

This was President Whitaker's message to the King community at the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year, just after the upheaval at and near the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.



God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee.
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.

--Third verse, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," James Weldon Johnson

Dear Fellow Members of the King Community:

We begin this academic year, as do all American colleges and universities, in the shadow of the recent horrendous events in Charlottesville, Virginia. Whenever cataclysmic events occur on and around other campuses, it is healthy to consider if there are common threads and common concerns on ours. Such self-examination gives us opportunity to address areas—in this case race relations, especially—where there is always room for improvement.

It is important to remember that what happened in Charlottesville was not a University of Virginia problem so much as it was the University as victim. Most of those who came to Charlottesville to protest came from outside of the area and from outside of the University. Indeed, when white nationalists marched with torches through the UVA Grounds, including in historic and residential areas, it was definitely the university and the residents who were being terrorized. We do not expect any such protests coming to Bristol or our other campuses and sites, nor do we see any reason for outsiders to seek to protest on our campuses. We are committed to your safety, and have procedures to secure our places if that were ever necessary. Moreover, unlike the University of Virginia, we are a private university, with far greater latitude to control gatherings on our property. We respect and encourage free speech and free exchange

of ideas—including those ideas that might offend and trouble us. But being a private campus (and not a governmental entity), we absolutely have the right to preclude the sort of racist, bigoted, threatening messages and conduct that marked Charlottesville. Those have no place at King.

What I would like to tell you is that you will find absolutely no racism or bigotry at King or around us. But that I cannot do, any more than I can say King or those who live near us are immune from any of the other maladies and distortions of character that come with our fallen human condition. I can tell you that such conduct would be an aberration at King, at odds with our character as an institution. And I can give you several important assurances.

First, King is a Christian university, and racial prejudice is antithetical to a Christian worldview. We are all made in God's image, part of the creation he proclaimed "very good," each person worthy of love and respect. In Christ there is no black or white, no Asian or Latino, no American or immigrant, no male or female. That does not mean we have to ignore the history and influences that our various heritages might reflect—for that is part of who we are and how we were formed. It does mean we must reflect God's love in our interactions, one to another. It means that we should try always to put ourselves in the other person's shoes—especially when that

person is different from us in some way. Indeed, we are called to reach out in love to those not like us in their backgrounds and even their conduct, as Jesus did throughout his ministry. As a Christian university, we are committed to following Christ—and that means rejecting racist and hateful words and conduct. At King we welcome and love all people.

Second, King is a place with a strong civil rights record. King was essentially, if not officially, segregated until the 1960s, as were most colleges and universities in the South (and many elsewhere). But the story of King’s integration in the 1960s is a strikingly good one, a record we can all be proud of. King took the initiative—without any prodding—to admit African-American students well before many other schools. The president, R.T. L. Liston, with the assistance of the area’s black leaders, teachers, and clergy, personally recruited the first African American students. In that undertaking he had the support of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees. That transition for King was seamless and peaceful, with no protests and very few incidents of any sort. Those first African-American students excelled, at King and after their time here, as have those who followed them. Dr. Liston laid the foundation for King being a place of welcome, acceptance, encouragement, and fairness for all students, irrespective of color or ethnicity. As an institution we proudly continue that emphasis today.

Third, King is committed to the value of diversity in all its dimensions—diversity of background, diversity of experience, diversity of heritage, diversity of nationality, diversity of ethnicity, diversity of race, diversity of sex, diversity of religious belief, and diversity of thought and opinion. We are a university, and part of being a university is exposing our students to the wonderfully diverse world they are entering, now and when their time here is over. That commitment means we do not simply tolerate or abide those who are different from us: we value them as people of worth and see them as integral to our development as whole persons and as citizens. That important part of a King education cannot happen if some refuse to show respect for others in discourse or daily living or who refuse to let go of unjust prejudices. There is not a place in such a community as ours for people like that.

Fourth, we have a mission, newly revised, whose terms leave no room for racial prejudice and bigotry. That statement reinforces that we are a “Christian academic community”—and racism is inconsistent with each of those three words—and with the community they describe. We are committed to students excelling, and hatefulness is not reaching

toward excellence. We work to make students thoughtful, and there is nothing thoughtful (in any meaning of that word) that allows for prejudice—indeed prejudice is the opposite of being thoughtful, for it depends on blanket judgments formed without thought. To be resourceful one cannot demean, ignore, or dehumanize those with whom one should be working alongside, here at King or beyond. And certainly to be a responsible citizen one cannot be racist, which in a civil society is the height of irresponsibility. The mission statement charges us all to uphold high expectations and show a worthy example, and this, also, applies to how we comport ourselves on matters of race.

We have in place these strong expectations for our students and for our faculty and staff, and those expectations define who we are as a community. We hold ourselves to those standards. We do not aim merely to reflect the society and culture around us—we aim to be better, so that we can have a positive and transforming influence as we seek to serve others.

As we begin this school year, let us all at King recommit ourselves to racial equality, to treating others without prejudice, to being a place where love always overcomes hate, and to developing the “content of our character.” Let us all pray the words of the stirring hymn above. Together we can build a better and stronger community here and work for a better society beyond the university. I have every confidence given our history, our people, our mission, and our dedication that we can do just that.



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President

