

Remarks to the Westminster community  
on the occasion of our 90<sup>th</sup> commencement ceremony

Donald Nally  
May 17, 2019

Good afternoon.

President Dell’Omo, Dean Onofrio,  
my friend Anne Sears,  
members of the faculty,  
the board, guests, and especially, students:  
Steven and I are grateful to again stand and sing with you.  
It is a humbling honor to address you today.

I have taken off my robe because I want to be naked in front of you –  
not literally (it’s no longer 1985 for me),  
but symbolically,  
because I believe this is what we do with our art.  
And, because I feel  
we ought to ask questions about the costumes we wear  
to signify the temples of the educated:  
the church, the academy, and the concert hall.

I wear the costume today to walk in step with friends I love;  
I take it off to be alone with my thoughts.

I will present those thoughts in Three Acts.

Act 1. Why me?

A few months ago, I received a call from Marshall,  
asking if we could meet when we were both in Kansas City.  
We did, and he spent the first 20 minutes of our meeting  
laying out all the disturbing details  
of the issues facing the Choir College.

It was a dire conversation,  
and we sat quietly for a moment  
pondering it...

And then he cheerily added,  
“So, we’re hoping *you’ll* be our commencement speaker.”  
And I thought “What the hell, dude?”  
(Did everyone else say “no?”)

Over the past month or so,  
I’ve asked myself the question “Why me?” many times:  
Why me.... to stand here in this year, on this day,  
just 10 weeks after the passing of my Westminster mentor  
and our friend Joe Flummerfelt,

and on the retirement of my good friends Laura and Tom  
and of the intrepid Phyllis,  
and, frankly, in a place I never imagined I could be  
when I sat in the late eighties  
and listened to Robert Shaw,  
and then to Joe,  
give this speech to the graduating class.

Why me?

One possibility is that I am, indeed, a part of the WE that is Westminster.  
I stood with the students in the chancel in 1986  
and with my graduating class in the nave in 1987.

In fact, Westminster was a bit of a shock to my system  
when I arrived in the Fall of 1985.  
I moved here from Chicago and found  
all the “*hope and love*” stuff to be a bit perplexing.

There was a *lot* of Jesus.

And ritual...

I was raised in an extraordinarily liberal Presbyterian church,  
Zero liturgy. Many autoharps.  
We did not process.  
We did not sing tunes like ENGELBERG.  
There were no handbells.

So, I approached my first Westminster commencement with great suspicion,  
it was all a world I'd never known:  
the funny hats on professors I thought had better fashion sense;  
Joan Lippincott's metronome clicking away on the organ  
as she played Warren Martin's Procession  
over and over and over again;  
the red sea of Freshman in the balcony,  
and that weird Anthem that I thought was just the silliest piece of music I'd ever heard.

Until I stood in the chancel and heard my graduating friends answer  
my question, “Who will go for us,”

and I become quite emotional when they answered:

“Send me.”

And I got it.

On that day I became a true Westminsterite,  
As I realized that  
The great gate of Kiev is never greater  
than the moment,

once a year,  
that the graduating class of Westminster Choir College  
steps forth into the nave and into their new lives.

Because of my Westminster pedigree, I know that some members of this  
community anticipate I will address Westminster's future.

That is not why I am here,  
and yet it would be disingenuous to ignore the elephant in the room,  
as an alum who has wandered far  
but felt the gravity that forever holds all those who have attended  
the Choir College in its orbit –  
the gravity of community.

“The Westminster thing”  
as some who have not been here call it,  
but for those of us who have spent time together at the Choir College,  
that “thing” is “a sense of purpose and of belonging,  
of community,  
and of love.”

If the coming weeks bring news of a restart, a new life for Westminster,  
then we will stand together  
and be grateful that we are a part of this community.

And if the coming weeks bring news that the 90-year event  
called Westminster is coming to an end,  
then we will stand together  
and be grateful that we are a part of this community.

Westminster is not a set of red brick buildings  
sitting on a 24-acre lot that has,  
like so much else in our lives today,  
become the bargaining chip and battle ground of the powerful,  
who are ill-equipped to understand the needs of artists.

Westminster is not symphonic choir performances  
with the New York Philharmonic  
and it is not a senior recital in Bristol Chapel.

It is not the extraordinary tradition of these commencement ceremonies,  
nor inspirational voice teachers,  
nor brilliant theoreticians,  
nor dedicated librarians,  
nor the bell in the tower of Williamson Hall.

It is us,  
the students of Westminster; the product of all that.

It is you, the graduating class,  
the Freshman in the balcony,  
those behind me in the chancel,

and all that have come before you  
who have spread out across the world  
and preached the gospel of community –  
what Joe called “the value of corporate music-making” –  
the meaning of choral colors,  
and the devotion to the Meaning of Words.

So, though it may feel that the shadow cast over this ceremony  
is the Choir College itself caught in the rays of a setting sun,  
I assure you that is not the case.  
If we turn around and face that light,  
we will see that Westminster IS the sun,  
and it is we students who cast those shadows  
across our lonely planet  
and will continue to do so as LEGACY –  
through the students of our students  
long after this institution –  
which, like all things that humans touch, is ephemeral and will die –  
is gone.

Westminster is a community.  
Period.

The opportunity of the commencement of our now-peers  
gives us reason to pause,  
to breathe,  
and now,  
not tomorrow or next week,  
reach across the pew, or the aisle, across campus, or across this country,  
and take the hand of someone with whom we have been frustrated,  
or disagreed on this topic,  
or whom we have simply forgotten in the crushing no-man’s-land  
of “what do we do now?,”  
and hold that hand  
with the love that brings us together today.

Act 2. The Voice.

(I’m done with that.)

So, We’re at Westminster.  
We are Westminster.  
We sing.

Therefore, I want to focus my central Act on  
“Who has the Voice and How are they using it?”

I’m not talking about the singing voice,  
but rather, the Voice of the Artist in 2019 and beyond.  
The Voice of you, who,

as of today,  
are no longer seniors and graduate students,  
but citizens of the world.  
And it is for this reason that I feel this is not the moment  
for me or anyone else to go lightly on you  
and to tell you to grab the brass ring  
or that the world is waiting for you with open arms.

Because you have responsibilities.

It is an amazing time to be a musician in the United States;  
it is the Renaissance of new-music and musical entrepreneurship,  
of curating your own artistic lives  
and doing exactly what you want with them.  
The sentence that my students hear most often from me –  
(which sounds like advice, but is actually a command) –  
is...“do what you want and don’t do anything you don’t want to do.”

We’ve been led to believe  
that there is a certain direction we should all go,  
certain measures of success,  
certain life hurdles to achieve.

And none of that is true.

I know, because I have continued to ask the question,  
“is this the artist within me?”  
And when the answer has been “no,”  
I’ve moved on, to find out more about who I am.  
It’s been one long attempt to *better understand my own understanding*,  
that thing Joe Flummerfelt was so good at facilitating in his students.  
It’s been messy and scary and it continues to be...  
and it’s the only way I know how to make sense  
of the little bit of time I get to spend on this earth,  
or anywhere else, for that matter.

It’s not true that we need to be married, or to own a home, or a car;  
owning property is an illusion –  
an ancient misunderstanding of our relationship to the land that feeds us.  
And, money is one of the many ways by which we are controlled.

Not all violinists need aspire to play in a major orchestra –  
as we watch many major orchestras commit suicide  
in their attempt to be all things to all people.

Not all singers need aspire to the opera stage.

The current rebirth of the professional choir  
in towns and cities all over this country is a gift,  
and an opportunity;  
yet, we do not even need to aspire  
to professional singing as the outlet for our need to express.

We can do what we want.

When our art is fulfilling to us,  
it is then that we are able to truly give to the listener –  
to the one receiving what we have to say.

The fundamental cry of the visual artist is “Look at me.”

The fundamental cry of the musical artist is “Listen to me.”

And yet, while it is the need to express, to be listened to,  
that motivates our singing, it is the requirement  
that we also listen openly and selflessly to others  
that makes our art unique,  
and that is so lacking in our world.

We are depending on you, this generation,  
to restore some balance to rhetoric and to truth of language,  
through the Words you speak and sing  
and the way you listen to others.

To do this, we must forego the ubiquity of music –  
the crass arrogance by which we treat this thing, music, we say we love,  
by placing music in every mall, car, gym, café, restroom, and earbud.  
We have weakened its value  
and yet reinforced an already-dangerous nostalgia  
applied to nineteenth-century music  
and the association of its melodies  
with some type of healing  
or ‘time that was better,’  
or just simply “get in line.”

In his fascinating book, *The Hatred of Music*, written at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
Pascal Quinard, writes,  
“Never before has a century so repeated the music  
that preceded it as this one.”

I reject the misguided role of historical music in our lives.

That is not to say there is no value in historical music.  
Its value is as  
‘a record of the time and its emotional contexts’  
that informs how we got here.

It has no value as an indicator of a better time.

A piece of music should change us, so that,  
at its conclusion,  
we are different than we were at the beginning.

If, in a performance, we have only affirmed our own morality,  
than either the piece of music has failed,  
or we have.

The fundamental crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is The Other –

how we observe the other,  
how we make room for them,  
how we attempt to understand them,  
how we listen to them.

This is why the Words we speak and sing are so important  
and why the musical era we seem to be in, at least in this country,  
is so encouraging,

an era of “the composer”  
in which creative artists  
weigh carefully the Words we will sing.

Ted Hearne’s work is a great example of this.

It is fundamentally about asking questions—

questions about the world we live in,  
about art,  
and about language and music –  
or, in Ted’s Words, about

how music “represents or confronts our current media culture.”

This is why I am drawn to Ted’s music,  
why I feel at home in it.

Because I want.

Because I get confused—

I *am* confused.

I’m uncertain the line between  
identifying the problem and *being* the problem.

Eighty years ago, in the introduction to his play *A Time of Your Life*,

William Saroyan wrote:

We have always believed that art should be one thing,  
religion one thing,  
politics one thing,  
morality one thing, and so on.

This kind of isolation of entities... is foolish.

All things must come together as one, which is man.

(He goes on to say:)

Reflection and action must be equally valid in good men  
if history is not to take one course and art another.

And here I will note that Saroyan was indeed  
a noted progressive of his time  
and yet he uses the Words man and men  
as a person of that time.

We weigh Words.  
We can do better.

### Act 3. Yelling at the Seniors

When David Lang wrote *Statement to the Court*,  
he told me he stood in front of his computer monitor  
yelling the Words;  
he was angry and hopeful.

I had the same sensation writing this final, brief Act,  
so while I may not actually yell,  
though I may,  
know that in my heart I am screaming –  
not at you, but with you, the graduating class of 2019.

I'd like to share some thoughts from the American poet Philip Levine,  
from whom I have drawn much inspiration.

Phil said, "I don't believe in the validity of governments, laws, charters,  
[and] all that hide us from our essential oneness.  
We now exist in the kind of a world that Orwell was predicting,  
and the simple insistence upon accurate language  
has become a political act.

(He continues,)

Nothing is more obvious than what our politicians are doing to our language,  
so that if poets...

[and here, he means you, artists, story-tellers, singers, us]

...if poets insist on the truth,...  
or on a faithful use of language,  
if they insist on an accurate depiction of people's lives  
as they are actually lived –  
this is a political act.

Joe Flummerfelt inspired all he met to embrace that oneness  
that Phil Levine mentions,  
and to seek truth in art

through an unadorned rawness and vulnerability  
that could be heard and felt.

And though he was not an inherently political person,  
I will dedicate my final comments to the memory of Joe,  
and address them not necessarily to everyone here,  
but specifically, to those graduating,  
who need to do better than my generation  
or Joe's generation,

if you are to have a world  
in which your children may sing.

You have the Voice and the Voice is power.

I challenge you,  
In fact, I insist, on my rights through brotherhood and sisterhood  
as a fellow-Westminster graduate,  
that we use that Voice to ask questions about the world we live in  
to make our art ever more relevant.

To eschew the tyranny of false nostalgia that we have applied to historical music and its hierarchies  
and to write our own narrative as a record of the time.

When future cultures ask “What did they do?” –  
the only thing they will have to judge us by is art,  
because art is the only thing that is not fleeting.

“How did they respond?” they will ask.  
Will the answer be that we sang Schubert songs into the night,  
or will it be that we made a moving and dramatic piece  
about the way in which we treat the earth?

Wendell Berry says it well, when he observes,  
“Eating is a political act.”

To me, singing is a political act.

Its purpose must be to invite a way of thinking about our world  
and about our emotional lives  
that goes far beyond ourselves,

And so my invitation to the Class of 2019  
is to be naked in front of those who receive your art;

Ask questions with them,  
Observe the suffering of others;

In your art, embrace science and  
stop spewing fossil filth into the air;  
In your art, honor the generations that are coming after you  
who also need to breathe and to drink water;  
Honor the plants that right now need the same;  
In your art, help the polar bear, the tiger, the penguin, and the bee,  
Lose plastic,  
and deny the rights of men to tell women what to do with their bodies;  
In your art, release gender  
and defy the wars of the rich;  
In your art, speak truth to power and challenge authority;

Make your own path and don't pay attention  
to the SHOULD that those who are not artists  
will lead you to believe is the way,

the path,  
the road to some unreachable happiness  
that lies only within you,  
in Your Voice, and what you do with it.

In your art, be the enlightened generation  
that mine and that before me would not be;  
In your art, love our neighbor, welcome the immigrant,  
and provide shelter for those in need;  
Sing. Listen. And tell your stories.

Understand the true power of your Voice  
and of the language on your tongue.

And when,  
in just a few minutes you sing those Words,  
“SEND ME,”  
feel the gravity of those Words  
as we do indeed send you out to speak daily  
to a world that desperately needs you.