

Adelphi University
Office of the President
May12, 2015

Dear Adelphi students, faculty, staff, and Alumni Council:

When I read about the slaying of Officer Brian Moore in the line of duty, I thought about the dangers of police work, the availability of guns, and the amount and kinds of violence we experience all too often. I also thought about the number of incidents in which violence and death have occurred in recent months.

As we enter this commencement season, I ask you to think about our roles and obligations as members of this community, to contemplate our commitment to an education that is as much about the advancement and promotion of character and citizenship as it is about preparation for careers and commerce, and to consider what it means to be an ethical person.

When we consider our ethical roles, we must then ask, can we allow ourselves to remain silent in the face of social and economic injustice, demonstrated, for example, by recent repeated manifestations of racial bias and misconduct in the public square that has led to severe injury and even death?

Don't we have a mandate to speak out? Shouldn't our education give us the courage to take a stand for what is just, even when it is inconvenient or when we assume others will take opposing stands that we believe to be political and not principled? I hope it does.

We citizens must employ the ethical "eye" to challenge societal patterns that in total and in summary test our sense of what is just. This takes courage, as well as compassion, but it is our obligation -- to identify the fault lines and to seek empirical evidence so that we can arrive at a larger truth and develop appropriate strategies to address injustices wherever they occur.

This is especially true in universities, which are institutions committed to the pursuit of unbiased truth by promoting intellectual integrity and openness to diverse points of view.

The ethical eye helps us to identify the principles required to find the truth that lies beyond the prejudice of racism by focusing on fairness, equity, and justice for all, even those who fit a certain profile, whether they be alleged perpetrators, members of the police force, or innocent bystanders. No one should be an "other" to us if our education has succeeded. We are one species, with each member seeking to find a unity connecting head and heart. There is no progress in Civil Rights if our goal has been redefined as, "Don't shoot," instead of "Let us rise up."

I raise these issues now because of events in society that affect us all, but affect some of us in more immediate and problematic ways.

Think of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Rekia Boyd, Miriam Gray, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray, people we now know by name who were killed recently by representatives of the justice system, as well as others taken before them.

Each of these names represents one event among too many more that could be recounted, black youth, female as well as male, killed in cold blood. And we could add Emmett Till and more like him, killed by vigilantes acting as police, just as happened in the case of Trayvon Martin.

New phrases have entered into our daily lexicon: “Hands up; don’t shoot.” “I can’t breathe.” “Black lives matter.”

Police have been killed, too. They have dangerous jobs, as witnessed by the recent deaths of Officer Moore, shot by someone with a criminal record. The majority, like Officer Moore, are honest, nearly noble guardians of the public square. The shooting of Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, both members of minority groups, perhaps representing a department’s desire to diversify, was a heinous crime perpetrated by a crazed person who then shot himself. There can be no excuse for such ill-motivated vengeance.

Some blame the killing of Officers Liu and Ramos on the protests about the deaths of the victims whose names we have come to know. I ask, why can’t we regret both sets of killing? Why can’t our commitment to due process apply to both sets of individuals? Why can’t our values of compassion and empathy apply to both the youth and the police?

Even as we mourn these officers and scorn their killing, we should not forget Eric Garner crying, “I can’t breathe.” We can be sympathetic to the police even when we acknowledge the fact that confrontations between police and black youth lead all too often to unnecessary violence, severe injury, and even death.

Why do so many encounters escalate to violence? What causes a complaint about jay-walking or selling cigarettes to become a shouting match and a shooting?

How are police trained to mitigate and defuse such public engagements, especially when they must know that the person accused in a street crime is likely to be less well-educated, less schooled in managing such encounters, and more likely, because of age and race, to have negative perceptions of law enforcement?

We know that our Adelphi Public Safety Officers, many of whom are retired New York City Police, the Garden City Police, and Nassau County Police are well-trained and believe in community policing, but that other communities are not so fortunate.

While the incidents that resulted in the deaths of Garner, Rice, Brown, Scott, Boyd, Gray, and others are different from one another, with circumstances that can be debated, each is part of a larger pattern related to race that seems to be supported by the institutions of law and morality.

The various police departments in Cleveland, Ohio, Ferguson, Missouri, Chicago, Illinois, North Charleston, South Carolina, Washington, D. C., Baltimore, Maryland and Staten Island, New York are separate, but they are not unrelated. Police science and art have national associations that promote and share “best practices”.

There have been other societal patterns supported by law and institutions of morality that have been challenged: consider slavery and laws denying voting rights to black and female citizens. Consider laws limiting the rights of self-identified Lesbians, Bisexuals, Gays, and Transexuals to marry. Such laws were or are being amended or abandoned and moral standards upgraded because of the organized efforts of many Americans who have argued that discrimination of this kind is unethical and unjust. The ethical eyes employed by these average citizens stared down the old law, the old legal interpretations, the old morality, by forcing others to consider the dimensions of fairness, equity, and justice in creating new laws and establishing new standards of right and wrong. These movements continue.

Our Constitution allows for changes in laws, regulations, and official protocols as we learn more about human rights and aspire to honor them, even as we honor property rights.

We must seek truth and justice through evidence, not emotion. In all cases, we must take the path to justice free from bias, even when it seems difficult and may run counter to our personal experience. We can do so even as we support training and protection for the police charged with preserving the public order.

I write now to encourage the Adelphi community in its broadest components to reflect on these matters, discuss them, and abhor violence of any kind, even as we focus on end of semester requirements and celebrations and prepare for commencement. Our motto is, “The Truth shall make us free.” Let us live it individually just as we ask that you live it as a member of this community.

My favorite minister, one among many in my journey to understand faith and reason, who spoke at my inauguration in 2001, always signed off on his letters and emails with a single word, “Courage,” and so will I.

Courage!

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert A. Scott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Robert A. Scott, President