

**Millsaps College
Opening Convocation
August 24, 2017**

Rob Pearigen, President

It is my privilege to serve as President of Millsaps College and to be with you, the Class of 2021 and our new transfer students, this morning. My official assignment today is limited to welcoming you and then introducing the president of the Student Body Association.

But, in welcoming you I want to say three things:

First, thank you for choosing Millsaps as your college home; thank you for entrusting your educational experience to the outstanding faculty assembled here and to the staff, administration, student life professionals, coaches, groundskeepers—all who make up the Millsaps family and whose lives are now closely linked with yours because of the intimate experience that's the hallmark of Millsaps; and, thank you for being part of the College's vision for the future—indeed, you're the very purpose of that vision, stated in these words:

“Building on its motto, *Ad Excellentiam*, its strong heritage of social justice, freedom of thought and reflection on life's most important questions, and its central location in the capital city of Mississippi, Millsaps engages students in a transformative learning and leadership experience that results in personal and intellectual growth, commitment to good citizenship in our global

society, and a desire to succeed and make a positive difference in every community they touch.”

I welcome you into this vision. You’re a bright and talented group, and it will be our privilege to teach you and to learn from you in the years ahead. You’ll be giving back as much as you take away from Millsaps—now your *alma mater*—and our relationship with one another will be life-long. So, welcome!

The second thing I want to say is that you’re joining our community at a very important time in the life of the College and, indeed, in the life of our city, state, nation, and world. It’s a time of great achievement and promise, but also a time of considerable challenge, apprehension, and even fear—apprehension and fear often growing out of and magnified by our human differences—differences of race, color, creed, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, physical abilities and disabilities, and religion.

We at Millsaps are grateful to often be ahead of the curve in matters of social justice, campus tolerance, and respectful treatment of others. We’re proud of our legacy of ethical leadership and freedom of expression. Indeed, our current strategic plan recognizes this heritage and seeks to build upon it.

We’re also proud to be part of a major effort sponsored by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, announced just last week, in

which ten institutions have been selected from 125 applicant schools to serve as sites for the first Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Centers.

Along with generous financial support, the AAC&U will help guide the development of these Campus Centers as part of a multi-year initiative to educate, prepare, and inspire the next generation of leaders to advance justice and build equitable communities. Like the other nine institutions chosen to participate (including Duke, Rutgers, Brown, and Spelman), Millsaps was selected based on our potential to examine and inspire improvement in race relations in our community.

But, our justice-oriented legacy notwithstanding, we have not, in truth, always lived up to that legacy—not in the distant past and not in recent times. So, now more than ever, we’re called to live into our highest principles, and you, our newest students, are invited into this noble and aspirational narrative.

The third thing I want to say is connected to my second point. But, it relates specifically to the concepts of “order” and “disorder.” Events of recent days have powerfully reminded me that we live in a universe and at a moment in time when contrasting manifestations of order and disorder are being played out before our very eyes.

Like millions of Americans, I enjoyed watching on Monday the celestial phenomenon of a total solar eclipse. My wife Phoebe and I snuck away from

Jackson for 48 hours and spent Monday afternoon in a small field in east Tennessee, in the foothills of the Appalachia Mountains. There, in a perfectly clear sky and precisely on time at 1:31 p.m, the moon totally eclipsed the sun—an astronomical event that had not only been anticipated in our country for years, but was predicted two centuries ago by astronomers, understood two thousand years ago by the ancient Babylonians, and set in motion ions ago when our galaxy came into being. The experience was, for me, a wondrous and mind-boggling reminder of the inexorable order and predictability of our universe.

Juxtapose that experience of beautiful, time-less, universal order with the morning news that Phoebe and I listened to the same day that featured recent, disordered, and human-caused tragic events in various places around the globe, including in our own nation and on the campus of one of our oldest and finest universities, the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. As institutions of higher learning, places like UVA and Millsaps are exemplars of free and open inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge through the honest and robust exchange of ideas. But, our very openness to dialogue and debate has created avenues for hateful assertions of power and unbelievable, utterly disheartening claims against the natural order of human kind—against the dignity and fundamental value of all people. This, to me, is disorder at its worst.

But, I'm a person of hope, and faith, and wonder. And it occurs to me that, imbedded in our human experience and in tragic forms of human disorder, there are seeds of order and reconciliation, just as, ironically, there are elements of disorder embedded in the orderly processes of the universe. During the two minutes of total solar eclipse that Phoebe and I experienced on Monday in a remote field in east Tennessee, the natural order of the day was broken. The hot August air became unusually cool, an eerie darkness crossed the landscape, a strange quietness descended upon the surrounding hills until, of all things, night crickets began chirping. Even our rambunctious and crazy dog, Spencer, seemed unusually subdued during this momentary pause in the natural order of mid-day.

Then, suddenly, at 1:33 as predicted, the sun reemerged from behind the moon, a rooster crowed in the distance signaling new light, the temperature rose quickly, cows not crickets started making noises, and order was restored.

As the natural world responded to the disorderly hiding of the sun in the middle of the day, we must ask ourselves: what are the seeds of order and reconciliation embedded in the disorder of our times?

I believe they are found in bold activism consistent with the values that you yourself pledged to uphold on Tuesday night at the 4th Night Ceremony—the values of honor, duty, compassion, justice, service. Embracing and boldly

acting upon these values, expecting them to be the watchwords and norms of our experience together at Millsaps, and taking them beyond campus—in the words of the College’s strategic plan, “across the street and around the globe,”—this will be our way to infuse order and hope into a time of disorder and despair.

Make no mistake, these values are not the province of any political or ideological perspective. From conservative to liberal and everything in between, honor, duty, compassion, justice, and service have common meaning and currency for all who seek a better world and all who have hope in the power of human relationships.

In addition to Elizabeth Kolbert’s book, *The Sixth Extinction* (your summer reading assignment which has its own lessons about order and disorder in the universe), my summer reading included books by Pulitzer-prize winning author Richard Ford, whom I had the privilege of publicly interviewing during last weekend’s Mississippi Book Festival here in Jackson. A recurring and uplifting theme in Ford’s often gloomy stories is the “fabric” of care and intimacy “that holds people close enough together to survive”—what Ford calls the “redeeming quality of human affection.”

May we, as members of the Millsaps community, do all in our power this year to be exemplars of the core values of the College, to embrace and love one

another in all our differences, and to claim and live in to on a daily basis the
“redeeming quality of human affection.”

Thank you and God bless you.