

University of Hartford

Hillyer College – Virtual Commencement 2020

Remarks by Dr. David H. Goldenberg

“HISTORY DOESN’T REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT DOES RHYME”

I want to congratulate the winners of our college and departmental awards, as well as our students who have completed their studies and will be awarded their degrees when we gather together face-to-face in December and I get the opportunity to shake your hand as I have every Hillyer graduate since 2001.

Connecticut’s greatest writer, Mark Twain, is reputed to have said, “history never repeats itself but it often rhymes”. And yet, it is hard not to think in those terms. As the news reminds us almost daily of the toll the Spanish Flu of 1918 took on the United States and the world, one might be tempted to think that history repeats the pain. But our job is to really remind ourselves that the nation and the world recovered.

No different than today, few families were unaffected. Illness, job loss and even death were a shared national experience that did not differentiate by political party, religion, region of the nation, gender or age. As is the case across time, those who are economically challenged found it hard to access health care and suffered the greatest.

But our job is to really remind ourselves that the nation and the world recovered. As will we.

Some say that Twain was trying to remind us one can’t go back in time. We can’t change what has taken place. And while the events seem similar, we may experience them differently.

Time moves in just one direction – forward. But what we might learn is not a comparison of how many people were ill, but rather, how did people of that time find the courage to move forward.

The aftermath of the Spanish Flu gave us a period of reform. People began to ask themselves what was really important in their lives. How did they now reflect upon the value of human life? Who in their lives showed the greatest of potential only to be now gone? What did they want their society to do that would reinforce a compact written nearly 150 years earlier - that all people of the nation were created equal with certain inalienable rights. What, then, did they want their leaders to do?

Leaders emerged with a new perspective. They sought change. They sought some things that today we consider to be unquestionable. Child labor laws emerged, not as an economic issue, but it was now more important for a still fledgling nation to focus on education for all. Investment in science and medicine would set a tone that would have the United States lead the world forward with Noble prize winners in the sciences. Minimum wage was introduced, asking employers to recognize that the livelihood of workers was as important as the products they created.

I was listening to a National Public Radio story about a nursing student who took ill with the Spanish Flu and she looked up from her bed as she was in recovery and watched airplanes taking off from a nearby airport. She thought a change of career might be good. Amelia Earhart would inspire a generation of women to seek careers traditionally held by men. Having lived through the Spanish Flu, she feared nothing.

While recovering from the flu, Franklin D. Roosevelt would commit to a lifetime of politics bent on reform so that the American dream might be shared by as many citizens as humanly possible. Some of those dreams would not be realized for fifteen years, and we are still far from where he envisioned we could go. From FDR we learned that real change is not a 100 yard dash, but rather a marathon that comes from personal commitment.

Out of their pain, came a commitment from a generation to change the world and make it a better place.

So, Twain was right. You can't go back and change history. While some things feel similar, they are distinctly different and define our own time. No history book can describe what you are personally experiencing in May 2020. Some of us have found the nearness of our loved ones is a powerful and guiding

emotion. Some parents can't wait for you to be out of the house and back at college – that shared space can be taxing. Some of you have cared for the ill in your family. Some of you have become first responders.

Our job – today – is to look forward. This Covid-19 will end but what will we have learned from the triumphs and mistakes? A generation before led the charge for reforms.

So who among you will be the Amelia Earhart and break norms and take us to places we have never been? Who among you will be the young FDR who is inspired and will lead us forward in businesses and communities toward a standard of fairness and justice?

Our history will rhyme. That is, we will survive this pandemic as did Americans in 1918. Until we see each other face to face again, know that I believe we will only become stronger as a nation when the next generation – your generation - stands up, defines a better direction, and takes its place to lead the nation forward.

Bless you and all whom you hold dear. Stay safe. And congratulations to all the graduates of 2020.