

2019 LCWS Graduation Speech

Presented by Garrett Kimberly, Saturday, June 8th, 2019

I like to tell my students that every main lesson contains, no matter how hidden or cryptic, a secret to living a good life. You probably think that you've had your last main lesson. If you're healthy teenagers, this thought should bring you some relief – If we've been any good at our jobs, it should bring you some regret. But you're wrong. You haven't had your last main lesson – not even close. You still have a thousand main lessons remaining. College, travel, family, aging – these are some of the main lessons that await you. Your future is nothing but main lessons – and each will hold, no matter how cryptic or hidden, a secret of a full life – one filled with suffering and joy, clarity and confusion, regret and gratitude.

This morning, I'd like to talk about one of the ways you've been prepared to take up these remaining lessons. I'd like to talk about **context** and **seeing one another as completely as possible**. It's been said that we live in an age of context collapse, a time in which it's easier than ever to look only at the isolated content of a moment without regard to its context. Context collapse is a term credited to [danah boyd](#), a technology and social media scholar (who spells her name in lowercase letters). I'm going to be stealing liberally from her work throughout my speech, so thanks danah. To help us understand what context collapse is, she suggests this thought experiment.

Imagine you have a crazy trip somewhere far away. You see wonderful things. You meet interesting people. You do something you regret, something you'd never do back home. You have a wonderful time. Now, imagine, upon your return, you tell the story of your trip to your closest friend. What story do you tell? Now, imagine you then tell the story to your trip to a member of the freshmen class. What story do you tell? How would you tell the story to Mr. Deil-Noble, or to Maria Cimonetti, or to a parent? I imagine you'd tell each story differently – because of the differing contexts of your relationships. Now, imagine that right after you return from this fantasy trip, all those different people come together at a party where you have to tell them all together the story of your trip. Which story would you tell then? The best friend version or the freshmen version or some other version?

Now, imagine that 2.4 billion strangers also show up at the party wanting to hear about your trip. What story do you tell now? 2.4 billion is the current number of Facebook users by the way.¹

In this thought experiment. You maybe have two choices for your story. You could tell all those people a sanitized version of the story of your trip – in which case everyone is bored; or you could tell the more complete version of the story and risk offending or even hurting some people.

This is what we mean when we talk about context collapse. It's a state in which it becomes more and more difficult to say the right thing because we're not just communicating in a single context. Instead, we're shouting into the void of Twitter, into god knows what jumble of how many contexts. Our context gets so big and complex that it effectively collapses. And, while

¹ Facebook reported 2.38 billion global users in FY Q1 2019.

tools like Twitter or Facebook allow us to stay connected with many people – we should never confuse that connection for an authentic relationship – a connection alone is not a relationship.

Communication – telling that story of your trip – could be an opportunity to connect more deeply with someone, to give them a chance to become closer to you, to learn something about you and your experience. But, if your context grows too complex you lose that, and the communication becomes just a list of events and places. Your listener knows *about* the trip, but they don't really *understand* it. As Mr. Crimy and Ms. Dews might say, learning without context is just learning *about* something, but not actually learning the real thing at all.

Now don't misunderstand: there's a time and a place for speaking into multiple contexts. Like, maybe ... a graduation speech. Where you might find yourself talking to a group of people you know well, and care deeply about as well as a lot of people you've barely met.

So, what is it that makes authentic communication possible? It's context. The context of your relationship shapes how you choose to tell your story. Context allows us to say the right thing to the right person at the right time. Now, wouldn't that be an amazing world – one in which we all said just the right thing to the right person at the right moment?

And, how do we form those relationships where we know the right thing to say? I think it comes from really seeing one another as complete people. So, I want to talk for a moment about seeing. We all want to be seen. When you were a child and drew a splotch of paint on a page and said, "Look at this!" You were literally asking to be seen. When you were in math class and asked your teacher, "Did I do this right?" You were asking to be seen. That moment at the end of the 12th grade play when you bowed and thought, "Wow, look what we did." You were seeing yourself and your classmates – in front of a bunch of people who were seeing you.

In a few minutes, you'll walk up here and take a diploma and smile for all these people who are so proud to see you. You have been seen here. Being seen and seeing – *truly seeing* is the creation of context – the context that allows us to understand one another.

Being seen isn't easy, by the way. At times it feels wonderful because someone is looking at something that we're proud of. But, being seen can be painful because we also contain flaws and things we're embarrassed by. It can hurt to have those things seen. But, in seeing those things they can be transformed – made better.

Not long ago I ran into an alumna who told me that she needed to take a break, from "all the intense Waldorf stuff" – I think she meant being seen so deeply that it was uncomfortable. That same week, I ran into another alumna who said she was so happy to stay connected with "people who really got her" – I think she meant people who truly saw her. This juxtaposition of comfort and discomfort reminded me a little of my own experience here. I've felt so deeply understood, so completely seen that I've felt loved. I also felt the pain of being seen – someone seeing the

stuff I'm not proud of. And through that pain of being deeply seen, I've become a better teacher, a better person, I think.

So, two things strike me about this sort of deep seeing. First, you have to be open to be seen; you have to be honest and vulnerable. I know that each of you has the courage to be vulnerable. So, when you can, choose vulnerability – choose vulnerability.

The other thing that strikes me is that you cannot deeply and completely see someone – come to fully understand all the context of who they are, without learning to love them. In my experience, seeing leads to loving. And that loving changes us for the better.

I know that you've each learned this way of seeing. That's one of the things that all those main lessons taught you – to see deeply. From the moment you picked up a rock in freshmen Geology and really had to look at it, to the moment you finished your self-portrait last week, after looking so carefully at yourself, you've been practicing a kind of deep seeing.

It's sort of a superpower. Imagine what the world would be like if we all saw one another this way – We all came to love one another's strengths and flaws and allowed that love to make us better. So, go use your superpower to make the world a better place.

Start now, look to the person next to you – all of you. Notice how you feel – amused, annoyed, comforted? Remember all the context you have for that person – all your disappointments, admiration, frustrations, and delights. See them — and love them.

Now, look to your family and the things about them that you're proud of and embarrassed by – all the context you have for them. See them — and love them.

Now, look to this school, this faculty, see all the things you're happy to have done, all our shortcomings, all your frustrations, all the great memories, moments of pride. See it all and love it.

Finally, look to the wider world and all you know about it – the threats of global climate change, political conflict, economic instability, the extraordinary natural beauty of the world, the kindness of neighbors, generosity of strangers, the history of suffering and of triumph. See all you know about the world – and love it.

When you come to love the world, the school, your family, your friends, and yourself then you can help those things become better, and that's one of those secrets hidden in all the main lessons you've had, and all that await you in your future. Fare well. Thank you.