

## “The World and US”

President Carl Strikwerda

Elizabethtown College Convocation, August 29, 2017

Leffler Chapel and Performance Center

**Class of 2021**, wise upper class peer mentors, distinguished faculty, noteworthy newly tenured and promoted colleagues, energetic leaders of Student Senate, impressive Emergent Scholars, dedicated staff, honorable trustees, and valued parents and friends, welcome to the **118<sup>th</sup>** year of Elizabethtown College.

We are standing in a very special place, not only in this beautiful chapel, but on a college campus. One of the most precious attributes of colleges and universities is their special quality, set apart, to some degree, from the rest of society. In a maddeningly busy world, colleges offer a place to think, create, ponder, and reflect. Yet separation can also be dangerous. The term “ivory tower” connotes colleges and universities as dis-engaged, and perhaps even irrelevant, to the concerns of the rest of the world. Still worse is the charge of elitism: colleges and universities lead a privileged life that misleads their members into thinking that they can ignore the concerns of others. Finally, we can be exclusive, welcoming only those who agree with us or form a tight-knit group.

Colleges, like all communities, in other words, only exist because there are some boundaries, but how permeable these boundaries are makes a huge difference. There is a great difference between: “Do you really think that he’s a good fit for us?” and “Please join us.” Who is in and whom we allow in defines our communities. Similarly, how we define “us,” what language we choose to guide us, how we decide to deal with differences amongst us, and how open we are to the rest of the world determine the health and future of our communities.

Just how powerful this college can be when we are open to the rest of the world and encourage others to be part of our community was brought home to me this summer when I represented the College on a trip to Japan. In Japan, I helped renew the relationship that we have had for twenty years with Nihon University, the largest university in Japan. Every summer, Nihon University sends us students to study English here, and Nihon has welcomed dozens of our students to study Japanese. My wife and I also helped host a reception in downtown Tokyo for E-town alumni and friends. A number of Japanese engineers were part of the event. I wondered why, even though they were not alumni of the College and never studied abroad in the U.S., they were attending that evening. The answer is because they had come to central Pennsylvania in the wake of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident in 1979, the most serious accident at a commercial nuclear power plant in U.S. history. At that time, U.S. engineers and scientists knew far less about the harmful effects of radiation than did the Japanese, who for decades had studied the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese engineers who came to this area were welcomed by members of the Elizabethtown College community, made to feel at home, and went back to Japan firm friends of the College. Over thirty years, they have become part of the E-town alumni network in Japan, encouraging Japanese students to study here, and becoming friends of our alumni in the country. How much poorer were our college be in friends, in our global influence, and in our understanding of the world if decades ago, members of our community had not welcomed the stranger and been open to expanding their knowledge of the world?

It is a cliché that we live in a globalized world. But globalization means that the world is more connected economically and in terms of information. It does not, by itself, break down barriers. Instead, the rapid pace of change can lead to a backlash and a raising of new barriers, as we have seen in the vote by the British last year to leave the European Union and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and the movement to lessen trade across U.S. borders. We have to be aware of the divisions in the world around us, speak to them, confront them where necessary, and not replicate them in our midst. Similarly, we as a college community must continue to re-examine ourselves, so that no one seeking to belong here encounters barriers, in-group talk, and exclusionary customs. Race, ethnicity, religion, gender identification, economic class, or political persuasion should never define “us”.

Communities also only thrive because they share common values.

What unites a community is a shared language, some agreement about what is valued, a common sense of how it has been shaped by the past. It is absolutely important that we have the right rules and policies to protect freedom of speech, protect members of our community from harassment, and to ensure that we promote respect and inclusion. But those rules and policies only go so far. The deeper shared “language” is really a set of customs, practices, and ideas that we live out and to which we are committed as individuals, not a literal language. This came home to me once when a Chicana friend told me about a conversation she had had with a Mexican friend. Even though they were both speaking the same language, Spanish, it was soon obvious that they talking past each other, simply because politics in the United States and Mexico are so different. Mexico inherited more of a centralized continental European political system from Spain and France, where much more governmental initiative runs from the top down, where the U.S., as we know, is, by comparison, a mosaic or perhaps an anarchy of state and local autonomy. In Spanish, the two friends found they couldn’t even use the same words for many positions in government in the two countries. Despite having a common language, the two friends had very different experiences, customs, and practices. My Chicana friend said that the experience, despite the discrimination that she had faced as a Hispanic woman growing up in the southwestern United States, made her realize how much she had been shaped by America. Even if some Americans still had difficulty seeing her as a fellow citizen, she became even more determined to change the parts of America that she could touch for the better.

So what is our language, our shared customs, our history that defines us as a college? Last year’s election and the tragic protests and violence in Charlottesville recently remind us how divisive the tensions in our society can be. On a college campus, much of that potential divisiveness is expressed in the struggles over how to accommodate dissent, differences of opinion, and debate. Elizabethtown College is committed to freedom of expression. According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of expression means:

The right to hold opinions without interference.....freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media.

Being open to a wide diversity of views, even those with which we may disagree with strongly, is vital to our life as an educational community.

As a college, our commitment to freedom of expression is rooted in our core values of peace, social justice, and human dignity. We defend those values by criticizing those who advance racist, hateful, or discriminatory views or advocate violence. The Brethren who founded Elizabethtown College had historically experienced persecution, torture, and even martyrdom, often from people who claimed to be Christians and to be doing God's will. The Brethren are not only one of the three original peace churches of the Western world, along with the Quakers and Mennonites, but Brethren, along with their sister Anabaptist groups, pioneered in advancing the conviction that religion should never be forced or coercive in any form. What is true for religious belief should also be true for political convictions. We reject violence, coercion, and oppression of others for their political beliefs.

How do we live then with the deep divisions over so many issues that divide our world and even members of our own community? I am gratified that our own students have provided us with a model of civility within disagreement. During the last electoral season, the College Democrats, College Republicans, and Young Americans for Liberty cooperated in registering voters, bringing people to the polls, and organizing a joint conference on political tolerance on campus. There are very few college campuses in America where liberal and conservative students held a joint election night party together to watch the returns come in. There was such a party at Elizabethtown College. This kind of respectful collaboration in the midst of disagreement exemplifies commitment to fostering democracy at its best.

We must commit ourselves to welcoming all members of our community, to defending the human dignity of everyone and every group, and to rejecting violence and hatred. We want, to some degree, to be isolated from the world in order to carry out the vital work of teaching, scholarship, and developing the human potential of our students. Yet we must also commit ourselves to helping shape society, meeting the demands of the future, and representing the values that help define our national community. We are not an ivory tower. And we are not elitist. We can all be proud that the College sponsors the Elizabethtown Community Housing and Outreach Services (ECHOS)-- which has nearly eliminated homelessness in our community--that our Social Enterprise Institute and High Center for Family Business are spearheading a \$350,000 grant from BB&T Bank through the Lancaster Community Foundation to promote economic development in the greater Elizabethtown area, and that, once again, we are hosting speakers this academic year who span a wide range of religious and political viewpoints in order to educate ourselves and the wider community.

Just as important, we will continue to re-examine our practices and ask whether or not we live out our shared values. We must define ourselves as a community that promotes peace, practices conflict resolution, fosters learning for its own sake, rejects bigotry and hatred, defends freedom of expression, and welcomes students, faculty and staff from all walks of life, places on the globe, backgrounds and beliefs. Thank you very much.