

Memorial Address by Rev. Mr. Douglas J. Ray, SJ '95
Princeton University Alumni Day Service of Remembrance
February 22, 2020

I would like to begin by thanking President Christopher Eisgruber, Dean Alison Boden, the Alumni Association of Princeton University, and Ted Stephens, the President of the Great Class of 1995, for being so kind as to invite me to speak this afternoon at this Alumni Day Service of Remembrance. We gather to remember all the members of the Princeton community – alumni, students, staff, and faculty – who have died in the last year. It is a real honor to be invited to speak here, and I am very grateful.

Princeton is a place full of traditions. Some are joyful; some are silly; some are solemn. This afternoon we gather for one of the University's most solemn traditions, recalling those members of our community who have died, to pay tribute to them and to give thanks for the gift of their lives. Each of these Princetonians was unique, and contributed something to our community that no one else could offer.

The broad diversity of our community is one of Princeton's greatest strengths. Each year, when a new class is admitted, the University boasts of how many different states and countries have sent their sons and daughters to us to receive one of the finest educations in the world. We hail from every state in the nation and every continent on the earth. We come from different cultures, races, and religions. This diversity provides Princeton with one of its greatest strengths, the ability to learn from all of these different perspectives.

Two years ago, Cantor Chanin Becker of the Class of 1993 delivered this address, and spoke about the Jewish concept of *Zachor* – the command to remember, to make space for the stories of those who have died. Last year, Rev. Scott Ramsey, of the Class of 1994, speaking from the Presbyterian tradition, gave us a close reading of the scriptural texts, finding hope in the Word of God. Today, I would like to share a few thoughts from my own tradition – Roman Catholicism.

The first idea is that of *anamnesis* – a special kind of remembering. What do we mean when we say “we remember?” The various Christian traditions have different ideas of what Holy Communion is, but Catholics believe that *anamnesis* is a good way to describe what we are doing; that when we celebrate the Eucharist, we are doing more than telling a story of what has happened in the past. Rather, we believe that Christ is truly made present to us when we gather

in celebration and remember the story of the Last Supper. We do not simply listen passively to a story we have all heard before. Instead, we believe that Christ comes among us, and we actively encounter him by remembering his story. We participate in his story, and he participates in our community.

I like to think that we are doing something analogous here today. When we recall our classmates, coworkers, friends, and family who have died we are in a sense making them present to us here, in this Chapel, this afternoon. We come from many different traditions, offering different explanations of what death means. But all of us can remember our beloved dead, and keep their memory alive. When we tell their stories, their stories become part of our story. They become present to us, and continue to have an effect on our lives.

Princeton is the kind of place where you can feel the presence of history, and of all the people who have passed through here over the centuries. When I was an undergraduate, my campus job was at Mudd Library, working for Ben Primer, the former University Archivist, who died last year. My classmate Bijan Salehizadeh and I spent a couple of years organizing the archives of Whig-Clio, going all the way back to the 1780s. Working in the University Archives gave me a great appreciation of the history of Princeton, and helped me to see how the stories of the generations that came before us shaped Princeton into the place it is, and affected my own story. Much of this history has left traces visible on campus, if you know where to look.

I learned that the Stamp Act Sycamores, in front of Maclean House, were planted in 1765, and are still alive today. Those two trees have stood witness to more than two and a half centuries of the life of this University. The walkways on the east and west sides of Front Campus and Cannon Green were laid out not by the University, but by the students of Whig and Clio in the nineteenth century, to provide convenient paths from Nassau Street to Whig Hall and Clio Hall. Spelman Hall was built in the early 1970s in part to accommodate the expansion of the student body in connection with coeducation.

These are just a few of the continuing effects of the lives of Princetonians who came before us. The people who planted those trees, who laid out those walkways, who voted to admit women have passed on, but their legacy continues to be part of the life of the University, and of our lives. Princeton is the place it is today because of those who came before us. Most of our stories do not leave such obvious, visible traces, but our lives shape those around us just as much. Our loved ones who died this year may not have had as great an impact on the built

environment of the University, but they affected our lives, and they live on in us and in everyone whose lives they touched. All of our stories are interwoven with one another, which brings me to the second idea from my tradition: the communion of the saints. In the Christian tradition, we believe that all of us, whether living or dead, are connected to each other in one great body.

Again, I think we can say analogously that Princetonians share a similar bond, in a way. We have all heard the stories of a Princetonian backpacking through the wood of a remote country on another continent, just to encounter someone wearing a hat with a big orange P on it. We recognize something of ourselves in one another when we encounter other members of our community, no matter where it is. When we meet another Princetonian, we recognize that we are connected in some way. This connection endures through time, and binds us, the living members of this community, to those who have come before us.

Perhaps the most visible symbol of this connection for us is P-Rade. Year after year, we line up class by class to march and cheer each other on, and for a few hours it does not matter if you have your name on a building or if you are struggling to make ends meet, if this is your first P-Rade, or your seventy-fifth. We are all part of the same family, wearing orange and black outfits that anyone else would never even think of wearing in public, but that we know mark our membership in this tribe.

I have been coming to P-Rade for over a quarter of a century, now. Watching class after class march by is a little like watching our past, present, and future march before our eyes, in reverse. We cheer for the oldest living alum, and then the first alum who is walking, rather than riding a golf cart. We trade locomotives with the classes ahead of us, until it is our turn to join. Then, as we pass the younger classes, we look at them and wonder if we were ever really that young, until we finally reach the graduating seniors in their jackets (whether senior jackets or beer jackets, I leave up to you), and welcome them into the family.

One of my classmates has been coming to Reunions since she was a little girl, and she says she remembers seeing the Class of 1895 march. Personally, I remember seeing the classes from the early nineteen-teens, but every year there are fewer classes ahead of me, and more behind. I can see how the University has changed over the years by looking at the faces of our fellow alums. New stories are being written every day, by a new generation, but those stories are linked to the ones of those who came before us, just as our stories are linked to those of Princetonians yet to come. Those who graduated a hundred years ago would barely recognize the place today,

and if we were to come back a hundred years from now, Princeton would have changed in ways we can't imagine now. And yet, when the P-Rade marches in 2120, all of us here today will be part of it, just as those in the class of 1920 and the class of 1820 will be part of this year's P-Rade in spirit, because all of us, all of us are connected to each other.

As much as Princeton is always changing, there is something about this place that stays constant from year to year, and from century to century. We remember those who have died, and their stories continue to be part of our story today. We honor our beloved dead in different ways, and we may hold different beliefs about what happens after death, but we can all imagine that we are in some way related to each other and to all the members of the Princeton family.

We gather in this place to pay tribute to our dead, as we should. We need to set apart a special time to remember those we have lost, to pay tribute to them, and to reflect on the gifts that their lives were to us, but we do not leave them behind when we leave this chapel. Their stories will continue to be part of our story as long as we remember them, and we will continue to be connected to them both now and in the time to come. Amen.