today's graduates stood out as leaders, as beacons of light, at Trinity. Gio Jones, who served as Student Government Association president and on the President's Commission for Trinity's Future; Vanessa Ross, who sat on our Task Force for Campus Climate; Pearl Rourke and Jaymie Bianca, whom I call my Venture women: you four are among a greater class of hundreds who have prevailed in your educational endeavors at Trinity and have shown a true entrepreneurial spirit and resilience. I thank all of you graduates for your extraordinary efforts throughout this trying time. I also thank all the faculty and staff for all they did to continue our mission despite the innumerable challenges sparked by COVID-19.

And so graduates, as you all are bound together by the unusual circumstances of the year—the COVID testing center in Ferris, grab-and-go meals from Mather, masked athletics practices, Zoom trivia nights, the rainbow of alert-level colors—I leave you with a few questions to consider: What affect did these shared experiences have on the bonds you have with one another? During this time of COVID-19, how did your relationships with others in the Trinity community change? What shared bonds will draw you back, 10, 20, or even 50 years from now, to reminisce with your classmates about these extraordinary times?

Before you walk away from the Main Quad today, I hope that you'll think of how you successfully adapted, how you learned what you could handle, and how you witnessed that what you could handle evolved from day to challenging day. This is the miracle of what we have done this past year. I also hope you'll know in your heart that you are moving on as a stronger person, a more resilient person, and that behind you, you are leaving a Trinity

College that is better thanks to your presence. You will remain as a handprint on my heart,  
dear Class of 2021.

Congratulations!