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The Disquieted Heart and the Lighted Path: LeVar Burton's Dedication Day Speech

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Abstract

This Saturday past brought with it an electric sort of chill, the kind fueled by a driving breeze that lifts your jacket, steals past your socks and up your legs, worms its way through gaps in scarves and gloves, and leaves you feeling naked and afraid and alive in ways that no one else can see. The kind of wind that whisks away complicity and surety, leaving you with nothing but a burning compulsion to *do something* that will reignite your humanity, your belief in goodness, your claim to a kind life. For those who attended, the Dedication Day ceremony in the National Cemetery trembled with the same terrible power. This year, there was something dreadfully eerie about coming together to honor men slain in the struggle to prove that a nation “conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” could endure terrible division and betrayal between its countrymen. The speechmaking, no matter its tenor, could not escape the gravity of the question on everyone’s mind: what does the future hold for America, and how can we make sure it won’t undo the already unfinished work for which our forefathers died?

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Disquieted Heart and the Lighted Path: LeVar Burton's Dedication Day Speech

By *Matt LaRoche '17*

This Saturday past brought with it an electric sort of chill, the kind fueled by a driving breeze that lifts your jacket, steals past your socks and up your legs, worms its way through gaps in scarves and gloves, and leaves you feeling naked and afraid and alive in ways that no one else can see. The kind of wind that whisks away complicity and surety, leaving you with nothing but a burning compulsion to *do something* that will reignite your humanity, your belief in goodness, your claim to a kind life. For those who attended, the Dedication Day ceremony in the National Cemetery trembled with the same terrible power. This year, there was something dreadfully eerie about coming together to honor men slain in the struggle to prove that a nation “conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” could endure terrible division and betrayal between its countrymen. The speechmaking, no matter its tenor, could not escape the gravity of the question on everyone’s mind: what does the future hold for America, and how can we make sure it won’t undo the already unfinished work for which our forefathers died?

That is not to say that many did not try desperately to drown out the unpleasant facts of the hour with platitudes. And perhaps that response was to be expected. These are uncertain times, and before an uncertain audience some speakers said things that would have been reassuring a year or two ago. They spoke triumphantly of the honor in the fight, of the eternal and resonating success of the Union. Of the dignity of the nation that emerged from the war, battered and bruised, but energized. They spoke of the “great work” engaged at Gettysburg through the warm lens of nostalgia like it was fairy tale, complete with the token happy ending, written just for us. Like the great work was finished, and all that remained was to remember. Like there was, conveniently, nothing to fear and nothing to discuss.

But then LeVar Burton took the stage.



LeVar Burton delivered the keynote address at the 2016 Dedication Day celebration. Photo credit: Gettysburg College

As a man who is “not a big fan of coincidence,” Burton took invitation to speak as his cue to “be part of some personal intent.” Admitting to the crowd that recent events had “caused my heart to be disquieted, and full of dismay,” he spoke of where we, as a nation, had been and how we had managed to return to the same broken, bleeding ground in less than two centuries. And he reminded us that there is a way out.

He reminded the audience that 153 years prior, President Lincoln witnessed a “nation in turmoil.... An America reeling from the effects of a very costly conflict, a conflict that was rooted in the opposition of ideas as well as ideals. And very much like today, a conflict where combatants... who were once neighbors, friends, even family, now harbored hearts full of anger, dissent and distrust.” Burton laid out the facts eloquently, and with the power of both learning and experience:

Our nation was locked in a struggle over the issues of race and class and the direction of our national economy, and we proved ourselves willing to wage a bloody war over which among us was to have access to the tenets of our nation’s founding.... And fifteen decades later, these very issues confront us still. And the promise of America has yet to be delivered to too many of her children. So I ask myself, ‘exactly what part of *all men are created equal* do we continue to fail to grasp?’ No matter which candidate you supported... we must finally come to the indisputable truth that we are indeed house divided.

The seeds of our current disunion are strewn for centuries behind us: our willingness “to imprison over one hundred-thousand of our Japanese brothers and sisters in internment camps,” our obsession with imprisoning and oppressing “all we can classify as ‘Other,’” and

more. The compromises and complacencies of our forbearers have left us with not just an uncomfortable national history but also “a duality of identity,” a crisis of conscience as much as of character.

However, although we are “faced with a crisis that truly has the power to tear us asunder,” Burton reminded those gathered that “this crisis is one of our own making,” and, as such, we hold the power to unmake it in our hands. What we lack is the will. Too many of us lack the compassion to admit to the things that Burton’s mother taught him from a young age. That “in America, a quality education is the ultimate leveler of the playing field,” and that everyone deserves that fair start. That many Americans “inherit a world” where they are attacked “simply because of the color of [their] skin,” and that this makes a mockery of what every defender of American democracy has struggled and died to save. That if we are to enjoy any rights in this country, we must acknowledge what Burton learned as a boy becoming a man: “that it was my right to determine my destiny for myself.”

Burton urged his listeners to rededicate themselves to the great work that was started here a hundred and fifty-three years ago, to the truth that “all men *and women* are created equal.” As he reminded the audience, “Abraham Lincoln once called America the ‘last, best hope of Earth.’ I have always believed that about my county. I still do.... Are we a perfect union? No. By no means, no. However, we have demonstrated time and time again that when we put our minds to it, great things are possible.”

I have said it before, and I will say it again: these are trying times. The rights that people love and cherish in the world over may very well end up strangled on the vine, right here at home. We cannot say whether love and liberty will trump hate and the wrongful urge to control. But if there is one thing to take away from LeVar Burton’s Gettysburg address, it is that we cannot afford to bury our hopes. We have no right to give into fear and resignation, not when so many good people have sacrificed so much for the dream of love, equality, and fellowship. As LeVar reminded us, we are fortunate—we live in a great country that affords a wealth of fine examples to follow. As he put it, “It is Lincoln himself who sets our course and lights the way for us all: ‘The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud and God must forever bless.’”

The question remains: now, when our pride vanishes a little more each day, and our glories become worn and forgotten, will you rededicate yourself to virtue? To justice and love? Will you stand with Mr. Lincoln?

Or will you let the whole house fall?

To see Mr. Burton’s speech, [click here](#) and skip ahead to 1:08.

For an exclusive Gettysburg Compiler interview with Mr. Burton, check out [Sticking to His Plan: An Interview with Dedication Day Keynote Speaker LeVar Burton](#)

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