

Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on October 27, 2017

Location: Hendricks Chapel

Remarks: Convocation for Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars

The Chancellor was introduced by Pamela Brandes, Associate Professor of Management in the Whitman School of Management and Chair of the Remembrance Scholar Selection Committee

Thank you, Pamela.

I acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, the indigenous people on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands.

I extend a warm welcome on behalf of all of Syracuse University to our honored guests here today - the families and friends of our Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars, the families and friends of those aboard Pan Am flight 103, and all those who join us from Scotland, and from Washington.

My remarks today are for our current Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars. I congratulate you on your character and your achievements that led you to be selected for this great honor. You represent the very best of your schools, and each of you is now tied by this honor even stronger to both Syracuse University and Lockerbie Academy.

Your honor in becoming a Lockerbie or Remembrance Scholar is also a responsibility. And that is what I want to talk about today.

“Turn my eyes away from what in my human weakness I cannot understand, and therefore cannot bear to look upon.”

Those are the words of a French priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. More than anyone I know, he struggled movingly, both in his work and in his writing, with the problem of suffering. He addressed the normal human impulse, when confronted with violence, or tragedy, or disaster, or evil - the normal human impulse to turn your eyes away. To turn off the news. To focus on happier places and happier times. To flee to a place of comfort and refuge. To not think about it. "Turn my eyes away, from what in my human weakness I cannot understand, and therefore cannot bear to look upon."

Theilhard De Chardin viewed this normal human impulse as a weakness, and he struggled against it. There is so much bad that happens when people turn their eyes away. Most of all, in turning our eyes away, we help annihilate the memory of those who could not or did not turn away from confronting evil - those who were engulfed by the tragedy and those who struggled against it, those who tried to find and preserve good among the toughest of times.

This is my fourth Remembrance week. I have seen and been moved by all the ways the Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars help all of us to turn our eyes toward what happened on December 21, 1988, and after. I have been moved by the ways you preserve and pay forward the memory of our people on the plane and on the ground.

I have heard the speeches now four times, and seen the roses laid and the empty chairs and the countless innovative ways our students refresh our memory and our resolve.

But last year I realized there was something missing for me. I felt I could not truly respect these events here in Syracuse without also paying respects to the village of Lockerbie. So, my wife Ruth and I went to Lockerbie in June, with the help and counsel of many gracious people, including Professor Larry Mason, Coach Roy Simmons, Lockerbie and Remembrance Scholar Fergus Barrie and his family, Brian Asher at Lockerbie Academy, Colin Dorrance and Stuart Cossar of the Scottish police, and many others.

What we found in Lockerbie was not what we expected. Sure, we visited the Academy and Tundergarth Church and Dryfesdale Cemetery, where so many lost are remembered. We went to Sherwood Crescent, the neighborhood where many in town died and where a beautiful garden now thrives.

The Lockerbie we saw was beautiful and moving. But what was more amazing was the people of this town. We met so many people who with quiet grace and dignity had refused to turn their eyes away. On a night close to Christmas in 1988, tragedy and disaster rained down on their town. Wreckage and fire and debris. Suitcases and belongings and passengers and crew, and among them 35 Syracuse University students.

We met so many people in Lockerbie who turned towards the unfathomable and helped, and who continue to help to this day.

I just want to share one example. At Lockerbie Academy, we met an older Scottish woman with gray hair, Josephine Donaldson. Twenty-nine years ago, she confronted the piles of debris and belongings of the passengers on the plane - suitcases and backpacks and purses, soaked with water and dirt and aviation fuel.

She was among the Scots who volunteered to wash the laundry. For the families of foreigners, of strangers she never met, she laundered clothing and cleaned possessions, neatly folding and wrapping them in homemade covers, so that the families would know someone in Scotland cared.

In the course of doing this, she discovered, in a purse and a suitcase, birthday cards to two Syracuse University students that the students had carefully saved. She realized that these two girls had been born on the same day in October and in the same year, and had each celebrated their 21st birthday just weeks before the flight.

That discovery affected her, and she brooded on it. When October 1989 came around, she took flowers to Dryfesdale Cemetery on their birthday to honor each of her two girls, Nicole Boulanger and Amy Shapiro. She went again that December on the 21st. She has gone every year since with flowers for her girls, every October and December.

I asked her if she had told anyone, or had contacted the families. She said no, it was hard, and boy did I believe her. She did not talk about it for decades—she said she did not want to call attention to herself. She just thought someone in Scotland should remember her girls.

Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars, you live in age where so many seem to be loud and self-centered, where there seems so little empathy for strangers and foreigners, where quiet grace and decency seem discounted.

What I ask of you, who are the best of Syracuse University, the best of Lockerbie Academy, what I ask is that you remember all your lives the quiet decency and grace of Lockerbie and of Scotland. I ask you to remember a people who, when ruin and death rained down upon them, had the courage and decency to turn and face it, and who have since embraced this University, to its great blessing. In what I pray will be your long lives, I ask that you remember these 35 students, that you remember Andrew McClune, and that you remember them in the way Lockerbie has modeled for you, by paying forward their decency and grace toward others, even toward strangers. That will make Syracuse University even prouder of you than we are now, and that's saying a lot.

Tomorrow, October 28, 2017, is Nicole Boulanger and Amy Shapiro's 50th birthday. Tomorrow, in Scotland, I know a real lady with gray hair and flowers will go to a cemetery.

Please, have courage never to turn your eyes away.

Thank you.

#