

Faculty commencement speaker: "Be agents of civility"

by News Bureau - Saturday, May 11, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/27307/faculty-commencement-speaker-be-agents-of-civility/>

The following is the text of the full University of Wisconsin Oshkosh 139th spring Commencement address delivered at the May 11 morning ceremony by Tracy Slagter, assistant professor of political science:

"When I meet new people and they ask me what I do for a living, I say, "I'm a professor of politics!" People usually look at me like they feel sorry for me, as if they're thinking, *Poor girl, studying such a nasty topic!* Sometimes I quickly try to make up for it by saying something like, "Oh, no *no*. I don't study *American* politics. I study European politics and genocide!" As if associating myself with economic meltdown and mass murder somehow makes me a more appealing party guest.

"If I boil it down, I study people who aren't always nice to each other, and I study subjects people don't like to talk about in polite conversation. I study people who — sometimes tragically — have forgotten how to speak to one another, especially about difficult things. And when we forget how to really talk to each other about the hard stuff, the results are devastating—we lose respect for one another, we lose the ability to compromise, we lose the heart of the democratic process, and (in the most dire cases), we lose our ability to distinguish good from evil.

"Graduates, I want you to talk about the hard stuff even when it's not convenient to do so. I want you to be kind. I want you to be the kind of people a great education has prepared you to be.

"I want you, Class of 2013, to be agents of civility and practitioners of democracy. This an assignment for every single day, from this point forward.

"Events in our state and in our world have made it seem like we are more polarized than ever – the Republicans versus the Democrats, the rich versus the poor, the religious versus the secular, the public versus the private. It seems like everyone has a loud opinion about what's wrong and how to fix it, and everyone has a nasty name to call people who have a viewpoint different from theirs. There are TV stations, radio stations, podcasts, blogs, bumper stickers and yard signs that will tell you *exactly* how to think, and give you ready-made responses to repeat to anyone who doesn't agree with you. In our own state, we've seen bitter debates and protests, nearly intolerable campaigns, politicians and even neighbors who've drawn lines in the sand that make compromise seem impossible (and unwanted).

"In this type of climate, it's easy to refuse to talk to those whose opinions on anything are different from yours. It's easy to say, "Oh, let's not talk about politics. Or religion. Or sex. Or taxes or discrimination or war or the environment." I want you to be unafraid to dig into these things, to talk about them because your education has empowered you to do so. But I want you to talk about these things intelligently and compassionately, and to demand the same from others you encounter.

"As an agent of civility and a practitioner of democracy, I want you to refuse to engage in name-calling. I

want you to listen with great interest to people whose opinions you think are *absolutely crazy*. I want you to avoid knee-jerk reactions because they are an indication that you're not really listening. In short, I want you to refuse to play by the rules of what passes for conversation in this country these days: talk about the hard stuff, but do it with intelligence and compassion.

"Think about it this way: our society is like one big relationship. Democracy is really about relationships, after all: we can agree and disagree, but we all have to live together at the end of the day. Democracy really doesn't work very well if we're not nice to each other, or if we're not engaging each other with respect. Incivility and nastiness makes some people shut down entirely and allows only the few loudest, brashest voices to be heard, even if they're not the voices of reason. The heart of democracy is diversity of opinion, a right we have here in this country that people in other countries quite literally kill for. Take your education out into the world and use it wisely because your democracy depends on it.

"Friends, all of this "civility" and "democracy" isn't just about politics (although, as a political scientist, I think *everything* is about politics, but that's another speech!). You're about to embark on new adventures. You're moving to new cities, starting new jobs, hunting for jobs, going to graduate school. In each of these endeavors you are going to encounter people who are aren't civil, who care more about making others fail than empowering people to succeed, who try to make you feel like your voice doesn't matter, or like the issues you care about aren't worth discussing. But you, my agents of civility and practitioners of democracy, will be OK if you rely on the lessons we taught you here about critical thinking, evidence, and reason AND if you remember a lesson Mom and Dad likely taught you: BE NICE.

"This is not an easy path. Talking about the hard stuff with people who aren't interested in being kind is not always very fun. And you won't always win. But sometimes you will, and sometimes people will notice that you won by changing the rules. Graduates, I want you to impress the world with your intellect and your skills. Let people be dazzled by your ability to articulate your thoughts. But let them be disarmed by your kindness."

Read more:

- [May 2013 Commencement: More than 1,300 graduates to be recognized](#)
- [The places you could go after UWO](#)
- [Career shift, cancer didn't stop grad from achieving communication degree](#)
- [Class speaker to class of 2013: "Continue to beat the odds"](#)