

5-27-2011

2011 Commencement Address: Marilynne Robinson

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Recommended Citation

Robinson, Marilynne, "2011 Commencement Address: Marilynne Robinson" (2011). *Commencement Addresses*. 12.
https://crossworks.holycross.edu/commence_address/12

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2011 Principal Address

By Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize winner and renowned author



I will tell you something you may not hear elsewhere. You live at a wonderful time in a wonderful country. I feel as strongly as anyone that everything could be much better, and ought to be better. But one of the pleasures of my self-defining life, my life as writer and teacher, is that I have read history, and I have traveled to and talked with people in those regions of America considered by many in this country to be alien territory. I have taken from history an awareness of the human tendency toward destructiveness and bitter violence. We share this tendency, certainly. But, in terms of our national life, we have cultivated an ethic of civil peace which has allowed for the flourishing of a great many wonderful communities and institutions. At the moment this ethic is under great stress, a fact that makes it all the more important to acknowledge it and recognize its value.

It is an honor to speak at an institution as distinguished as this one. But I am also honored to visit colleges I might never have heard of before they invited me. There are so many colleges and universities in this country—5,000 is the figure I have seen—many of them not in Massachusetts. However they might differ, they have certain things in common that are not common elsewhere. For instance, they tend to be beautiful, with grassy spaces and chapel bells and buildings that are meant to embody the serene gravity of the institution. Their students are local, or the children of graduates, or they are drawn to the school because of religious affiliation, but in any case they are as serious as students to be found elsewhere—not serious enough, that is, but as capable as any generation of assuming the role of adults in a complicated world. Or, to put it another way, they are as full of good faith, as imaginative and accomplished, as any generation that has lived before them. And they always feel well served by their teachers, as I believe they are. It is generally acknowledged that most of the best higher education is to be had in the United States. At the same time we are constantly told that our high school graduates lag behind Brobdingnagians in every measurable skill. But, overwhelmingly, it is those same graduates who fill our colleges and universities, which could not sustain their high standards if the performance of their students were even relatively as abysmal as we are encouraged to believe. I deal constantly with a prejudice against themselves that is induced in young people by these invidious comparisons, often with student populations in other countries who have been winnowed at an early age, on the basis of competence or class, from a much larger population who do not receive academic education at a high school level. And these same countries make students specialize their training in math and science or language and humanities while they are still in high school. So, with all due respect to the varieties of educational policy, the fact is that unlike things are being compared. We ought to be too sophisticated to base policy on this sort of thing. Clearly on this point our education has failed us. (And here I surrender parenthetically to the impulse to give a word of urgent advice. Think very hard about the meaningfulness of anything you are told, especially if it involves percentages or statistics. What I am really saying is, look very carefully at anything that would in any way disable the confidence you will need to make a full use of your judgment and your conscience.)

I go on about this because of that prejudice I mentioned. I work with young writers, in a program so selective that the yearly avalanche of applications comes near overwhelming us. Many of my writers have extremely handsome educational histories and broad experiences of the world. And many don't. We choose our students solely on the basis of their writing. The rest does not interest us, since personal history is no predictor of distinction in the art we teach. The thing of interest here is that they are all equally persuaded that they are culturally or intellectually disadvantaged, relative to writers of other times and places. That is, they feel that culture and circumstance have relegated them to lesser levels of attainment. Big thought is not a thing they ought to attempt.

On one hand, modesty about one's education is wise and appropriate. At best it is an outline, an agenda, a curriculum for the decades of learning that should follow—and which, by the way, this big, buzzing civilization of ours has done an extraordinary amount to accommodate. And on the other hand, a modesty that disqualifies anyone from making a real, full test of his or her ability simply impoverishes the world. The attempt to take on ideas is full of perils, of course. Many people fear embarrassment. There are those who will not give words to a thought, in all silence and privacy, with a delete key at their fingertips, because they fear embarrassment. I see this so often in my teaching that I can only assume it affects many other disciplines as well.

This prejudice against ourselves has more important consequences, even, than the suppression of creative ambition. The American culture of education is under attack. Now people who are in some degree shaped by it are called an "elite," somehow alien, foreign occupiers on a terrain where learning is not native. In certain minds they are unsuited for participation in public life by evidence that they might, long ago, have been paying attention in class. This in a culture that has educated more people longer and at greater expense than any other country in history. It is not uncommon now to hear great public schools like mine spoken of as if they were burdens on the taxpayer rather than assets created by 150 years of investment by the people. We have something wonderful, and we should value it and make the best possible use of it, because it very much needs protecting.

Here is something I have learned from my travels. You can go almost anywhere in America and find an interesting cultural life. Big or small, all these campuses are in effect Chautauquas. They bring in poets and lecturers, they offer musical performances and stage plays. Often they are centers of study for local or indigenous culture, history and environment. Often they are publishers of regional literature. They have interesting specializations, like geothermal technology and contemporary Central European music. It is surprisingly characteristic of any place in the country that people love it and are there for that reason. So their performances are local and their literatures are regional, and none of us has any reason to assume that they are not, therefore, of the first quality. This love of place is manifested in land and building preservation, the creation of archives, the revival of local culture and cuisine, in the development of new and traditional crafts, and in painting, poetry and memoir. A few weeks ago I went to a chamber concert, the debut performance of a newly commissioned work, in a gallery and performing arts center left to his small town by a local farmer.

His cornfield was now restored prairie. The building was surrounded by experiments in sustainable agriculture. My first thought was that this was quintessential Iowa, and my second thought was, this could be anywhere in America, any well-loved place, with only the small differences of the things people choose to cherish. It would take the Census Bureau to estimate the number of reading groups there are out there. I would not hazard a guess at the number of novelists, or of shape-note singers, for that matter. Whatever may be wrong with us, we are not benumbed and television-besotted. Why all this good local life does not yield a more satisfactory national life I do not know. But it does suggest strongly that the lowest common denominator should be recalculated, that it should be a lot higher than it is now, and that we would be happier with our civilization if we had a better sense of it.

Of course it is hard to have a real sense of a country as big and busy as this one, and as heterogeneous. In the Middle West whole towns are effectively Norwegian or Dutch or German, Lutheran or Calvinist or Catholic. This is not the kind of diversity you see driving by, or flying over, but it is real and deeply felt. Frankly, this kind of focus on ethnicity makes me a little uneasy. Still, it is interesting in its own way. America is deeply inscribed by the history of the world, through its whole length and breadth.

But the inevitable difficulty in knowing the country is deepened by the ways we are encouraged to think that we do know it. Our generalizations are always uninformed and predictably unkind. Sometimes it seems to me that when we talk about Americans we forget we are talking about those irreducibly complicated creatures, human beings. I met a man in a prison in Iowa who had spent a stint in solitary confinement working on a villanelle. He could do this because student volunteers from Grinnell College come to the prison to teach. I met a woman in a prison in Idaho who said something to me I will never forget: Tell your students to write good books. They are all we live for. I visited a prison in Iowa where an inmate had asked the librarian to mark the books educated people would read. She had marked each one with a little square of green tape. We everywhere encounter amazing strangers. We have something to give them, and they have something to give us.

American colleges and universities are precincts meant to celebrate the life of thought. Why do we always assume they should be beautiful? Why all those meadows and gardens and walks and ponds? They are not islands in an intellectual desert, but expressions of a great consensus of belief, that education is not only valuable but also wonderful. You have enjoyed a strong education here on this beautiful hill, and now you are ready and able to enrich other lives as yours have been enriched, and to make this interesting country better and wiser. It needs you and it deserves you.

A few days ago I was at Oxford University, at the Rothermere American Institute, talking with British scholars and students about American history and politics. The experience was so striking that it made me revise the remarks I had prepared for today. These people at Oxford have every kind of information and experience relevant to the question of our national character. I grant the realities of cultural difference, which do not always sharpen insight into such matters. But if these same people had made negative comments about the country, I'd have felt obliged to take them seriously.

Instead they proposed some interesting theories, for example that, because ours is a religious culture, Americans are exceptionally inclined to take ethical positions and to assume responsibility for them. I think I am like most Americans in that I would love to believe these things are true, and yet I feel uneasy about taking them to be true. We know our faults so well. And we feel it is naive at best to believe our country has special positive qualities, though we will grant that we have more than a few negative ones.

And modesty is a fine thing under all circumstances, except those in which it becomes disabling. What if it is actually true that the world looks to us for ethical insight, or to assume responsibilities that are compelling to us because of our religious beliefs? What if historical circumstance gives us a special role in the world, not in the sense that we should make any presumptuous claims, only that we should try to live up to the hopes others might have of us—by learning widely and thinking carefully, by disciplining ourselves toward fair-mindedness? The dominance of American culture in the contemporary world is lamented by some, and it can take unattractive forms. But as Americans we can try to ensure that it is a force for tolerance, reasonableness and humane values.

There can be no question that the influence of this country is very great and that our responsibilities are therefore equally great. We can duck behind the notion that this influence is the work of great corporations and government agencies, and that we helplessly and innocently accept its consequences. But this influence is in fact very broadly cultural. As individuals we participate in the creation of it. After all, many of the greatest corporations are not American, and the religiousness for which we are apparently notable is not a trait of corporations, even those that are American.

To a very great extent we determine the nature of this influence—we, as individuals and communities. The work we do, the choices we make, the ways in which we educate ourselves and one another, the degree to which we live by our professed values, the care and deliberation with which we articulate our ideas and the willingness with which we say what we take to be true—these all go into the making of American influence.

It is easy to be disappointed, exasperated, with our religious culture, with blandness here and intemperance there, with fads and hypocrisies and a general failure to inculcate tradition. So it can come as a surprise to learn that on balance America gives religion a good name, that religion is associated through us with ethical seriousness among other things, and that its importance among us is considered by many to be enviable.

For those of us who are religious in any way or degree, the fact that much of the world, and certainly the secularized Western world, looks to us to see how religion is lived out, implies responsibility of a very high order. An institution like Holy Cross continues and exemplifies the unique historic importance of religion in the propagation of learning, and the love of learning, celebrated in the beauty and wealth of resources that typify American higher education. The association of religion with ignorance and narrowness is itself ignorant of religion's cultural importance, historically and at present, in humanizing and enlightening the whole of society.

As students here you have been given a deepened sense of thoughtfulness and good conscience, which are, as I have said, the most important things you can bring to the world. We are supposed to be a very practical culture, very solution-oriented, and yet we have a tendency to fret endlessly over things that can be fixed. If, like my students, you feel as though your very good education is incomplete, you can fix that. In your years here you have been taught how to learn. If you are wary of assuming responsibilities to which you might feel inadequate, make yourselves adequate. And here I refer again to the thoughtfulness and good conscience in which you have been instructed. If you feel that Catholicism or Christianity or religion is not represented, by detractors or defenders, in ways that honor its profundity and beauty, live out its profundity and beauty. To do this is more telling than any argument.

The truth should be faced and dealt with that in the contemporary world this country is exceptionally powerful and influential. Unless we accept this, we cannot be sufficient to our obligations. There is nothing historically exceptional in our situation. There are always two or three great powers in the world. We know the history that has made us great in this sense—notably the two world wars in which the powers of Europe inflicted and suffered devastation. If there are always a few profoundly influential countries, and one of them happens to have made a prolonged experiment in institutional democracy, wouldn't it be an excellent thing if that country made

a good attempt at democracy? If its citizens really were loyal to the project, through all doubts and difficulties? If it was a nation composed of diverse cultures and populations, wouldn't it be an excellent thing if it acknowledged and enjoyed the ongoing renewal of continuing immigration? Wouldn't it be an excellent thing if such a country created marvelous resources for teaching and learning, and its citizens really became learned and informed and intelligently critical? And wouldn't it be an excellent thing if its great treasury of faith, with its thousand expressions, deepened and disciplined its citizens to make them honest and gracious stewards of the influence circumstance has given them? And, if we exclude the term "exceptional," and set aside concepts like "power" and "influence," would we not, in any case, be better and happier citizens of the world if we did these things? There is a great, democratic power in autonomous individual action and decision. By grace of the new technologies, this may be truer now than it has ever been before. Who you are, what you do, what you make of yourselves through learning, prayer, reflection and service, all this will matter. Your lives are the life of this civilization, your hopes are its great hope.

There is a benediction we love in my church. Maybe you know it, too. "Go into the world in peace. Help the poor, heal the sick, support the faint-hearted. Return no one evil for evil, but in all things seek the good." There are many here more competent to bless you than I am, and they have blessed you in many ways. I simply offer you these words because they are excellent advice.



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