2019 Muster Keynote Address

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

Howdy! I bring greetings to all of you from four generations of the Roblyer family here tonight. I also join in welcoming the family members and friends who have come from near and far to answer the Roll Call for the Absent in honor and memory of those each have lost. I welcome members of the 50-year-reunion Class of 1969, a close-knit group of Aggies who continue to nurture their relationships; some of them do so at their weekly “Ags and Bacon” breakfast gathering, which I was graciously invited to attend a few weeks ago. This class has given a generous gift of the new Spirit Plaza and its monuments to mark our most sacred Aggie traditions, including Muster. But tonight, no matter whether this is our first or hundredth time here at Texas A&M University, we all are family, we all are welcome.

I also want to thank the 30 remarkable students of the Muster Committee, who graciously placed their faith in me when they invited me to speak tonight. I and my family have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them during this semester. They are a most impressive group of Aggies, simultaneously operating from a compassionate reverence for the relationships we will remember and celebrate this evening, as well as an awesome drive to make this a Muster to remember. And what a magnificent thing they have created! From concept to delivery, marked with thousands of hours of passionate effort, this Muster is a heartfelt gift from these 30 students to all of us here tonight.

Muster is a unique occasion. Only a group of Aggies would conceive of combining a somber memorial service for hundreds of lost loved ones with a boisterous family reunion boasting tens of thousands of guests. Muster is a joyous celebration and a somber remembrance.

What we do here tonight is echoed in well over 300 other locations, as far away as Australia, Kazakhstan, Estonia, Saudi Arabia, and wherever two or more Aggies have gathered. Each Muster honors those Aggies who have died during the past year, but live on in the hearts and minds of those in attendance. There have been many, many Musters before tonight.

* Musters were held during World War II and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, during which many Aggies served in harm’s way, and far too many paid with their lives;
* Muster was held the Spring after the Bonfire stack collapsed on November 18, 1999, and we lost 12 of our own;
* Muster was held in 2002 after the terrorist strikes of 9/11 had killed 3 Aggies and thousands of others, and our entire nation feared an unknown future;
* Musters since that year have honored the growing list of Aggies who died during the ongoing War on Terror.
* Musters through the years have also honored those who have battled physical and mental illnesses, those whose lives have ended suddenly and tragically, and those who have died peacefully at the end of a long life.

To “muster” means “to assemble.” “Sergeant! Muster the troops!” would have been a common order a number of years ago. However, the title of tonight’s event can also be used in the sense of “mustering courage.”

Both of these meanings are appropriate, for on this day, Aggies assemble to revel and to remember all that they love about Texas A&M and the Aggie Family. But most importantly we also come to be with the Muster families who daily find the courage to continue on in the wake of great losses.

Muster is central within the Aggie universe, but there is a lot to love about Texas A&M.

* Aggies love our traditions. Silver Taps, Midnight Yell, Elephant Walk, and Muster are just a few that are unique among universities.
* Aggies love our student-run organizations and events, like Fish Camp, Freshman Leadership Organizations, the Corps of Cadets, Greek Life, the Big Event, and over 1000 more. In these organizations, Aggies learn and hone the fundamentals of teamwork that will make them exceptional contributors and leaders in their chosen communities and professions.
* Aggies love the athletic programs at Texas A&M. We love winning, although we realize that we will occasionally be out-scored or run out of time just before we most certainly would have been victorious.
* And Aggies love academics. Texas A&M is a tier-one university, a world-class institution, a top leader in the academy of teaching, learning, and discovering through research. We don’t just learn and leverage existing knowledge, but we create new knowledge, building upon the foundation laid by those who came before us. We share knowledge in order to make a difference in the lives of our community, nation, and the world.

As a social scientist, I look at these parts of Aggie life: traditions, organizations, athletics, and academics; and see a common thread. In each of these aspects of Aggie life, relationships are at the center. I hold many different perspectives on the Aggie experience.

I am a former student twice over, a parent to several Aggies, a current faculty member, and a member of the greater Bryan – College Station community. So these are the lenses through which I want us to look at Muster tonight: as a time to honor and celebrate Aggie relationships past, present, and future.

**II. PAST RELATIONSHIPS**

First, we look to the past and honor those Aggies lost to family, friends, and the Aggie community during the last year. Those who knew and loved each of these Aggies will mark their memory by answering “Here” during the Roll Call for the Absent. There is power in remembering.

I want to read a passage written by Frederick Buechner in his book, *Whistling in the Dark:*

When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart.

For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost. When I’m feeling most ghost-like, it’s your remembering me that helps remind me that I actually exist. When I’m feeling sad, it’s my consolation. When I’m feeling happy, it’s part of why I feel that way.

If you forget me, one of the ways I remember who I am will be gone. If you forget me, part of who I am will be gone.

As a son and a father who is familiar with the ache and grief of loss, I join with all those surrounding our Muster Families tonight to say that we are here to remember with you your loved ones now lost. Some of us personally knew your family member. Others of us were only introduced this week as we solemnly viewed the Reflection Displays many of you so caringly provided. We cannot comprehend the depth or the breadth of your experience since your loss, but we are committed to helping you honor them, as well as help you to recall the happy memories of them that are tied to their time in Aggieland. As the *The Spirit of Aggieland* reminds us, the bond of friendship and family makes us unique and keeps us strong. “*We are the Aggies, the Aggies are we, true to each other, as Aggies should be.*” Those just getting to know us might think that these words are no different than the songs of any other almamater’s. However, *The Spirit of Aggieland* reflects on our long and storied past to remind us of who we are now.

**III. PRESENT RELATIONSHIPS**

Second, when we consider who we are in the present, we find ourselves indebted to our current Aggie relationships. We should probably all have a large “AGGIE UNDER CONSTRUCTION” sign hanging around our necks to remind us of the importance of honoring the contributions others are making to our lives day by day. Who we are at this moment is not just the result of our own accomplishments mixed with a bit of good fortune, but it is the product of many great and small gifts given at just the right time, through the goodness and generosity of others in the Aggie community. These are gifts of exceptional value because they are exactly what we need at that moment:

* Opportunities we did not think possible
* Second chances when we’ve fallen and have trouble starting again
* Words of encouragement when we feel unimportant and worthless
* Inclusion as family even by those different from ourselves or with whom we disagree
* A listening ear when life is caving in and we need to sort things out
* Words of advice that cut through our confusion and indecision
* Words of caution or warning when we are about to do or say something we will regret

These gifts give us the stamina to carry on, the insight to seek wisdom, and the confidence to take risks for something great. We become our best selves because these gifts are bequeathed through present relationships.

I have studied at this university twice for the sum total of seven-and-a-half years. During those years, I benefited from the kindness and generosity of others as they met me wherever I was. Although past now, these were present relationships when I was a student and they impacted me profoundly.

* I came to Texas A&M for my undergraduate degree because David Reck, Class of ‘84, shared his love of Texas A&M throughout our time in high school.
* Steve Sisney, Class of ’82, graduated high school 2 years before me and paved the way in Aggieland, sending back word that it was all we had hoped it would be.
* Dr. Sandee Hartsfield, Class of ’70, and his wife, Jenny Hartsfield taught a college class at church and took a personal interest in each student. Their hospitality and support gave me a much-needed respite from life on campus during my fish and sophomore years.
* Dr. Nelson Duller, Class of ’48, was a faculty member and well-respected scholar in the Physics Department, as well as my undergraduate academic advisor. In my junior year, I was overwhelmed by the competing responsibilities of the Corps of Cadets and my physics coursework. I went to Dr. Duller in desperation, fearing failure, humiliation, loss of my scholarships, and the risk to my upcoming military commission. He responded with patience, kindness, wisdom, and strategic thinking. He helped me adjust my degree plan so I could graduate on time and uphold my responsibilities. I left his lab shaking my head in wonder. He transformed my doom-filled outlook to one of hope and encouragement.
* During my senior year, I was befriended by “Old Man Al.” He was a retired missionary whose self-appointed job was to care for students in the Corps. Al’s supportive and non-judgmental friendship helped me to keep my head high and sights level to prepare for life after graduation.
* Through all of my undergraduate years, 4 of my fish buddies and the best non-reg friend that anyone could ask for were there to encourage, cajole, sweat, and share the experiences of life on and off the Quad. Steve, Scotty, Bob, Eric, and Greg, thanks for being there with me through it all. We are also mindful that this Muster is the 25th anniversary of when we all answered “Here” for our close friend and fellow cadet, John Romero, Jr., Class of ’84.
* Twenty-two years after my first graduation from Texas A&M, in Fall 2006, I was a full colonel. My head was spinning and my heart was sinking during my first doctoral seminars. What in the world had I been thinking when I decided to jump into a Ph.D. program in political science in order to teach for the Air Force? It had been 14 long years since I had earned my master’s degree. I had no background in political science theory.

I knew how to buckle down and gut it out when faced with a tough situation, but faculty and staff members like Nehemia Geva, Ken Meier, Mike Koch, Erik Godwin, and Lou Ellen Dozer kept me focused and moving forward through the program. Without them and so many others, I would not be here teaching.
* And then there are the many Aggies present day who infuse my life here with joy, purpose, and challenge: students, staff, faculty, administrators, former students, friends, neighbors, and family.

Each of us in this room tonight owes much gratitude to people who are accompanying us, challenging us, helping us, encouraging us, and making us more today than we were yesterday. Maybe this is one of the secrets as to why Aggies are so well-known for their achievements and accomplishments—because each Aggie is, in a way, crowd-sourced: the benefactor of the accumulated investments of so many members of the Aggie Family.

**IV. FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS**

Third, we might consider the promise of relationships with those who will become the Aggies of the future, sitting in classrooms, practicing yells, and receiving their Aggie rings. Some of those future Aggies join us tonight, learning the ropes of how we do Muster. However, there is not only the distant future to consider, but also an imminent future. It is a future that anticipates tomorrow and the days that will follow soon after. It is a future that we can immediately shape and impact in powerful ways by helping to preserve and promote this university’s most valuable resource: its people. Our existing and potential relationships hold tremendous power. Often all that is needed to ignite this potential is one compassionate word or action in answer to the needs of those around us.

As a faculty member, I encounter many students who are struggling in significant ways. Through my experiences and those of others I know, I am also aware of faculty and staff who are in great need of connection with someone who will show them compassion.

* Academic life for students and faculty alike can be an experience that is lonely, uncertain, anxiety-inducing, and even clinically depressing.
* Serious hunger among college students is a growing reality across the nation. It is becoming more common for students at Texas A&M and elsewhere to skip meals repeatedly because they lack money for food.
* College expenses, even at public universities like ours, are an increasingly bigger source of significant stress for first-generation students, students estranged from their families, and students and families in the midst of major life challenges. Despite budgeting and planning, one unforeseen event can result in financial chaos and threaten academic goals.
* Many students feel academically stranded because the high school study skills that were sufficient to gain them admission here deliver only failure and disappointment in their courses. These students become embarrassed, frustrated, and doubt that they belong.
* Contractors, such as the custodial staff and food-service workers, serving in the Aggie community sometimes feel that they vanish into the background: unacknowledged, underappreciated, and unworthy.
* Statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health document the likelihood of individuals seriously considering suicide and point us to troubling realizations. During the coming year, over 3000 undergraduate students, 500 graduate students, 300 staff members, and 100 of our faculty are likely to contemplate taking their own life. Additionally, about half of them will never plan to tell anyone about it. Suicide risk continues to climb every year.
The transformational power of personal, caring relationships is the most effective means to fight against this.

While we fulfill our given roles as students, staff, faculty, leaders, team members, and family, we can make a difference by showing compassion and offering relationship.

Compassion is a rich concept. It begins with empathy, that desire to understand the circumstances of others around us and to be touched by the emotions they are experiencing. But compassion surpasses empathy, culminating in caring action and committed involvement.

* If you have ever gotten your next several meals from The 12th Can food pantry, you’ve received compassion.
* If you’ve worked with the student organization CARPOOL to provide a free, nonjudgmental ride home to a community member who was not safe to drive, you’ve practiced compassion.
* If you have ever been in crisis in the middle of the night and talked to a student staffer on the Student Counseling Service’s HelpLine, you’ve felt compassion.
* If you have ever seen something troubling in a friend’s eyes, then invited them to sit for a moment and vent, you have extended compassion.

Compassion is not listed among the Aggie Core Values: Excellence, Integrity, Leadership, Loyalty, Respect, and Selfless Service. But compassion is there, hidden inside each aspiration. Without compassion, our Core Values would not be admirable. They would be hollow shells--without heart.

Promoting and tending healthy interpersonal relationships also requires an ongoing commitment. Day by day and year by year we must build bridges between our differences and emphasize our commonalities.
We must respond with compassion when we detect signs of distress and trouble. For as we are faithful to do this tomorrow and in the days following, we will find that we also influence the distant future. The Aggies of today and of tomorrow will be observing us and learning from our example. By valuing relationships within our community, our imminent future will shape the more distant future of the Aggie Family across time. Therefore each of us is valuable. Each of us is important.

The fact that I am the one speaking to you tonight is a humbling illustration of the power of an ordinary life that can be transformed by the compassion of others. We are all transformed. We all have the potential to transform others. We may not be wealthy, but we are rich in the personal relationships in which we invest. We may not have prestige, but we can be powerful because of the influence granted by those who trust us. We may not be famous, but we will be well known to those who have invited us to share in parts of their lives.

CONCLUSION

Our past, present, and future relationships are what knit us together. In both remembrance and celebration, and in both extending and receiving compassion, we should be humbled and challenged by being part of the Aggie Family. We can look back at many examples set by those who are now gone from us. We can notice and appreciate those in the Aggie Family who are investing in our lives right now. In the coming days, we can pledge to practice…

* LEADERSHIP through kindness
* EXCELLENCE through caring
* LOYALTY to our shared humanity
* SELFLESS SERVICE through intentional availability
* RESPECT through trustworthiness
* INTEGRITY through authenticity

Those whose names will be called tonight, including our beloved 41st President and his wife are cherished members of that family who modeled for us the Core Values through their acts of compassion. We will remember these for years to come. Let these memories and this charge cause us to rise up as thousands of points of light at this university and in the world around us, shining with a bright and welcoming compassion. By doing this, we honor the living and also those members of the Aggie Family that have gone before us and whose lives we honor tonight. Through these relationships and memories, we will strengthen the foundations and the impact of this institution along with the many, many lives that are and will be Texas A&M.