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The University of Iowa
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A Community Observance for the Victims of November 1

Opening Remarks:

I want to thank all of you for coming this evening to share in this occasion and to lend your support to these grieving families and to all of us who share their grief. I especially want to thank those who have come from other colleges and universities, both in Iowa and around the country, and those who are here representing the Board of Regents, state government, our federal congressional delegation, and the two Consuls from the Chicago office of the Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China.

In the Dark Ages of the West, on the other side of the world, the Chinese poet, Li Po wrote these lines:

Heaven is high, earth wide: bitter between them files my sorrow.
Can I dream through the gateway, over the mountain?
Endless longing
Breaks my heart.

With broken hearts we come together this evening, to mourn the dead and to comfort the living, and to wipe each other's tears. Joined as one community, we mourn for Anne and Christoph and Dwight and Robert and Linhua: and we share the sorrow of Miya, grievously wounded, and of all the stricken families. These terrible losses have diminished us all.

I will not try to speak of the wonderful gifts of those who have fallen, of so many distinguished careers and promising achievements cut short. Instead, for the University, I will simply reflect on their precious humanity.

Last Friday these vital members of our community were strong and active, full of life, engaged with work and families and friends. Now six have died, one by his own hand, and a seventh lies injured and immobile, in need of our care and concern.

The pain of our friends' families is piercing, and I know we all recognize that the very worst of it is theirs alone. But whatever can be shared we must share -- we want to share. We must remember that for these families, there is comfort in knowing how closely the lives of those they mourn have been intertwined in our community.

Anne Cleary's brothers told me that they joined hands at her death, and that the family bond among them has never been closer.

I hope, in the larger family that makes up this University, we too will go on reaching out to each other, and that we will strengthen the ties of caring and giving that bind us together. Let us extend ourselves, be good to each other, open our lives to each other, and offer each other whatever comfort is possible.

Closing remarks

We come now to the closing moments of this observance, when we must set our faces resolutely toward the future.

In the recovery and rebuilding that is ahead, we must continue to rely on each other for help. We must continue our struggle to find meaning and to create meaning from where we do not find it.

Out of her own grief, Emily Dickinson wrote that "Time never did assuage." In physics, the riddle of time's arrow remains with us, despite the symmetries now discerned in the fundamental forces of the universe. It is a law of dynamics that systems eventually lose energy, and order gives way to disorder. Only in the human dimension can we resist this immutable process.

We resist it in our renewal of commitments to each other and to our work. We resist it in learning day to day to live with our sorrow, in growing stronger "As Sinews do, with age."

It is too soon, tonight, for us to think of joy again. But in the fullness of time, joy will indeed come back to us – in a strain of music, in the sprouting of a seed, in the touch of a friend. Though time may not assuage, it will allow the healing to begin.

This is the universal affirmation that comes down to us through the ages, from others who have grieved and suffered before us. This is the affirmation of Aeschylus, who chorus sings in Agamemnon,

Even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget
Falls drop by drop upon the heart,
And in our own despite, against our will,
Comes wisdom to us by an awful grace.

Let us be consoled in that timeless wisdom, as we leave to prepare for a new day tomorrow.

The University of Iowa will, in time, recover. We will not be the same, but I hope we will become even stronger in the most important ways: in our bonds to each other, in the ties that unite our culturally and geographically diverse community.

What heartens me most is the character of the people of this University, who have responded courageously and selflessly to this crisis. Ever since I came to Iowa, I have observed among University people an unusual strength of character, revealed in a rare generosity of spirit and a pronounced ethical and moral concern. I consider these qualities the hallmark of the University of Iowa.

The University character has emerged with unmistakable clarity in the past week. I have seen it in my visits to the hospital; I have seen it in my conversations in Van Allen Hall; I have seen it in my meetings in Jessup Hall.

We are a family, a closely-knit family. That is why I am so confident that the University of Iowa will recover. And we will not only recover, we will become stronger, as we draw together in support of the University we love.

Good night and thank you for coming