

August 14, 2017

Dear RISD Community,

Like many of you, I am distraught about the recent events that unfolded this weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, events led by Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists that called hatred to the forefront, and ended in violence, injury, and loss of life. Echoes of actions that took place resonate to many of us, frightening reminders of past tragedies that one hopes that we had evolved beyond. However, both the Friday night march on the University of Virginia campus and the Saturday's "Unite the Right" demonstration are evidence that we have far to go to truly become a civil society. Violence is not free speech. It must be called out for what it is – violence.

Violence and hatred undermine the very rules of freedom that are the basis of our society. They have no place on a college campus, where all members deserve to feel safe.

Although I know these events took place elsewhere, I am aware that they affect our community, particularly our students, faculty, and staff of color, and of religious beliefs that have been called out in hatred. I want to repeat what I have made clear in the past. At RISD, there is no place for this kind of bigotry or hate. Violence of this sort is shameful and unacceptable anywhere, and should not belong in contemporary, democratic society.

A true democracy is defined by discourse, by respectful dialogues about different points of view. We all must work in a communal commitment to ensure that RISD is a place where openness and acceptance thrive, and where everyone's value is recognized. It is our responsibility to let these values guide our teaching, our scholarship, our daily interactions, and all of our creative and critical endeavors. Creative works can play a unique role, helping to bridge misunderstanding, to enlighten each other about different perspectives and different experiences. The disciplines that we teach can create poignant shared languages across these differences, shared languages that still express and recognize our individuality and independent identities.

In two weeks we will celebrate the 54th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech, an address delivered on August 28, 1963, at the largest peaceful assembly of protest in our national history in its time. Over half a century later, as we experienced the violence of this weekend, we were reminded of the bravery and dignity of the march of 54 years ago. Yet, at the same time, we mourn that racism and hatred still exist in our country after so much sacrifice, and that injury and loss of life can still be tragic outcomes beyond the courage.

What we can do is start locally, with our own community. Let's face the hard truth that the events this weekend felt like personal injury to many of us, and let's make the effort to help one another heal from those injuries. As we send our thoughts of good will to those who suffered in Charlottesville, let's also each commit to making the extra effort to ensure that RISD is a place that makes the value of every member of our community evident. The RISD community deserves nothing less.

Sincerely,



Rosanne Somerson
President

