

Speech - Opening Convocation

Ishara Nanayakkara

Good afternoon Berea Beloved,

As per the instructions, I am supposed to tell you my Berea story. I am not here to philosophize, theorize, or hand out wisdom. In fact, I am inclined to believe that even if I wanted to do any of these things, I would not be able to, given my limited experience with life. So for your benefit, and for the reward of managing to spend the next three minutes without being termed a boring bearer of platitudes, I am going to open my heart to you.

I was born in Virginia, USA and lived there for a little over 7 years before moving to Sri Lanka, the tiny little island where my parents came from. I returned to the United States in 2016 to attend Berea College. As you can see, I have limited experience with life, but enough with cultures and traditions from living in two separate, opposite worlds. Growing up in Sri Lanka, I yearned for my life in America. However, when I was in Virginia, I longed for the Sri Lankan culture and my family that lived there. Thus, my life has been of conflict, opposites, adjustments, compromise, and a wish to find my true home. I can proudly and safely say, as I stand before you today, speaking as the official representative of the 83rd administration of the Berea College Student Government Association, that I have found my home at Berea. Berea College has absolutely changed my life. I have learned the true value and dignity of all labor, have made friends and connections that I believe will last a lifetime, and have had the most wonderful roommate who has become family. I have been exposed to opportunities that I did not believe existed. I have been given the chance to study abroad, intern at the United Nations, and perform and excel at activities ranging from debate to dance.

I could not have imagined a place this open to accepting people from all backgrounds. I can see in the crowd, my fellow Bereans from almost all the continents of the world. I can see that we look different, we follow different gods, we speak different tongues, we have different beliefs, origins, sexualities, cultures, and upbringings. However, here, on this day, standing as members of this beautiful and loving institution, we are all Bereans. Being a Berean means being righteous, truthful, just, and many other things. However, above all, it means being a part of a

family that cannot be broken. It means being a leader, a change-maker, and a harbinger of light in the darkest corners of the world. I stand before you today a proud American, a proud Sri Lankan, and a proud Berean. I welcome the Class of 2023 to this wonderful family, and speak for all Bereans, when I say that God has truly made of one blood, all peoples of the earth.