

Syracuse University Strasbourg Center

Farewell Dinner Speech: April 26, 2019

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This evening I'm going to speak to you about a possessive adjective. Ok, I get it; that doesn't sound very promising. But before you get up and walk out, let me just say that it's a really important possessive adjective. Plus, it's a French adjective that every American knows (and also, probably, the only French adjective that every American knows.) Now that the suspense has built up to a nearly unbearable level, I'll add that it's the first-person plural possessive adjective: yes, you're right, it's "notre," as in—yup, you're right again, *Notre-Dame*.

In response to the terrible fire that only a couple of weeks ago devastated the roof and spire of this magnificent cathedral, there has been an incredible outpouring of support, and more than one billion euros has already been raised. Contributions have come from the fabulously rich, but also from those with much more modest means. (This, as you may have heard, has caused quite a bit of controversy—well, it wouldn't be France, unless there was a controversy—since the difference in the size of the contributions has been viewed, especially in this period of the "gilets jaunes," as a sign of the profound economic inequality from which French society suffers.)

But contributions have also poured in from around the world, from people of all faiths and of all cultures, for ultimately the "notre" in *Notre-Dame* applies to *all of us*; not only to the French, not only to the Catholics, and certainly not only to the billionaires. It is *our* cathedral, that is, the cathedral of all of us who have been awed by its majesty; who have been dazzled by its stained-glass windows, especially the wonderful Rose Window; who have been moved by the thundering sound of its organ; who have climbed its towers and admired the spectacular view of Paris. But the cathedral also belongs to those who never had the chance to visit it in person, to those who admire it from afar, in photographs, in paintings, and in films; to those who read about it in poetry and in novels. (Just a small side note: Victor Hugo's novel, which in English we know as *The Hunchback of Notre*

*Dame* is actually titled in French simply, and more appropriately: *Notre-Dame de Paris*.)

*Notre-Dame* is, in other words, both a French monument and a monument that belongs to all of us; it is part of France's cultural heritage—its *patrimoine*, but also part of the world's heritage: *notre patrimoine*!

Many of you will have heard of UNESCO, the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*; and many of you will know of its efforts to designate and preserve “World Heritage Sites.” These sites can be monuments—and, indeed, the cathedral of *Notre-Dame* is among them; but they can also be landscapes, pilgrimage routes, or city neighborhoods. And recently, the concept has been extended to what UNESCO calls our “intangible cultural heritage,” to such things as various musical and gastronomical traditions, to local festivals, to traditions of craftsmanship, and so on.

Heritage sites, whether tangible or intangible, always belong to a geographically and/or culturally specific area; but the key point is that their importance always extends far beyond these local limits; for at heart, heritage, whether in stone or in sound, whether created by nature or by human hands, is something that we all have a stake in; something that we must preserve; and, above all, something that we should all have the right to *share* in.

In English we use the legal and philosophical idea of “the commons,” that is, of a resource that we all share and that, in order to benefit from, we must all work at preserving. I like to think of study abroad as an opportunity for students to expand their sense of what makes up the commons. Sure, when you arrive in a new country, the first thing that strikes you is how different everything is. (Or, as Dorothy puts it in *The Wizard of Oz*, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”) And yes, you’re right, there are lots of differences—some that you like and others, well, let’s say that you’re not terribly enamored of. But bit by bit, you start to recognize that what you share with others is more important than what separates you.

I’m sure that you all remember those Venn diagrams you had to do in math class when you were studying sets, those circles that overlap with one another and define a *common area*. Well, study abroad should, if all goes well, expand the area of overlap between you and another culture; it increases what you value in

the world, what you wish to share in, and, consequently, what you deem worth preserving.

In other words, study abroad vastly expands your first-person plural possessive adjective: so now, when you say “notre,” it applies to much more than it did a few months ago, when you arrived at the Charles de Gaulle airport.

With your newly expanded *notre* -- and maybe also your newly expanded waistline, since, as we all know, French pastries are not fat free, and we're just about to indulge in dessert -- there also comes a certain responsibility. Whether you realize it or not, you are now part of a rampart against all those who would pull the overlapping circles of cultures as far apart as possible. And, I'm sorry to say, the world today is filled with politicians and political movements who are encouraging precisely this kind of separation, who want to reduce overlap and the scope of what defines “notre” as much as possible.

Yesterday evening, together with the students in our music program, I attended the Strasbourg Philharmonic Orchestra's wonderful performance of “The Damnation of Faust,” a work by the greatest French composer of the nineteenth century, Hector Berlioz. It just so happened that the guest conductor was American; and also that two of the three principal singers were American. At the end of the concert the applause was deafening, and the conductor and soloists had to come out many times to acknowledge the audience's appreciation. In his final bow, John Nelson, the conductor, took Berlioz's score off his music stand and raised it above his head, as if to say, “here is the man who truly deserves your applause tonight.” But as a fellow American, I also saw in his gesture an affirmation this is *our* common musical heritage, *notre patrimoine musical commun*, a glorious heritage that belongs to all of us, whether we are Americans or French, and one that we should love, preserve and share.

I hope that you feel much the same way about this city, this country, and maybe even this continent; and I truly hope that your few months here represent just the start of a lifelong project of expanding the meaning of that wonderful first-person plural possessive adjective: “notre.”

*Bonne continuation!*