Space Matters
Doug and Evelyne Skopp Holocaust Dedication
Remarks by E. Thomas Moran

Space matters. That truism is particularly evident to anyone who has tried to manage a classroom environment.

For over 20 years the person who arranged classroom space on this campus was Evelyne Skopp. She undertook it, as she did so many other roles in the registrar's office, with great sensitivity to faculty and their needs in best serving students. She is one of those rare people who unfailingly gives a human touch to all who depend on those vital services. Evelyne has long been a central presence in making this college the kind of caring place we pride ourselves on being.

Beyond her own contributions, she has been Doug’s resilient and, as he fully acknowledges, indispensable supporter in his work on the Holocaust.

Doug's grandfather wanted him to be a rabbi. In many respects, his grandfather got his wish. We can see it in Doug's love of learning, his nurturance of community, and in the elegantly expressed architecture of his hopes for a compassionate world. At times he seems more like a theologian than a historian.

For Doug the foundational insight is that, in an otherwise dark universe, rescuing our common humanity is the only way to light a path to a decent future. This requires that we imagine others lives, with empathy, and as they experience their lives. We must see in them our own qualities. In our dreams and despair, in our capacity for love and to cause pain, we human beings are more alike than we often want to acknowledge.

This is no idle insight, for Doug. Throughout his career, his work has compelled him to stare into the hideous pit of hell that is the Holocaust. He has done so out of a sad and brave obligation: to insure that such genocide never occurs again. Preventing unspeakable suffering begins with comprehending how we human beings ever permit it to occur at all.

His search has culminated in a stunning novel, Shadows Walking. In it he does not offer a simple condemnation of those doctors he writes about, who colluded in Nazi brutalities. Instead, he explores the complexity of human nature in a way that leaves us realizing how terrifyingly difficult it is to stand against injustice and to avoid sliding into an icy indifference to human suffering.

To face straightforwardly the worst things human beings can do to one another takes courage. Wisdom rarely comes to us on a rainbow. And Doug is not simply an uncomplicated idealist. But his message is ultimately hopeful.
Martin Luther King Jr. said: “The arc of history is long but it bends toward justice.” However, as Doug comprehends, it doesn't bend by itself. Committed people put their shoulder to the wheel of history and push it toward justice through their sacrifices.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was killed on April 4th 1968, Robert Kennedy was en route to speak in the heart of the African-American ghetto in the city of Indianapolis. When he arrived, fearing for his safety, his aides and city officials urged him to cancel his appearance. He persisted. In the chill, rainy night he discarded his prepared remarks and spoke from his heart.

He spoke softly, sharing the anguish of those he was with. He was seeking to understand the inexplicable and find a way to hold hatred and violent retaliation at bay.

He talked about the need for compassion, unity and love between whites and blacks; and he explained that all Americans needed to dedicate themselves to the unfinished quest of the ancient Greeks: “To tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.”

He then recited these lines by the poet Aeschylus: "Even in our sleep the pain which can not forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our despair, and against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

That night every major American city burned in riots of rage and despair. Every city except one: Indianapolis.

Words matter and they can affect the world and change history.

We must believe that here - in this Memorial space – amid the possessions of those souls, who suffered in an un bearable time, the spirit of Doug’s words can echo the same message of reconciliation that Robert Kennedy expressed on that tragic night in Indianapolis.

A mature capacity for compassion demands these convictions: that we must stand with those who are victimized, so that their tormentors cannot isolate and destroy them; that the impulse to condemnation must be overridden by the determination to avert the cycle of violence that leaves only a haunted humanity; that it is more heroic to heal with others than to vanquish them; and that it is more virtuous to face honestly the narcissism that may reside at the center of our own righteousness than to use it as leverage to humiliate and shatter others’ lives.

These aspirations are at the heart of Doug's life's work. With Evelyn’s support and love, he has fervently shared them as a teacher and a colleague. That is why today we dedicate this space in their names.

Thank you Doug and Evelyne.