Remarks by President Bradley W. Bateman
Randolph College
Opening Convocation, August 30, 2016

Every year as my summer vacation draws to a close, I start to think about this address. But what I am thinking about is not what the topic of the address will be. By the time I get to my vacation, I have usually been thinking about what my topic will be for several months, so the only question left is whether or not I will write out the text for my speech. I do not like to read a speech, and I think most people do not want to listen to one being read. This may just be how my own mind works, or it may be my training in speech and debate in high school, where I was trained to speak without a written text.

But today I have written out remarks because I have something important to say to you and I wanted to write these words out to make sure that I say them accurately and precisely.

I want to start my talk this afternoon by looking at a moment in the College's history; since we are in the midst of celebrating our 125th anniversary, it only seems appropriate to frame my remarks today with a story from our past. The moment I have chosen is one of our greatest moments, one that brings us great pride.

This moment took place 56 years ago in the fall semester 1960 when two of our students, Rebecca Owen and Mary Edith Bentley, decided that they would defy Lynchburg's widespread practice of racial segregation and go to the lunch counter at Patterson's Drug Store on Main Street downtown to have coffee with two white friends from Lynchburg College and two black friends from Virginia Seminary. At the time, a business owner in Lynchburg had the right not to serve black customers and Mr. Patterson happily exercised that right: he only served white customers at his lunch counter. The six students went to Patterson's peacefully and with the intention to ask Mr. Patterson to change his practice and let them have a cup of coffee together; but when they did, he refused and called the police. Their effort immediately became a sit-in and they were arrested and taken to jail.

The president at the time, Dr. Quillian, bailed them out of jail that evening. But this was only the beginning of the story. Rebecca and Mary Edith soon went home for Christmas Break; but when they returned, they faced trial for participating in the sit-in and they were found guilty. The punishment for their crime was to be a month in jail, but they decided to appeal the verdict and so were able to delay going to jail. When the day came for their appeal in February, however, they decided that rather than appeal the verdict that they would accept the punishment and go to jail for a month. In the South of 1961, it was a huge political statement for two young white women to be willing go to jail for their beliefs about racial equality. Lynchburg was shocked!

You will have no trouble finding Rebecca and Mary Edith's story if you google them on the internet. Their sense of social decency and fairness was exemplary. It took immense physical courage for Rebecca and Mary Edith first to participate in the sit-in and then to go to jail. When they went to the Court House in February 1961 for the appeal, the sidewalks were lined with angry people carrying tire chains. I join the generations of people who have celebrated Rebecca and Edith as among our greatest alumnae.

But this is not the end of my story. I raise this event partly to celebrate a great moment in the College's history, but there is more we need to know for me to able to get to my ultimate topic today. The first thing I want to add is that Rebecca and Mary Edith were not heroes to everyone at the College in 1960. Many, if not most, of their classmates were shocked by what they had done. In fact, it was so scandalous that they were brought before the Judicial Committee for misconduct. Only through a difficult hearing process was it determined that they would not be expelled from Randolph Macon Woman's College. And although Dr. Quillian had bailed them out and took them their homework in jail for a month, he did not approve of what they had done. Dr. Quillian was himself involved in a major effort to dismantle segregation in Lynchburg. But he wanted to do it quietly and without confrontation; thus, he believed that the lunch counter sit-in was counter-productive and made the work of his committee harder, not easier. You might say that he didn't appreciate the help. In retrospect we can see that Rebecca and Mary Edith were ahead of the curve, but at the time being ahead of the curve was not necessarily seen as a good thing, even by many of the people who agreed with them that segregation was wrong.

But this is not where they story ends, either. It is no wonder that much of the student body was scandalized by the sit-in since the College had no black students at that time. Our first full-time black student, Janie Hubbard, did not enter the College until the fall of 1964. Janie, however, was a so-called "day student", meaning that she did not live in the dormitories with the white students; we did not have black women *in residence* for another year, until the fall of 1965. Our first two black residential students were Ann Richards and Lois Suffolk. When Ann and Lois arrived, it was definitely a bridge too far for some members of our community. Three trustees resigned and some students left the school in protest. Important donors stopped their gifts to the College. Now, it was Dr. Quillian's courage that was seen as scandalous, just as Rebecca and Mary Edith's had been five years earlier when they sat-in at Patterson's lunch counter.

There are many lessons we might learn from the College's experience with desegregation and racial justice in the 1960s. There are certainly many questions that it raises. Perhaps some will ask how anyone could have questioned that Rebecca and Mary Edith were doing the right thing. A more honest person will perhaps ask whether they would have had the courage in 1960 to support them in their act of civil disobedience and their willingness to go to jail for their beliefs. The dominant ethos in the South at that time was so strongly in favor of segregation that it clearly took an exceptional person to take the public stand that they did.

But, I would like to dig even a little deeper and ask you to step back and reflect for a moment on the complex nature of what happened across the arc of the decade of the 1960s. Between 1959, when we banned sororities, and 1969, when Ann Richards and Lois Suffolk became our first two black graduates, our small college was radically transformed. Today we celebrate the courageous individuals who stood up for racial equality, but to celebrate them and not think about the difficult and painful process of adjustment and change is to misunderstand some of the most important lessons of the story.

For instance, should we think badly of President Quillian because he did not approve of what Rebecca and Mary Edith did? Or should we cheer him for later integrating the College in the face of opposition from the trustees, students, parents of students, and alumnae? Or can we step back even further and

understand him as a man in a very difficult position whose ideas were constantly evolving, but who always was concerned to do the right thing?

My point is not to tell you what you should think. My point is to ask that we think about how hard the change was to achieve, how many difficult shoals had to be navigated to achieve the end that would eventually bring racial justice to our campus. For remember, in this story, the majority of the actors did not support what Rebecca and Mary Edith did and the campus was deeply split about Ann and Lois's arrival. If Rebecca and Mary Edith, or President Quillian, had done what was comfortable, or what most people thought was prudent and right, we would have denied justice yet again and would have stayed up on the wrong side of history.

Perhaps it will not surprise you that what I now want to talk about is how we live together in community. What may surprise you is that I want to use this context to say a few things about free speech.

But I want to begin and end the remainder of what I have to say by talking about how we live together in community at Randolph College. We are a unique and wonderful community of people. We are defined by our smallness, or more particularly by the ways that our smallness gives us the privilege to know each other, enjoy each other, and learn from one another. We are close-knit, and that closeness provides the means to know more about the human race and its beautiful diversity. But I do not mean this solely in terms of the diversity of racial, sexual, and national identity, but in even more complex and deeply human ways. We each react differently to the world and we each feel differently about what happens in the world. Some of us filter the world through a religious lens while some of us are certain that there is no higher power. Some of us love change and new things, but some of us do not. Some of us are extroverted and some of us are introverted. These differences are present, of course, in any community of humans, but we are given the opportunity to experience each other in a unique way that allows us to learn about the human condition in intimate detail. Perhaps most important of all, we are given the chance to know ourselves more intimately and to make better choices about how we want to live our own lives. Some things about ourselves we will want to keep; some things we will want to change when seen through the lens of what we learn about ourselves when we are in close community with each other.

These differences in our natures and our backgrounds also mean that we have different opinions about the world. To the greatest extent possible, you are here to express those differences and to engage in the learning that evolves from discussion of, disagreement about, and exploration of those differences. Even when we agree, we may have come to the same position for very different reasons.

Thus, only if we have free speech can we enjoy the full fruits of this education. Both believers and non-believers need to be able to express their opinions. Both those who on the left and those who are the right. Both those who want to control immigration more fully and those who do not. But it takes great respect and a special kind of grace to be able to stay open to people with whom you disagree. In this nation especially, we have come to a point where differences of opinion are often times seen as the reason to yell at each other and demean the person expressing the idea with which we disagree. To

realize the benefits of this college community, however, we must be willing to ***engage with*** people who are different than we are in any number of fundamental ways. If differences of opinion are understood as a legitimate part of our learning, then free speech is indispensable for what we do at Randolph. If we had stifled free speech in 1960, or 1964, or 1965, the people who wanted to dismantle segregation would have been the ones who were silenced. Thus, we must always hope that unpopular ideas will have free expression.

But the ability to hear and engage with the widest range of ideas requires a fundamental respect for other people. We all must come to the table with equal dignity. Thus, there is never room for the denigration and attack of another person's basic identity. We can never threaten another person and then expect them to partake as a full member of our community. Civility and respect are central to who we are and to the successful life of this college. It is never right to demean someone for their sexual orientation, their race, their gender, their nationality, or their religious beliefs. Never. Respecting people in this way is not political correctness, it is civility. The policies of the College demand respectful treatment of people not because we are politically correct, but because we are a college and a place where people must live together respectfully to achieve the ends of liberal education.

It may strike you as odd that I have chosen to make this a central point of my talk today, but I do so because free speech has become a hot button topic on campuses across the nation. Everywhere I traveled this summer, I found myself in conversations with people about free speech on our campuses. As soon as I revealed that I was a College president, people would tell me what a "crisis" it is that we are limiting free speech on American campuses. It certainly would be a problem if people were unable to express their opinions freely, or we simply do not want to hear the ideas of people with whom we disagree expressed openly; but if what upsets people is the necessity of respectful and civil behavior, then I disagree that we have a problem. We do not need to sustain "recreational racism" and homophobic taunts to have free speech. In fact, remarks that demean other people only serve to remove them from our conversation.

Fortunately, I think that we have a different ethos on our campus. At least I am told by some students that we do. Last fall, when Yale and the University of Missouri were experiencing heated debate about free speech, I asked the student members of our Community Action Committee if we had the same kind of pressures on our campus. I was told no, that we do not. In particular, I remember what Maliya Jackson, a senior told me. She said, "The most important thing about people here is not their race, or their income, or their sexual orientation. The most important thing is that you are a part of Randolph. When we are here, our most important identity is that we are Randolph students. You can trust people here to have your back. I can't say that someone won't say something stupid to you, but you know that if they do, other people will be there for you."

If Maliya is correct, and I hope she is, then we are a very lucky community. It means that we have the decency, civility, and respect for one another to be able to responsibly exercise the right to free speech. I suppose it also means that if you are uncivil or disrespectful enough to make a racist, gendered, or homophobic remark to one of your classmates, that others will exercise their right to tell you why you've done something that does not work here and is inappropriate on a college campus.

It also needs to be said that if Maliya, a black student who is also Muslim, feels this way about being at Randolph, then we have much to celebrate on the occasion of our 125th anniversary. Not only have we continued to grow and change, we have truly become a better place.

Thank you. And *vita abundantior*!