

Berea Stories
Lyle D. Roelofs
President's Remarks
Opening Convocation
August 30, 2018

Thank you, Vance, Olivia, Libby, Channell, Mike, and Lakshya. The groups each of you so thoughtfully and graciously represented in your remarks are all essential parts of Our Berea. For all of us, the excerpts from *The Book of Berea*, that we heard today establish that it is a great read, a best seller for sure, when we get around to publishing it.

And thanks as well to the amazing singers from our combined choirs and their leaders. **[lead applause]** I should want to note that many first-year students and seniors, 75 first-years and 21 seniors, in fact, gave up the opportunity to march with classmates in order to be part of presenting that amazing musical number. You are back in the upper seating section, but please know how much we appreciated that gift to all of us.

- Members of the senior class, you students who will complete your studies this year, marched in together and we look forward to celebrating with you at Mid-year or at the end of the academic year.

[Lakshya said that Berea taught him never to give up, while also

adding to his skills at cornhole. Those are impressive additions to his story and I am confident that all of you have added a great deal to your Berea stories in just 3 years.]

- And you first year students are looking forward to great accomplishments, too. **[Olivia said that she was looking for a school that did not see her as a dollar sign, someone who could pay tuition. She is right, we built this school for her and you. And like her, I hope that you all ascend the Pinnacles, on Mountain Day in October and other times, too!]**
- You faculty bring learning to life, and treasure and reflect what you learn in return from staff and students. **[From you, Mike, we all learned that everything in life can be a learning experience. A casual conversation in a bar can turn into an incredible 40-year career!]**
- Staff members, you make this whole place work and play a key role in the education of students, through the Labor Program and the powerful example of your stories. **[Channell your story really emphasized how many Berea stories interconnect, yours with Virgil Burnside's and Mike Berheide's.]**
- Retirees from the College, you bless us with your continuing engagement and involvement, and in so doing, ground us more firmly in

our heritage and traditions. **[Libby, your story shows the amazing artistic beauty of the learning that is part of the Berea experience.]**

- Our alumni stay engaged to inspire us all with their accomplishments and to be helpful to following generations of Berea graduates. **[Vance, thanks for inspiring us with your story and reminding us that we are all turtles on a fence post, too.]**

We ask the first-year students and the seniors to march in this opening convocation, because you are the bookends of the student experience at Berea College, the start and the conclusion of student stories at Berea! But transfer students, sophomores and juniors are all adding to their stories, too.

- Transfer students, can I ask you all to stand up? We welcome you. Even if you started somewhere else, you have decided to become Bereans and we welcome you and your broader perspectives with open arms.

[Applause] You can be seated.

- Sophomores, will you stand up? We all know that the most challenging year for a college student is his or her first year. We are very proud that you have taken on those challenges successfully and will be building on that success this year. **[Applause]** You can be seated.

- Juniors, please stand up. You have even more successes and accomplishments, so we applaud you, too, and can already imagine you processing in this event next fall! **[Applause]** You may be seated.

There is a line in a poem, by Muriel Rukeyser, American poet and social justice warrior, that is apropos to the theme of this convo, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” Of course, I and my fellow scientists would stoutly maintain that there are, in fact, some atoms around, too, here and there, and we even tell a dumb little joke about that.

Q: Why should you not trust anything an atom says?

A: Because they make up everything!

But maybe Ms. Rukeyser was correct that the meaning that constitutes the Universe comes from the stories that are being lived out, that the reality of Berea College, for example, is best captured through the stories of Bereans. Elsewhere, she also says, “All the poems of our lives are not yet made,” and one could say, too, that *The Book of Berea*, is continuing to be written, day by day, year by year through the experiences and activities of all Bereans.

As President of Berea College one of my favorite roles is to serve as the chief story teller of the College. In addition to the great stories you heard today, and to your own, I could add the one about the Berean who arrived driving a cow to pay his term bill and eventually went on to serve on the Board of

Trustees later in his life; or the story of one of the first African Americans to graduate after Berea College was able to re-integrate in the early 1950's, and how in her 80's, she sat beside me at the dedication of the Carter G. Woodson Center, quietly crying because her graduation photo is part of the display in that space; or the story of a physics professor who grew up in the country of Libya, but came to be a true and beloved Berean, and who, as he lay dying of cancer, expressed the hope that his children could attend Berea College; or the story of Elizabeth Rogers, wife of J. A. R. Rogers, our first Dean of Faculty, who, not as confident in the efficacy of non-violent responses to the local opposition as were her husband and Rev. Fee, armed herself with chemical weapons from the laboratory of the school;. The list would go on and on.

The Book of Berea tells a grand story. In chronological organization, we would find the early chapters to be suspenseful and scary; in later chapters the stories reveal the emergence of a great and unique mission; and the chapters being written now show a school continuing to be true to those commitments, who have been writing great living poetry for over a century and a half. *The Book of Berea* will never be published between covers, but what a thrill to be writing it together with you!

Thank you!