

**Berea Stories**  
Lyle D. Roelofs  
President's Remarks  
Opening Convocation  
August 27, 2020

Thank you Brady, Teena, Dr. Kathy Bullock, Dr. Anderson, Rev. Dr. Williams and Dr. Fleming. The groups each of you so thoughtfully and graciously represented in your remarks are all essential parts of Our Berea. *The Book of Berea*, will certainly be amazing, when we get around to publishing it.

And thanks as well to the amazing singers from our combined choirs and their leaders from several years ago. Thanks so much for bringing that memorable occasion back to our attention, Kathy. **[applause]**

Students, whether you are new at Berea or continuing and whether you are studying in person at Berea or online from home or another place, welcome.

You are the reason Berea College exists and the reason for all our stories.

**Brady, thanks for your leadership of an hybrid SGA with some in-person students and some online.**

**Dawn, thanks so much for sharing your deep knowledge about the pandemic.**

**Teena thanks for the report from the Berea front lines in the war against the COVID-19.**

Retirees from the College, we are so sorry that our engagement with you cannot be face-to-face this Fall. **Kathy, thanks so much for your memorable remarks recalling one of our most amazing commencements ever!**

Our alumni are such an inspiration through their accomplishments and their assistance to following generations of Berea graduates. **Sonja, thanks for blessing us with your remarks and reminding us that Berea has always been a source of necessary 'good trouble.'**

The Board of Trustees is an amazing collection of supportive persons, all of whom care deeply about Berea and sacrifice their time and resources to support the College and take full responsibility for overseeing it. **John, thanks for your thoughts and marking out the line connecting two amazing radical men who happen to share your first name.**

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.” She was correct, I think, in 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 a story teller for the College. This year, I find myself mostly telling the stories of how an amazing institution is navigating some very anxious and uncertain times, still carrying on with its mission and commitments.

Our story, as you know, extends back to and beyond the last time the world faced a pandemic, and I was curious how Berea navigated through the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19. With the assistance of Sharyn Mitchell in the College Archives, I found some records from that time including a letter to then President Frost from the public health authority of Madison County, a Dr.

Bosley of Richmond dated Oct. 8, 1918. Here it is (on the screen). Dr. Bosley says,

Dear Sir,

By order of the Secretary of State Board of Health all schools, churches and places of amusements must close and stand closed until further notice. Except dormitories where students are confined in the College grounds. Day students or new students are not allowed to enter school. Please do not allow your student body to assemble in large number; also discontinue all chapel exercises.

Very respectfully,

J. G. Bosley,

County Health Officer.

So, this fall is not the first time, convo was disrupted. President Frost kept a diary and there are many mentions of influenza in Kentucky and the immediate area, including an ominous note on Oct. 10<sup>th</sup> that college influenza patients are being housed in Cumberland and Talcott Halls and that the hospital is already full, and the next day that the College is up to 100 cases and the main doctor and the head nurse in the hospital are infected. On the 15<sup>th</sup> they are up to 300 cases, but none too serious. On the 16<sup>th</sup> they start sending

some students home and the report from the hospital, then part of the College, “Can’t get nurses; must do the work ourselves and train our students.” All things considered, COVID-19 in 2020 does not seem as bad, yet anyway!

The other current national crisis is the shock and reaction across our nation to the tragic killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other persons of color, at the hands of law enforcement and now the tragic shooting just a few days ago of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, WI. At Berea, where we have long had a deep commitment to interracial education, this has caused us to wonder if we are doing everything we can to influence our region, our state and our whole society around racial justice. A committee named Black Lives Matter and the 5<sup>th</sup> Great Commitment, co-chaired by VP Dr. Dwayne Mack, from whom you just heard from and Dr. Jess Klanderud, Director of the Carter G. Woodson Center, studying that challenge for us.

*The Book of Berea* tells a grand story. The early chapters to be suspenseful and scary; later the stories reveal the emerging consciousness of a great and unique mission; but then from time to time, things get pretty anxious again, including the chapters being written right now. What a thrill to be working

together with you all, this year, writing the amazing stories of *The Book of Berea!*

Thank you!

[move to Miles award]