

**Convocation 2020**  
**Monday, August 17, 2020**  
**"Convocation Remarks"**  
**Dr. Jose M Torres, President**  
**Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy**

*This is not a drill! This is not a drill!* Remote working, distance learning, COVID-19; the killing of Black people; a downturn in the economy and record unemployment rates are among our current realities. *This is not a drill! This is real life!*

Is there a way to make sense of the new normal, the emotional toll, the lost lives, the continued hatred and racism, and the unbearable injustice we are experiencing in 2020?

My remarks today are about our current realities *and* about hope. Now, I know I ought to stay away from controversy and kick-off the new year with positive remarks at convocation, remarks that bring comfort to everyone. It's barely 9 in the morning, after all!

But, hey, we're IMSA; we're Titans! If not now, when? If not me, who? We *must* confront reality! The question is: amid the darkness of this present reality, where can we find windows of hope?

See, I believe there are windows of hope in the present darkness of our current reality. As members of the IMSA community, we have a responsibility to find and open these windows of hope *or* build them *if we must*. If we're going to advance the human condition, we must confront the brutal facts of our present reality.

How can *we* build windows of hope? How can IMSA *lean* into this hope? This is the topic that I want us to consider at Convocation this morning.

Good morning, everyone! And welcome to the new Academic Year 2020-2021!

Welcome Class of 2023, 2022, and our graduating class, the Class of 2021! Before the Academic Year ends, I hope to welcome each of you personally when we are all face-2-face.

Welcome to our virtual Convocation! What a great way to begin Convocation! I told our new principal, Dr. Akwaji-Anderson, Bill McGrail, and Kevin Broy that since we're going to be virtual, let's take full advantage of the technology!

Jessica Lyseng, Eric Pan, Elasia Rodriguez, and other students and alumni worked on today's Convocation. Let's give them a big hand!

This morning, we have with us IMSA Emeriti and Ambassadors and many other VIPs, who, in one way or another, support IMSA.

Students and IMSA staff, please give them a wave of a welcome.

This weekend former Governor of Illinois Jim Thompson passed away. He was the governor who signed the legislation to create IMSA. We are sorry for his family's loss.

*Students!* While many faculty members and residence counselors have just returned from their summer break, most have been working hard all summer long to prepare outstanding learning and engagement experiences for you through distance and remote engagement. Please give your faculty and residence counselors a silent *round* of applause!

Thank you.

Today, I want to focus my remarks on our current realities and on hope. *A window of hope.*

**(START SCREEN SHARE WITH TITLE SLIDE)**

I picture our window of hope as having a frame around the window and a glass, or a window pane through which we look. I describe the frame of our window of hope as "*realistic optimism.*" The glass or window pane are people as I will illustrate later.

**(SLIDE-STOCKDALE QUOTE)**

The highest-ranking naval officer imprisoned during the Vietnam War, in what was called the Hanoi Hilton, was General James Stockdale, who said,

"You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

When asked who did not make it out of the Prisoner of War camps, Stockdale said, "that's easy." It was the optimists.

You might ask, how come the optimists did not make it?

Stockdale said the optimists were the people who thought they would be rescued by Christmas. Christmas came and went, and they were not saved. Then, they thought they would be rescued by Easter. No rescue. They expected they would be rescued by Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving came and went, and still no relief. Then, again they thought they would be saved by the following Christmas. And yet no rescue. They died in the camps. They died of a broken heart.

Stockdale lasted over eight years; four in solitary confinement.

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE)**

Let me apply this concept to our present situation. We need to have a realistic optimism about COVID-19.

When will this pandemic be over? When can we return to campus?

We can't assume it will be over by Labor Day, or by Thanksgiving, or by December, or by the New Year, or even by spring break.

It **will** be over! We **will** return to campus **someday**! We **will** gather together again physically, **eventually**!

We need to find the strength to persevere; we need to have faith that we will prevail in the end. We need to build this window of hope by adopting a frame of realistic optimism.

American history provides another powerful illustration of hope and realistic optimism.

The slaves were in dire circumstances. Beaten! Raped! Lynched! Working under the hot sun. Their bodies were not their own.

How did they have hope? What enabled them to persevere? Where did they find the faith to prevail in the end? How did they nurture a realistic optimism?

In the article "Power of a Song in a Strange Land,"

Donna M. Cox, Professor of Music at the University of Dayton, OH (February 14, 2020) stated,

"For the slaves, the *Spiritual* proved to be an ingenious tool used to counter senseless brutality and the denial of personhood. To survive emotionally, resilience was critical. In the *spirituals*, slaves sang out their struggle, weariness, loneliness, sorrow, hope, and determination for a new and better life."

Cox explains, "*Spirituals* can teach how to build hope in the face of despair and challenge the status quo."

Listen to this spiritual, "[I've got a crown up in a dat kingdom. Ain't a dat good news](#)"

It rejoices in the certainty of a future hope totally unlike the day-to-day reality of enslavement."

**(PLAY Video)**

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE AFTER VIDEO)**

Cox concludes, "Four hundred years after the birth of slavery, as the world still struggles with racial division, injustice and a sense of hopelessness, *spirituals* can teach how to build hope in the face of despair."

Realistic optimism is the frame, the *spirituals* support this frame, this window of hope. (And if I had time, I would speak about how the *Blues*-music that carries us from despair to hope-- support this frame of our window of hope.)

This morning, I cannot ignore the other brutal fact of our current reality facing the nation and IMSA.

While all of us are very aware of COVID19 and its impact on us at IMSA because it separated us from our physical campus in Aurora, the other brutal fact of our current reality is the fact of institutional and systemic *racism*, including *racism at IMSA*.

Now for those of you who may have difficulty understanding or empathizing with how people experience racism, microaggressions, or injustice, let's engage in a thought experiment.

Someone said, that "Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

The following visualization may have this impact on you: *Comfort those of you who are afflicted; afflict those of you who are comfortable.*

Later this week, the Residence Counselors will create opportunities to debrief this visualization and my convocation speech with students. I want to thank them in advance for facilitating these courageous conversations.

Let's engage our imagination through a visualization.

I ask you to please close your eyes. Go ahead and shut your eyes.

Bring up an image of yourself. This image can be your picture from your IMSA ID or your reflection in the mirror from this morning. Take a good look at yourself and keep the image of your current self intact throughout this visualization.

Now imagine that all through elementary and middle school, all of your teachers, every single one was *Black*.

Imagine that you live in the *US of Black America* where every single high-level official, the President, VP, Speaker of the house, the senate majority leader, every elected official at the federal government in *Washington is Black*.

With your eyes closed, further, imagine that the entire Supreme Court-all 9 justices are Black.

Every elected official at the state level, the Governor, the Speaker of the house, the President of the Senate, every single elected official in *Springfield is Black*.

Imagine that all but a few police officers are Black. On television, you see frequently, Black officers abusing their power over white people, in fact, just recently, you saw a Black officer, kneeling on the neck of a white male, who kept saying, crying: I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe!

He called out to his mom. "Momma, oh, momma!"

The Black officer knelt for over 8 minutes on the white man's neck. His hands in his pocket.

The other Black officers witnessing this murder did not intervene.

Now, here's the last image; with your eyes still closed, imagine that every single IMSA teacher is Black. Your English faculty are Black; all your history/social science teachers are Black. Your mathematics and science faculty, all of them, without exception are Black.

Each of your College and Academic Counselors are Black.

How would you feel in a world like that? Would you think that this world would be fair, that you would get a fair shot at life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

Now open your eyes. With your eyes wide open, observe our present reality.

Every single IMSA English faculty is White; all your history/social science teachers are White. Almost all of your mathematics and science faculty are White. Each of your College and Academic Counselors is white.

The President of the US is white; the VP is white, the Speaker of the House is White, the Senate Majority Leader is White, the Governor of IL is white, the Speaker of the house and the President of the Senate in Springfield are all white...

Can you empathize? Can you get a sense of how people might experience our current reality? How do they feel in our current world full of racial divisions, microaggressions, and injustice? What is their current reality?

In "I am not your Negro," JAMES BALDWIN says: "If any white man says give me liberty or give me death, the entire white world applauds. When a black man says exactly the same thing word for word, he is judged a criminal and treated like one.

And everything possible is done to make an example of this bad N so there won't be any more like him."

See 40 sec. video:. Warning: Mr. Baldwin uses the N word!

**(PLAY Video)**

<https://time.com/4656492/james-baldwin-i-am-not-your-negro-documentary/>

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE AFTER VIDEO)**

I encourage you to see the entire documentary video *I Am Not Your Negro*.

Where's the window of hope in this current reality? How can we find hope in the brutal facts of our present racist world?

People serve as the glass in our window of hope. I see windows of hope in our Black students that continue to persevere. I see a window of hope: the glass of the window, if you will-in Black youth and in the co-conspirators who have marched in the streets. I see windows of hope in those who demonstrate on behalf of Black Lives Matter.

I ask all of you to move *from allyship and to become co-conspirators*.

**(SLIDE)**

Nassim Taleb, "If you see fraud, and do not say fraud, you are a fraud."

**I say**, if you see racism and do not call out racism, you are acting racist.

**(NEXT SLIDE)**

Desmond Tutu said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

**I say**, If you see microaggressions and don't call them out, you are a microaggressor.

It's that old line: "*All evil needs to prevail* is for good men (and women) to do nothing."

**(NEXT SLIDE)**

MLK said, "We're all complicit when we tolerate injustice."

Let me end with another illustration of a window or glass, a person, who gave us hope, whom we lost recently.

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE)**

Congressman John Lewis just passed away exactly one month ago today on July 17, 2020.

His last essay was published, by design, the day of his funeral. I encourage you to read it in its entirety. It speaks of love, service. It speaks of hope.

Here's part of the essay, as read by the actor Morgan Freeman.

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE)****(PLAY VIDEO)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_i2DSkAys-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i2DSkAys-8)

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE AFTER VIDEO)**

IMSA, John Lewis encourages us to "get into trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble!"

We must come together as a community to build the windows of hope made from frames of realistic optimism and from the glass of those of us who do not tolerate injustice.

Where can we find hope for these troubled times? We can find hope in the *Spirituals* and in the *Blues*. And, *we can find hope in each other*.

*We are each other's windows of hope!*

Let me wrap up by stating clearly.

There's *nothing wrong* with you if your skin is black (there's *nothing inherently right* with you if your skin is white).

Enjoy this last video of the most searched words: A Celebration of Black History Makers.

**(PLAY VIDEO)**

[Video](#) of most searched words Google.

**(STOP SCREEN SHARE AFTER VIDEO)**

Best wishes to all for a successful 2020-2021 Academic Year!

Thank you!

**(END WITH LAST SLIDE) and transition**