

The 490th Convocation

Address: "What's in a Name?"

By Danielle Allen

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A University of Chicago graduation excels for one reason only: we still read every single name.

Have you paged through your program yet? First comes the invocation; second, the address; third, some musical interludes; fourth, honors; and then the conferral of degrees. Every degree candidate is called across the stage; the President shakes each hand. Perhaps your last name starts with C? After your own loved one has stood briefly (all too briefly) at center stage, there will be hundreds of names to go. You will, I can assure you, enter a trance-like state.

For your meditations, I offer you the subject of human equality, a subject that confuses us mightily these days. Once upon a time certain Americans said bold things like: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." Four score and seven years later, other equally bold Americans called the United States "a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition of human equality."

Despite the rhetorical clarity and definiteness of these phrases, even at the time of their first utterance they were formulated in contexts of confusion about equality and in order to drill through widespread uncertainty. The first phrase explained why one might overthrow a king for a republic; the second justified the bloody Civil War: the war was fought to see whether a nation not only conceived in liberty but also dedicated to equality could endure. These days neither BA nor MA, neither JD nor PhD, despite the years of specialized training each affords, guarantees comprehension of what the writers of the Declaration of Independence meant when they wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Since the glory of being the

graduation speaker is that one gets the last word on a student's education, I'll use this opportunity to attempt, with you, one last time, an understanding of what these words concerning equality might have meant. Luckily, behind this podium, I am hiding the ideal prop. This University of Chicago graduation ritual itself holds the secret to the meaning of human equality. Yes, even at this elite institution, in this celebratory moment of triumph, at the pinnacles of achievement represented by your advanced degrees, the graduation ritual also makes plain the fact of human equality.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." How many of you understand that statement? Or how many of you agree with it?

If this were a core class or graduate seminar, I would launch the proceedings with such questions. And if I had asked those questions, if I had in class begun to argue that the University of Chicago graduation ritual is the best-known enactment of the principle that all people are created equal, at least one student, but probably more, would by now have raised her hand to say: "Professor Allen, that's nuts! Admission to the University of Chicago is highly competitive, and the U of C is a place where, even if we're not all good-looking, at least everyone's on intellectual rocket fuel. And once we arrive at the U of C, the faculty works our tails off. How on earth can a University of Chicago graduation possibly help us understand the proposition of human equality, let alone engage us in dedicating ourselves to that proposition?"

Well, to answer that question, we will have to scrutinize the graduation ritual itself: the calling of the names. What is in a name, after all? We'll have to go back to basics. Our starting point must be the fact that every human being has a first and last name, or a given and a family name. Perhaps here we can spot a modicum of equality? But already I can hear another student objecting: "But dogs have names, and cats have names, and even snakes and hamsters have names! How do names distinguish human beings?"

Indeed, dogs, cats, snakes, and hamsters do have names, but only because we name them and thereby draw them into our human community. While our animals may recognize their names, they cannot either distinguish a first from a last name or understand the important difference between them. Although our family name is called our “last name,” in reality it comes first, preexisting us and marking the set of histories out of which we emerge. Our first or given name, in contrast, comes last and is a gift from someone barely older than we, who hopes for us a full human flourishing along our own distinctive path.

Names are ancient core technology for acknowledging aspiration and maintaining accountability. With our names, we take credit for what we have done; with our names, we are held accountable by others. (This is an insight that lawyers should understand particularly well.) Our names fix each and every one of us equally as creatures who aspire and can be held responsible. When I was a high school track-team member, my team of three long jumpers competed multiple times against a group of gracious sportswomen from another town with names very different from our own. The three on my team, three African-American women, would walk up to the judge and present ourselves: Allen, Jones, and Smith. On the other side were: Bunting, Rauch, and Dienes. Our names told the tale of slavery; theirs, of northern and eastern European migration. Likewise, today’s roll call will sing an epic song of human effort, channeled into mobility and exploration, conflict and collaboration. Our last names sing tales of the movements and minglings of peoples, and make us accountable to generational tradition.

Whereas our last names bind us to specific traditions and broader histories, our first names mark our potential break from the past. Each of us will extend the particular tradition from which we emerge in ways that our forebearers could neither predict nor predetermine. I remember feeling quite terrified as a child by the fact that my first name, Danielle, comes from the Hebrew, “God has judged.” But the fear derived entirely from the unpredictability of what God might eventually have before him to judge, and not from any sense that anyone knew the answer yet. The idiosyncratic

patterns of our predecessors prepare the moment of our entrance into the world but do not determine our passage through it. Only we are accountable for that, regardless of the aspirations our progenitors have on our behalf or the history they left behind. In this we are all equal, despite the fact that our passages through this world are infinitely diverse. Indeed, one can live one's life badly or well from any of the historical positions into which one might be born. When, shortly, we will call each name, we will collectively hold each degree candidate accountable for how he has acted on his own idiosyncratic aspirations; for whether she has lived well or ill. This fact of human equality becomes the basis for political equality, because in politics we work collectively to shape our environments for the better. It is because all human beings aspire and can be held accountable that all do play a role in how we shape our collective lives, regardless of how well that role is played. The proposition of human equality designates a fact of human life, not an ideal. The hard work is to figure out what a politics dedicated to acknowledgement of that fact of equality looks like.

Happily, today, every name we call will deserve celebration for great achievement. There will be differences of intellectual, aesthetic, and extracurricular interest, of ethnicity, gender, religion, and family background, of personal wealth and inherited resources, and each person who walks across this stage will have a different GPA. Despite these differences, everyone crosses the stage as an equal participant in the human drama of aspiration and accountability. And no person anywhere in the world, regardless of admission to the University of Chicago, is any different. Such is the basic meaning of human equality.

To dedicate oneself to the proposition of human equality is a two-step act. It is, first, to recognize that all people aspire, and that all people can and should be held accountable for how they act on their aspirations. It is, second, to build a politics that puts this recognition of human equality front and center.

Today, family, friends, and lovers of our graduates, you have a rare opportunity to meditate on a tableau vivant, a living picture, of human equality. One after another candidate, each in a maroon robe, will cross the stage—some hastily, some nervously, some employed, some still seeking—and in each handshake, basic human equality, the meeting of aspiration and accountability, will present itself to you again and again. Study that moment. I hope you will find in the occasion reason to rededicate yourselves to the proposition of human equality.

I, for one, will look forward to seeing each candidate cross the stage. Graduates, this passage is the final event in your education—not merely a celebration but a completion of your coming into being as fully educated persons. In celebrating you, this scholarly community rewards your individual achievement and also simultaneously rededicates itself to the proposition of human equality. Through this ritual you, too, dedicate yourselves to both excellence and equality. By so dedicating yourselves, you graduate. Let me state my final point plainly: An acceptance of the proposition of human equality is fully compatible with a love of excellence. This is the paradoxical logic and lesson of today's ritual.

Hoorah, then, for this ritual! There is much to learn from it, and I hope you will enjoy it. Please accept my heartiest congratulations, which I offer, even if in advance of the completion of your education, to each of you equally! We celebrate your aspiration! We are delighted by your accomplishment!

Now, I've talked long enough. Let's listen to your names.

### **Endnote**

This essay owes its core ideas to Ralph Ellison's essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate."

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