

Don't Be Silent

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Fellow Juniataans, esteemed faculty and staff members, returning students, fellow international students, friends and classmates, and finally, the mighty fine class of 2009: *Assalamu Alikum*—Peace be with you!

On behalf of the Student Government it is an honor for me to welcome you, and welcome you back, to Juniata College for the start of its one hundred thirtieth academic year.

About three years ago I entered Juniata College as a freshman—and as an international student. And like many of you I went through the longwinded but all the more necessary orientation process, the ritual speeches, and the welcoming addresses. So if sitting there you are wondering why, after a whole week of being welcomed and oriented, you still have to be here, believe me, I know how you feel

Being part of the orientation process this year has reminded me in many ways of my own entry here. I remember my own first impressions of the College and the campus community, my own expectations and aspirations for the next four years of my life that I was to spend here, and among many other such memory-worthy

Convocation Address, August 29, 2005, by the Student Government President

things, one particular sign, with a rather uncommon message, that was posted all around the campus—something that I still remember vividly and I think will always typify my own Juniata journey.

I had come to Juniata prepared to expect the uncommon, and I knew from the first day of noticing this sign that the environment I had stepped into was an uncommon one, and one that would force me to question my worldview and many of its bedrock assumptions. I felt then that after entering Juniata College education will have to be about more than just academics and that the lull period in my educational life was over.

This sign proclaimed something quite contrary to what I was used to hearing before, whether in school or at home. And because of this, I decided to pull down one of them and keep it with me. This sign is with me here today, and it says, simply but quite powerfully: “*Don’t be Silent.*”

These signs were scattered around the campus in my freshman year and adorned every building, from dormitories to Ellis Hall, and from Good; to Better; and later even the Best hall on campus. In the past two years, however, I have seen their numbers dwindle. Long after most of them were gone, I had noticed that a particularly obstinate one was holding out bravely, positioned on the window of Professor Skelly’s office in the Oller Center for Peace and International Programs—and urging the visitors not to be silent. But this year I have checked and seen that its place is empty too.

Now I was thinking to myself that all this may have something to do with the USA Patriot Act. But then somebody pointed out that the reason they were taken down had nothing to do with taking away liberties or silencing dissent, but rather that there was a more practical consideration at work here.

Apparently some students—and especially those living in off-campus residences—had interpreted the sign quite literally, and were putting it to practice with particular vigor on weekend nights.

My guess is that it is because of this, that you, members of the entering class of 2009, don’t see these posters around anymore. But since this particular sign has left a long-lasting impression on me, and since no aspect of my academic or student life in Juniata has been immune from the contagion of its message, and because I did

not want this valuable message kept from you, I thought I would share it.

Another thing that I would like to share with you today, ladies and gentlemen, both returning students and new students, is that recently I read an essay that was quite critical of us, the hardworking students of American colleges and universities. It derided the campuses as becoming overly careerist in their focus, and their students of being too concerned with academics and too apathetic about their civic responsibilities. It was quite laden with data on what small a percentage of students took part in civic life, organized and associated politically, or so much as voted in the last year's US presidential elections. Frankly, I thought this was all unfair. I can personally tell you that we had a presidential election here on campus last year and that the turnout was quite good. But the article went on about a spirit of apathy, indifference, and languor towards the responsibilities of a citizen of the world that plagued the institutions of higher education in America. Again I thought that this all was nonsense.

No weaker a regime than the brutal and oppressive regime of Apartheid in South Africa was brought to its knees through the actions of students in American colleges and universities. Hundreds and thousands of college and university students who saw it unjust that a minority of white Afrikaners ruled over most of South Africa's remaining African population, and who instituted unjust laws such as the Property Rights Act, preventing any Africans from owning productive land, or the Bantustans Act, dividing their country into minuscule, hard to administer, and economically unviable states, or who executed or jailed their political leaders, including Nelson Mandela—these college and university students, no different from you and me, they organized, protested, and led divestment campaigns, demanding that US corporations must get out of South Africa. Eventually these actions paid off, and the pressures they had created on both the Apartheid regime of South Africa, and the US government here, led to the collapse of that unjust system. Therefore I knew for a fact that the article was being unfair to US college and university students.

I also recall, as do many of you here, that only months ago this College celebrated the returning home of some of its own *eagle*-spirited activists: among them Harriet Richardson '65 and the poet

Galway Kinnell. These two, along with many others of this College's students and faculty, decided to go south to fight the unjust system that was segregation. They did not think it right that in a country where the *truth* that all men are created equal—was regarded as *self-evident*, was evidently being denied. In the process, these students and many others risked their comfortable silences, their personal safeties, and in some cases, their lives. And once again it all paid off in the end. I knew very well that the author of the article was going too far by calling the students of American colleges and universities apathetic, and given to lives of indifference and languor. And I knew of many other such instances of heroism and student activism in the past that led to great changes both abroad and at home.

But here, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to share another thought, a not so comfortable one, that I suspect might have been the author's real point in criticizing the hardworking students of American colleges and universities. As I was thinking of instances of student activism that have led to great changes, I realized that many, and in fact most, of these instances have happened in the rather distant past, and fewer and fewer have happened in recent times. True, we, the hardworking students of American colleges and universities, have a brilliant legacy of activism and a proud history of speaking out, but more recently, it seems that we have not lived up to the examples of our predecessors.

Here it may occur to some that there are no more apartheid and segregations to be brought down, and that in this era of civilization and progress, injustices such as those are things of the past. But one will be disappointed to know the sad truth that there are injustices as grave, and even graver, than Apartheid and segregation that are taking place in our wider world today; and I dare say from reading and from observation that it is debatable whether in this country an end has been put to all that is unjust. In fact, I think we should be thankful that *at least* these two instances of injustice (apartheid and segregation) do not happen today, because both through soul-searching and observing I have not found a satisfactory answer to the question: Would the students at American colleges and universities *today* take the kind of actions that those of yesterday took against apartheid and segregation?

What is more, there *are* injustices today that are worthy of

breaking our comfortable silences over. Some old injustices continue and new ones emerge: People continue to be killed in meaningless civil wars:

that is unjust.

People are killed in new wars of ambition and profit, or at best, ideology:

that is unjust.

People die of diseases that could be easily prevented:

that is unjust.

People starve because in a world of plenty they don't have enough to eat:

that is *unfair*.

People die because in a world of scarcity they have consumed too much:

that is *even more* unfair.

People are deprived of their liberties because of the actions of some other people:

that is not fair.

And people *are* . . . the list could go on.

There are always causes worth speaking out for. There are unjust things that happen to people everywhere. The difference may be that they are not happening to us—here—now. And injustice does not have to happen to us to be named so, that we may speak against them. What is required as the first order of business is an expansion of our moral universes, so that an injustice committed against anyone anywhere is counted as an injustice against us all, against humanity. Because by not speaking out against injustice, against what is wrong, against what is inhuman, we don't only sit on our (*expletives deleted*) and do nothing positive. In fact, we positively condone injustice and inhumanity through our silence. So you see, the responsibility is always there, regardless. Better speak. Better not be silent. And in our case, better live up to the legacy of activism and struggle that is left to us by our peers and predecessors.

In summing up, I suggest that the real question for we students, and our parents, and our teachers, is not whether at the end of four years here we will be trained enough to lead

productive, successful lives in science, technology, business, arts, and government. That is a promise that is already half-fulfilled by our presence here as students of an institution of *this* caliber. The question is whether at the end of the process the character is instilled in us to take responsibility for injustice anywhere, and to speak out against it.

To paraphrase the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, a greater tragedy than the strident clamor of the bad people is the silence of the good people.

I hope that none of us here will ever suffer such great tragedy in our lives.

Thank you, and may you *never* be silent.

