

University of Richmond Colloquy Address
Delivered by Patrice Rankine, August 17, 2016

For some minutes today, I want to draw your attention to politics. My focus on politics might seem ill-advised to some. Talking about politics might be thought to stretch the limits of academic freedom. The outlook might feel somewhat bleak to others. The political realm of which I would like to speak is one of violence, decay, and such fracture that we wonder if what is wrong can ever be made right again. Candidates for office succeed not because they point citizens to ideals to which we might aspire but because they are wealthy or aim to amass more riches and influence than they have already acquired. Rather than positing goals for the nation, even if those aims require adjustment to the course we are on, these politicians attack character; candidates for office call their opponents liars, stupid or insane. The nation has no clear direction, few common objectives, and there is no unity around any ideals. In place of concord, the daily news reports are of violence, at home and abroad: wars, murderous disruptions in public spaces, and deadly, petty crime with a cycle of unemployment, apathy, and general malaise.

You likely recognize in my description many of the news reports that we have heard over this very summer, but before I continue along the slippery slope, let me alleviate whatever tension I have caused in my contemporary description. The nation of which I speak is not the United States of America in 2016. I am not directly referring to our fraught elections and the incredible, staggering events of the past few months, the murders of civilians and officers entrusted with our safety, the random shootings or bombings that threaten us in public spaces. Rather, I am pointing us to the commonwealth of Rome, in the first century BCE. Marcus Tullius Cicero is our guide. He directs us to the liberal arts as the tools that will lift us out of our political abyss. Cicero calls us to what our insignia at the University of Richmond refers to as the *verbum vitae et lumen scientiae*, “the word of life and the illumination of science.”

Perhaps we might allow Cicero to point us, for a few more minutes, to the Roman Republic. The year is 44 BCE. The assassination of Julius Caesar occurs early in the year, the Ides or 15th of March. Rome is in a constitutional crisis. Recall that in the decade or so leading up to 44, Caesar had emerged as a great hope for the Republic. He led military campaigns abroad and wrote his book *The Gallic Wars*, but by the 40s his focus shifts from this and other foreign campaigns to the crisis on the domestic front. Rome is in decay, and Caesar unwisely advanced himself as alone able to fix it. He is wealthy. He is ambitious to the point of megalomania. He destroys longstanding, commonly held traditions and establishes himself as dictator. Others respond with violence. Reason, deliberation, and the advancement of a common good yield to war, domestic unrest, and civic decay.

Our guide Cicero is already a powerful force in his own right by 44. In exile at Tusculum, modern-day Frascati, Cicero crafts a book, titled *De re publica*, “On the Republic.” The book is a decade in the making, drawn from ancient wisdom, clearly allusive to a Greek antecedent, Plato’s *Republic*. In “On the Republic,” Cicero calls for a shift from the

reliance on charismatic leaders to the integrity of the Roman constitution, built from the best of ancient ideals. He develops terms like *humanitas*, “the humanities,” and *artes liberales*, the liberal arts, to refer to these traditions. Beset on all sides, during a time of war and civil unrest, in part out of necessity because of his absence from Rome, Cicero turns not to guns or vituperative, public oratory, but to logic, geography, mathematics, music, and theater.

From his place of reflection, Cicero advances the intellectual virtues, honed through training in art, physics, history, and political sciences, as preparation for living in community, for being among others in public life. Through the liberal arts, Cicero engages with the best minds regarding matters that affect all. For Cicero, the liberal arts are scrimmages for the battles ahead, not unlike the training for life that we posit in the 21st century that our liberal arts afford our students. Cicero engages, virtually, with the long-dead Plato, as they tussle regarding the *ideal* Republic, or at least a *more perfect* union than the one in which he lives. Similar to Plato, he is interested in the role that the liberal arts play in bettering the commonwealth. Cicero might inform our discussion of academic excellence here at the University of Richmond, when he writes, “what is more excellent than when we join the management of great affairs and their practice with the study of and reflection upon the liberal arts” (3. 5. 6-9). The academic disciplines form a structure that supports every field of study. Cicero goes on to name leaders from the past who added to their particular customs the foreign teachings of Socrates. Borrowing from the best of our past and that of others is a practice of liberal learning the Cicero himself demonstrates in his *Republic*. Throughout the book, Cicero argues for the superior abilities of those trained, in essence, in the best that has been thought and said on any topic. Thinking better leads not only to self-mastery, but those who think with better facility participate more constructively in public life. In cosmopolitan, civilized society, the intellectual virtues, drawn from the liberal arts, offer an antidote to the violence of civil unrest.

But Cicero’s contemporaries were not ready to surrender to better angels. Cicero himself would be killed in 43 BCE, a year after the publication of this book, his head and hands posted to the podium where he was accustomed to delivering his speeches.

What might we learn from Cicero, our guide, one of the first defenders of liberal education? We certainly have not returned to the Roman Republic to conclude that there is no hope for our commonwealth during our time of political strife. Cicero’s death was certainly bleak, though he is no easy hero of the period. He at times acted the coward’s part, flip-flopping between allegiance to Caesar and to Caesar’s main opponent, Pompey, in the years leading up to his death. Nevertheless, Cicero points to the ideals of liberal arts education as a beacon of hope in our darkest hour. The liberal arts call us to our highest ideals, the best that we can be.

Just as Cicero prepares himself for engagement with the commonwealth, the liberal arts prepare us for a life of common good. Through the emulation of past models, Cicero reveals that *innovation* and *creativity* come through a return: to the past, to models that we try on and refine in our own fire, until we bend them to our image. Cicero’s “On the

Republic” stands on its own even under the strong influence of Plato's *Republic*. It operates in a new time and place, just as we must craft our own Republics, our own academies, our own better future. In doing so, we are able to add our lines to the “powerful play,” joining our own flicker of wisdom to a “great cloud of witnesses.”

At the University of Richmond, our five schools offer a unique combination of traditional disciplines that prepares young minds – and learners at later stages of life – for innovation and creativity in a rapidly changing world. I spent some of my time this summer witnessing the vibrancy of our scientists in Jepson Hall and Gottwald – even on 100 degree days – as scholars worked with students across the STEM disciplines and through the innovative approach of the Integrated Inclusive Science Program. Our social scientists made news. Not only were they conducting faculty/student collaborative research projects, but they were also being called upon to address current political events in what is a fraught election year, in a troubled world. In the arts, we were preparing for exhibitions that will include Auguste Rodin and for *dialogic* theater productions such as David Mamet's *Race*. A pioneering Humanities Initiative is entering its second year. This group's exciting aim is to “*define, strengthen, and promote the identity of the humanities at the University of Richmond, underscoring the vital role the humanities play in our liberal arts education and in the lives of our students, our community, and our world.*”

These are only the highlights in a vibrant array of activities in individual and collective research and artistic production in our school. These programs represent the best in higher education today. They amount to a distinctive experience in the School of Arts & Sciences at the University of Richmond.

Being new to the community, I want to thank each and every one of our faculty, staff, fellow deans, provost and president, for the ways that you have made me feel at home. I am at home because my own beginning as a self, an adult, and a scholar was with the type of liberal arts experience that we have here. As you know, I studied the Greek and Roman classics at Brooklyn College and went on to steep myself in those traditions in graduate school. With each text, each word of life, each illumination, I have become more myself and freer to act in a world among others. In a way, Cicero's notion of the liberal arts redefines home.

We are at home at the University of Richmond because to be home is to be among those who share our values and ideals, the highest among which is respect and tolerance for the fact that we often have different values and ideals. To be free-minded, which is all that the word *liberalis* means, is to uphold the value of learning, to encounter the other as oneself, a leap through ethnic tribe to the tribe of great thinkers across time. In this place we call home, this University of Richmond, we have commitment to listening to and communicating with each other respectfully with intent to learn, to behave in a ways that uphold the dignity of each member of our community. I feel welcome in this community of learners, and I hope that you do as well.