

Commencement Address 2005

Laura LaPointe
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An alternate, somewhat more candid introduction of today's student speaker might go as follows: "After moving from the defamed, declining city of Flint, MI to a suburb of Boston for a fairly average remainder of her childhood years, Laura Lapointe headed off to a massive and overpriced academic institution in New York City where much money and little effort on academic pursuits was spent. When asked to describe Laura as a student, her college professors are unanimous in saying that they have no recollection of her existence, which is why she had to solicit a recommendation for graduate school from a sympathetic high school teacher. At Andover Newton, she has been known for enticing other students to join her for weeknight trips to local dessert eateries when they should have been studying, disturbing her neighbors by singing and blasting loud gospel and hip hop music at all hours from her apartment across from the laundry room in Fuller Hall, and lamenting the lack of available men on campus.

If Laura had a quarter for every man who has told her, 'I'm interested, but...fill in the blank,' she probably could park for at least an afternoon in Harvard Square. She recently became involved in church again after a two year hiatus during seminary, but has no plans for ordination upon graduation. In recent months Laura has been on a total of 39 interviews and has yet to be employed, apart from temping and holding one job back in March which she quit after a month."

You may be wondering the same thing I am: How did I get in here? Well, someone opened a door, and I walked through. You never know what's going to happen when someone walks through an open door. Some of us came in here one denomination and ended up another. Some of us came in single and ended up married. Some of us came in here with some money. Some of us came in here wondering, and now we know. Some of us came in here knowing, and now we wonder about what we thought we knew.

This school saw through some of our soiled and subpar paper profiles to our potential for success, opened its doors to us and welcomed us in, ushering us to this place today. At this moment we want to show thanks to those who have prophesied good news to us, those who have bound our broken hearts and set us free with the gifts of love and learning. Will our unparalleled faculty, our longsuffering staff, our forbearing family and friends please stand so that we can offer you the meager and inadequate thanks of our clapping hands and lifted shouts of appreciation.

What a strange and elusive thing is our common societal view of success. Most would equate success with having completed something, like an academic degree. But the word succeed comes from the Latin root "succedere", which has two meanings, neither of which refers to completion. The first meaning is "to go beneath, or to go under." Let me tell you, my classmates and I, we've gone under. The tossing waves of inner tumult have taken us down.

If you want to know what the loved one you are here to support today went through during this strange process called theological education, imagine being a pair of pants, being hurled into a heavy hot wash, hung to dry, then being expected to walk yourself back to the GAP the next morning and tell all the other pairs of pants about the factory where you were made. And then you have to pay the cashier everything in your pockets. The second meaning of the Latin root is “to follow after”, which suggests that maybe success isn’t so much about getting to the destination as it is about pursuing the goal.

I must confess that this whirlwind has left me with little memory of assigned passages in books. But there is one paragraph that was so arresting, it has been hard to forget. I read it during a class on the writings of the remarkable man Howard Thurman, taught by Prof. Kirk Jones. Rev. Thurman served as chaplain at Boston University and is one of the most community-building, gospel-carrying individuals whose beautiful feet have walked this earth.

My personal profile would pale in comparison to his. In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Rev. Thurman speaks of being only a teenager and seeing an attractive ad in the newspaper for what was then Newton seminary. With a burning desire and a rare brightness, he applied to the school. A letter came back from the president, regretfully stating that the school did not admit students of his kind and referring him to a black missionary Bible college.

This was almost exactly eighty years ago. The school's action was customary in the context of the time. Andover Newton's progress over the last century and even the last four years has been noteworthy. Now, for instance, the student body is over 60% female, preparing women for professions to which they have historically been forbidden entrance. And we have a prophetic new president who has already opened closed doors.

The *Watchman Examiner* was the name of the paper that carried the ad for the school that refused this great man admission into its doors. As we celebrate this progress, we need to rededicate ourselves to being "watchmen and watchwomen examiners," looking beneath the surface of common accepted practices in our world, nation, institutions, churches and homes. In order to be truly successful according to the Latin root definition, one must be prophetic. Professor Mobley taught us that a prophet is simply one who "sees through", one who "goes beneath", who heeds and follows a keen insight. Prophets unlock doors which have long been closed. And our time at Andover Newton has well equipped us to do this.

I want to dedicate my diploma today, insufficient offering though it may be, to Howard Thurman, and to others who may have been and are still being denied entrance through doors to many places because of the unprophetic shortsightedness or innocent ignorance of those who believe the keys are theirs.

And I pray that all who share in our ministries may somehow experience the message of these pins we are wearing today, that God has no outcasts.

One of the biggest things for me to adjust to in seminary, apart from using the New Revised Standard Version, was the replacement of the familiar dating terms “BC” and “AD” with “BCE” and “CE,” which stands for “Common Era,” a preferable term because it is more religiously inclusive. Well, I want to propose that we go back to the BC terminology, but this time the BC will stand for “Beloved Community”. I propose that today be coined the first day of the year “1 BC,” that this moment right here and now to be the start of a new era, and nothing will be common about it! Let us be, as prophets generally are, “uncommon”! Let us not be conformed to this world but be transformed and renewed! May your ministry unlock the doors to the gifts that others hold or hide in their hearts! Jesus said “I am the door!” I challenge you to be a door!

Be a door to freedom, a door to healing, a door to harmony! God has given us the “keys to the kingdom,” the keys to the Beloved Community. Faith, hope and love, with the third being the general master which can open any door! Martin Luther King, who prophesied the possibility of the Beloved Community, said, “Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization.” And Mary Baker Eddy, whose words have been such a deep source of inspiration to me, said: “Love cannot be a mere abstraction, or goodness without activity and power” (*Miscellaneous Writings*, 250).

There is a song many of us know, with a few different versions of the words, but my favorite version of the end of one of the verses says, “There’s room for all among those who love the most.” It says:

“People get ready for the train to Jordan.

It’s picking up passengers from coast to coast

Faith is the key, open the doors and board them.

There’s room for all among those who love the most.”

Let the class of 2005 at Andover Newton be known as the ones who were successful because no matter what their past or how many degrees they had, they saw through the stormy sky to the shining star, they took the keys of heaven to bind broken hearts and loose captives free, they loved the most and made room for all. Let us go out and spread love!

“Spread Love” w/audience:

“I’ve often said love could open any door, but I wish we had much more, more love is what we need. Spread love, da da da!”