

Student Laureate Speech Accepting on Behalf of the 2015 Laureate Cohort

Old State Capitol Building, House of Representatives
November 7, 2015

Good Afternoon,

I will begin my speech with two quotes from President Lincoln, both of which I've selected for their unforgettable language and inspiration.

President Lincoln once said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." He also said, "Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

If there's one point I hope you remember from those two quotes, it is this: for President Lincoln, trees were a source of profound inspiration.

But what do I mean by this?

Well, let's just say President Lincoln knew how to captivate an audience, and this was in part due to his unique mastery with words. There are so many metaphors you can associate with trees: "family tree," "root of the problem," "sap momentum", even "hedge funds". But as someone interested in the sciences, my personal favorite stems from a well-known phrase, the "tree of life."

Trees are strong, start from a mere seed and grow to become enormous, complex structures that often endure four seasons of harsh weather. Here in Illinois, they must be especially tough to survive the long winter! Trees wither, die, and yet are somehow re-born again each year. Clearly, trees are good metaphors for hopeful, positive inspiration.

But I think our President was far more clever than this. I believe he chose to use "trees" as a metaphor for an even more obvious reason: you see them every day! Think about a day in your life when you didn't see a tree. I certainly can't recall such a time, and I'm from the city.

President Lincoln managed to find inspiration in things he encountered each and every day, which is an insight we should learn from and implement in our own lives.

Student Laureates...in the spirit of President Lincoln, I too encourage you to think about that *something* or perhaps that *someone* who has inspired you. Because whether

or not you believe leaders are born, or that leaders are made, here I suggest that leadership needs to be *sustained*. For instance, without the day-to-day support of teachers, friends, family, and mentors, I certainly would not be standing here before you giving a speech about motivational trees and preparing myself to receive this truly outstanding award. I am here today because of my hard work, but also because so many others believed in my potential as an individual, and as a leader.

And so, on behalf of the entire two thousand and fifteen Student Laureate Cohort, I would like to express our appreciation and extend a sincere thank you to all members affiliated with the Lincoln Academy of Illinois. Your recognition will no doubt encourage us to continue making outstanding contributions in our local, national, and global communities.

To conclude, I would like to say that it is truly an honor to be amongst such talent here today. To the members of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois, thank you again for supporting the next generation of leaders. And to my fellow Student Laureates, I would like to congratulate you once more on your achievements.

Oh! And before I forget...the next time you look at a tree, I hope you will find comfort and inspiration in what you can, and most certainly WILL, achieve.

Thank you.

Cynthia J. Avila

The University of Chicago '16