

Berea Stories
Lyle D. Roelofs
President's Remarks
Opening Convocation
August 26, 2021

Thank you Bobby, Prof. McCormack, Bev Cook, Prof. Baskin, Julian and Ms. McCulley-Hall. The groups each of you so thoughtfully 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.

Congratulations as well to the award winners; we have one to go, the Elizabeth Perry Miles Award for Community Service, which I will present following these remarks. Normally these awards are all presented at our May Commencement, but that was virtual this past year, so we saved the awards for today.

And thanks, as well to the amazing singers from our combined choirs and their leaders. They perfected this piece in just the week or so we have been back, a testament to their talent and their great directors. I should note that a number of first-year students and seniors gave up the opportunity to march with classmates in order to be part of presenting that amazing musical number. Please know how much we appreciated your 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.

Bobby, thanks for your leadership of the SGA and for sharing how you have overcome some very serious personal and family challenges. Such stories of resilience inspire us all in the times when we, too, face deep issues.

- And you first year students are looking forward to great accomplishments, too. **I know that you all join Julian in the excitement of what you will do with the challenge of Berea College and in banishing procrastination forever from your life.**
- You the faculty bring learning to life, and treasure and reflect what you learn in return from staff and students. **Ed, thanks for sharing about your experience on the faculty of Berea College, what has changed and what has stayed the same.**
- 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 own Berea stories. **Bev, thanks for cheerfully greeting us every day from your post in the CPO and for making us your family, in the way your parents meant that!**
- 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. **Andrew, you are known to all your**

erstwhile colleagues as one of the path makers of Berea College, someone who broke the trail for persons of color here, benefitting all who followed you, but also teaching your white colleagues essential lessons for interracial community.

- Our alumni stay engaged to inspire us all with their accomplishments and to be helpful to following generations of Berea graduates. **Sherry, thanks for sharing your Berea story and reminding us that one of the hallmarks of our community is how we care so much for one another. We've all seen abundant evidence of that during the past 18 months, for sure!**

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 first fulfillment of the Berea chapters of the student stories. But transfer students, sophomores and juniors are all adding to their stories, too.

- New transfer students, can I ask you all to stand up? Even if you started somewhere else, you have decided to become Bereans and we welcome you and your broader perspectives with open arms. You can be seated.
- Sophomores, will you stand up? 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. 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! 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 are quite certain that there are, in fact, some atoms around, too, here and there, 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. I have to share that poetess Rukeyser has another little tweak for scientists in that poem. She entitled it “The Speed of Darkness,” which inverts so very deftly the concept of the speed of light, known to all scientists. I pause to ask my fellow scientists which of us has ever pondered the speed of darkness? Rukeyser also wrote some important books. In one of them, *The Life of Poetry*, she ends saying, “All the poems of our lives are not yet made,” evoking there her belief in power of poetry to give eventual reality to *peace*, not just as the absence of war, but as its own “fierce and positive” thing, as she calls it. Following her, we could say, too, that all *The Book of Berea*, is not yet made. It

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 storyteller of the College. In addition to the great stories you heard today, and to your own, I could add a few. Every year I mention the story of Elizabeth Rogers, wife of J. A. R. Rogers, our first Dean of Faculty. During a time when the young school at Berea was facing heavy local opposition and our founders were expecting a visit by a mounted posse of armed and angry citizens from Richmond up the road, they had determined that response should be non-violent. Elizabeth Rogers must have harbored some quiet doubts as to the sufficiency of that, so she armed herself with chemical weaponry from the laboratory of the school. There is no record of her having to employ them, though. The non-violent response worked as the posse left peaceably after leaving the Bereans with a demand that they depart from Madison County.

The current times we are in makes me think of the parts of the *Book of Berea* that would cover the period 100 years ago, the only other time our community has had to deal with a pandemic, in that case the so-called Spanish Flu. That was a very hard time at Our Berea. Many members of the community were ill and there were losses, including a total of ten students, seven who died from the flu, and three others from spinal meningitis, which was also circulating at the same time. That part of the *Book of Berea* would

have much sadness, but there would also be stories of resilience and working together. For example, when the head doctor and most of the nursing staff in the hospital fell ill, students volunteered to be on the floors caring for the sick. World War I was also raging and beginning to draw in American participation, which also added to the pathos of many Berea stories. Dr. and Mrs. Frost, the third president and first lady of the college lost a son in the war in that same year.

It is too soon to start on the section of the Book for 2020-2022, but, right now, we are living some Berea stories unlike any others in the last one hundred years. But I know that if we do everything we can to support one another and pull together, these sections of the Book can be an inspiration for future Bereans.

The Book of Berea tells a grand story. What a thrill to be writing it together!

Thank you!