

Agnes Scott

Opening Convocation and Honors Day

Remarks by Elizabeth Kiss
President
August 26, 2010

"Called to Live Honorably"

Good afternoon and welcome to a new academic year! Thanks to the hard work of so many people in this room, we have much to celebrate. Last Friday, we welcomed the class of 2014 which, at 265 students strong, is the largest first-year class in Agnes Scott's 122-year history. In addition to these first-year students, we are so pleased to welcome our incoming international exchange students, transfer students and Woodruff Scholars. In all, 325 new undergraduates have joined us this fall, as well as 22 Post-baccalaureate Pre-medical students and 25 students in our Master of Arts in Teaching program.

I salute my faculty and staff colleagues. You inspire, mentor and support our students and make this college a remarkable community through your actions and spirit every day. Thank you for being The Village that Keeps on Rockin'!

Our "village" has recently been enriched by a number of talented new colleagues. In particular, I am delighted to be joined at the podium today by our new dean, Carolyn Stefanco. I would like to ask Dean Stefanco and all of our new staff and faculty to stand so we may give them a warm welcome.

Last but certainly not least, it's my pleasure to welcome a wonderful group of alumnae and friends back to campus. We are so glad you have joined us today. When we ask our newly enrolled students why they chose Agnes Scott, it is amazing how often they tell us that they met an Agnes Scott alumna and decided, "I want to be like her someday." Today, you represent the entire sisterhood of alumnae and friends around the world who help to keep Agnes Scott strong. Indeed, even in tough times, our alumnae and friends came through, making last year the best fundraising year for the college since 2004. Thank you all for your devotion and generosity to this college.

Our theme for this year is "Living Honorably," a phrase that lies at the very heart of our mission "to educate women to think deeply, live honorably and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their times." When I came to Agnes Scott four years ago, I was struck by how deeply the concept of "living honorably" resonated with

students, staff, faculty and alumnae—how much it was part of our institutional DNA. Indeed, a commitment to “living honorably” emerged as one of the six core goals of our strategic plan, *Engaging a Wider World*.

Now this is actually pretty unusual. As the philosopher David Hoekema noted wryly in his book *Campus Rules and Moral Community*, while “the language of character, citizenship, and moral community is laid on with a trowel” in many college catalogues, the reality behind the rhetoric “might be summarized thus: ‘We hire excellent scholars for our faculty, maintain a good library, and fill the flower beds for parents’ weekend; and we sincerely hope that the students will turn out right.’”¹ On many campuses, lofty ethical language has very little to do with how people actually talk, think, deliberate and act—it is so much window-dressing, like the attractive banners proclaiming core values of “Trust,” “Honesty” and “Integrity” that hung in Enron’s corporate lobby in 2001, just before it collapsed in one of America’s biggest accounting fraud scandals.

Some people in the academy go even further and openly reject the idea that colleges and universities should try to teach ethics and model ethical commitments. The distinguished political scientist John Mearsheimer, in his “Aims of Education” address to the incoming first-year class at the University of Chicago in 1997, argued that while the purpose of a university education is to help students think critically, broaden their intellectual horizons and promote self-awareness, it should never “provide ... moral guidance,” offer courses “where you discuss ethics or morality in any detail” or see it as part of its mission to help students “in sorting out” the ethical issues they will face in their lives. In sum, he concluded that the university is and ought to be “a remarkably amoral institution.”² Similarly, the literary scholar Stanley Fish has argued that moral and civic education is a terrible idea, that it is not our business to encourage “responsible citizenship and moral behavior” in our students and that “no university, and therefore no university official, should ever take a stand on any social, political, or moral issue”—in fact, that it is “immoral” to do so.³

Well, if these are the rules, Agnes Scott is breaking them. We emphatically affirm that it IS our mission to educate students to “live honorably.” In a few minutes, Honor Court President Danielle Patton will ask all of us to publicly affirm Agnes Scott’s Honor System as our way of life and to pledge that we will “develop and uphold high standards of honesty and behavior,” “strive for full intellectual and moral stature” and realize our “social and academic responsibilities.” And Agnes Scott’s strategic plan states that we strive to “become a living laboratory of a campus-wide commitment to justice, courage, integrity, respect and responsibility through policies and practices

¹ David A. Hoekema, *Campus Rules and Moral Community* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 126-7.

² John J. Mearsheimer, “The Aims of Education,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 1 (1998).

³ Stanley Fish, “Save the World on Your Own Time,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 23, 2003) and “Why We Built the Ivory Tower,” *New York Times* (May 21, 2004), p. A23. Fish has expanded his critique of moral and civic education into a book, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

designed to model these values and to provide the campus community with ongoing opportunities for ethical reflection, deliberation and action." But what exactly are we called to do? What does it mean at Agnes Scott to "live honorably" and why is this commitment important to us? Answering these questions requires us to think deeply about who we are and who we want to become as a liberal arts college for women.

Last night, some of us had the opportunity to hear a remarkable man, Dr. Muhammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, global microfinance pioneer and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. As I listened to Dr. Yunus, I was struck by the synergy between the evolving mission and vision of the Grameen Bank and that of Agnes Scott College. The Grameen Bank is dedicated to empowering poor people who are otherwise denied access to credit through small, no-collateral loans. Initially, Grameen Bank tried to give at least 50 percent of its loans to women, since in Bangladesh in the 1980s only 1 percent of conventional loans were given to women. It took a lot of work to get to 50 percent, since it was so countercultural in rural Bangladesh for women to ask for and work with money. But once women began to participate in larger numbers the bank realized something surprising: investments in women had a disproportionately positive effect on communities. Today, 97 percent of Grameen's borrowers around the world are women.

Similarly, when in 1889 the elders of Decatur Presbyterian Church resolved to establish a school for girls and women they were inspired by a vision of a liberal education for girls and women that would enable them to elevate an economically depressed community still reeling from the effects of the Civil War. They saw an investment in the education of women as critical to building a better world.

So what does all of this have to do with honor? Our 100-year-old student-governed Honor Code is of course, and very importantly, a commitment to learn with integrity, to be fair to our fellow students, professors and the scholars whose work we use and not to cheat and plagiarize. But it is even more than that. It demonstrates Agnes Scott's commitment to take our students seriously as intellectual, moral and civic beings who take responsibility for themselves and their communities. As I reminded the class of 2014 at last Saturday's Honor Code Signing Ceremony, when student self-government was introduced at Agnes Scott by Dean Nannette Hopkins in 1906, women in this country had no right to vote—they wouldn't get that right until 90 years ago this very day, on August 26, 1920, when the 19th amendment went into effect. Indeed, for many decades after women got the right to vote—well into the 1960s in many places—women were excluded from serving on juries and required their father's or husband's permission to take out a loan or open a bank account. The constraints on women in rural Bangladesh that Dr. Yunus described are not so very different from what women in this country experienced until very recently. But at Agnes Scott young women were expected not only to act honorably themselves, but to take responsibility for each other, including the responsibility to wrestle with the challenges of how to respond to those who broke the rules. Agnes Scott's system of

student self-government reflected a powerfully counter-cultural vision of taking women seriously as citizens with full moral and civic status and autonomy.

Now I suspect that the founders of Agnes Scott never dreamed of a world in which women would be lawyers, doctors, elected officials, Secretaries of State, corporate and non-profit CEO's, professional athletes, research scientists, artists and social entrepreneurs. But their educational vision provided the foundation for generations of Agnes Scott students to become confident and thoughtful women who, having experienced a campus community that took them seriously and gave them opportunities to learn and lead, went on to change their communities for the better. From Civil Rights Movement journalists and participants such as Kathryn Johnson '47 and Constance Curry '55 to advocates for fair trade and champions of refugee and human rights such as Jackie DeCarlo '87 and Layli Miller-Muro '93, to countless others who contributed in ways great and small to creating a more fair, honorable and humane world, our students and alumnae have been nourished in a campus culture that gives them a stake in their world.

This may help to explain one of the most surprising aspects of a recent national study comparing women who graduated from women's colleges to those who graduated from coeducational institutions. A much higher percentage of the women's college graduates who were surveyed reported that they had benefited from a focus on values and ethics in college, that college helped students to develop action-guiding moral principles and that their college experience helped them develop a sense of purpose in life.⁴

I am suggesting that there is a connection between Agnes Scott's commitment to living honorably and our commitment to empowering women to shape their world. It's a connection we are called to nourish and develop every day, through our curriculum and through the opportunities we provide on campus, in Atlanta, and around the world for students to make a difference.

A second important dimension of Agnes Scott's commitment to living honorably is that we are called, as a community of faculty, staff, students and alumnae, to walk the talk—to synchronize the audio and video. This is why our strategic commitment to living honorably includes such concrete goals for how we want to make our policies and practices reflect our values. It's why we have created new opportunities for staff to have a voice in college governance, why we established a Living Wage target of \$14.25 an hour for full-time employees and why we committed to becoming leaders in environmental stewardship and a climate-neutral institution by 2037. I am proud of

⁴ The Women's Colleges Comparative Alumnae Research Project was commissioned by the Women's College Coalition and conducted by the educational research firm Hardwick~Day. For more information, see President Kiss' Summer 2008 *Main Events* column, "Women's Colleges are Worth the Investment" available on the Agnes Scott College website at ???. For the full survey results, visit the Women's College Coalition Website at <http://www.womenscolleges.org/story/what-matters>.

the progress we have made on all of these fronts, especially given the economic challenges of the past several years. This fall, we will be halfway to our Living Wage goal, with 24 of our 47 staff members in the original Living Wage group earning at or above our target wage. Over the past two years, we have reduced campus waste by 25 percent and an impressive 62 percent of the waste we produce does not go into landfills but is recycled or composted. This year, we'll be reassessing our Living Wage target and goal and pursuing a goal of 80 percent waste diversion by June 2011 and 90 percent by June 2012, which would make us one of the first Zero Waste colleges in the country. We will also be rolling out a new focus on reducing energy use in our buildings, which accounts for 88 percent of our greenhouse gas emissions, and installing a building dashboard system that will give us real time data on our electrical use in seven buildings.

Just as with an Honor Code, our commitment to living honorably in our campus practices and policies is not always easy. It ranges from developing the individual discipline of turning off the lights and your computer when you leave to the much more complicated and difficult choices we face in allocating college resources in tough times when there are so many legitimate needs.

In his wonderful little book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*,⁵ Rushworth Kidder argues that the really difficult ethical choices we face in our everyday lives are generally not those between right and wrong, but rather between right and right. He identifies four classic kinds of right-right dilemmas: truth versus loyalty, justice versus mercy, individual versus community and short-term versus long-term. I face these right-right dilemmas every day in my role, and I am sure all of you do too.

How do you balance justice and mercy in dealing with an Honor Code infraction by a student? How do you balance the legitimate needs of individuals versus those of the larger community, or those of the community in the short term versus the long term, in allocating scarce financial resources? There are no easy answers. But as a community called to "Live Honorably," we need to wrestle with these choices, be honest about them and do our best to resolve them in thoughtful and balanced ways. And we need to acknowledge that good people will disagree.

Difference and disagreement, and how we embrace and navigate them, is the final aspect of "living honorably" I'd like to explore with you today. In a world where so many people yell first and think later, in an era where we have witnessed a resurgence of xenophobia and coarse stereotyping in our public discourse, we have an opportunity as well as an obligation as a liberal arts college to reflect and argue well, to learn from and celebrate our diversity and to respectfully acknowledge our differences and disagreements.

⁵ Rushworth Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, 2nd edition (Harper Collins, 2009).

Consider, for instance, our world's desperate need for good models of truthful, respectful and humane engagement with people from other religious traditions. Founded by Presbyterians, Agnes Scott continues to affirm the values of faith, learning, virtue and vocation that lie at the heart of the Presbyterian educational tradition. But as we become an increasingly diverse community of faiths and convictions, we are called to continually re-articulate these core values in the face of changing realities, vocabularies and contexts—to be, in the words of the Presbyterian tradition, “reformed and always reforming.” So how do we honor our Presbyterian heritage while embracing people of all faiths and convictions as full members of our community? How do we talk and learn across religious, political and ideological differences? This is both a challenge and a wonderful opportunity, which our recently formed student Interfaith Council has embraced and which I hope many of us will engage in the coming months.

Arguing well in the face of difference and disagreement requires a commitment to think deeply, to raise probing questions and to state our views as clearly and honestly as we can. But it also requires a willingness to open ourselves up to learn from people who think, look and believe differently, instead of retreating into our own comfort zones. We are called to practice what Stephen Carter has termed “civil listening” — “listening to others with knowledge of the possibility that they are right and we are wrong.”⁶ That extends, I have to admit, even to the arguments against moral and civic education offered by Stanley Fish and John Mearsheimer that I cited at the beginning, which I believe have good lessons to teach us about the dangers of indoctrination and the temptations of smugness or self-righteousness that are ever-present in communities such as ours that are committed to living by moral codes and ideals. Living honorably means listening even to your harshest critics and being on the lookout not only for differences, but also for lessons and elements of common ground.

So as we begin a new academic year, let us reaffirm Agnes Scott's commitment to living honorably and embrace all the ways it connects to our mission to educate and empower women, our responsibilities as members of a remarkable community in a complex world and our aspirations to make that world just a little bit better. Have a wonderful year!

⁶ Stephen Carter, *Civility* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998) p. 139.