

“Building a Community of Grace”
Dr. Earl Lewis, University of Michigan
Baccalaureate Address
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Good afternoon everyone. I am honored and humbled to be delivering today’s baccalaureate address. This is a campus and community I have known but did not know. Through my children, Suzanne and Max, I have filial ties to this place. You see their maternal grandfather, Jack London, was a Bowdoin alum; as are their uncles, Steve and Howard; and their first cousin, Andrea. In fact, their late mother, Jayne, was to have attended Bowdoin, but she rebelled and went to Colby instead. In London lore, be it in the years just before WWII, or during Vietnam, or the 1990s, Bowdoin offered a way forward. Its bucolic setting and deep commitment to the liberal arts honed intellectual skills, to be sure, but the campus taught each of them about membership in community.

For the son of a Lithuanian, Jewish immigrant, Bowdoin offered Jack multiple lessons about the bonds and boundaries of community. His father, my kid’s great grandfather, had survived pogroms in his native land, only to embrace the grace of hard work and sacrifice in his adopted land. As a rag seller and eventually a small businessman, he worked to provide an alternative for his children. That Jack followed him into the family-owned furniture store business

begs its own telling. Jack survived D-day, when his mates died on either side of him; he endured PTSD, as he struggled through survivors' guilt. I am not sure he ever shook the sense but for the grace of God he may have died.

Now I am not prepared to give Jack's life the full treatment it deserves, but I do want to expound upon one thread—the idea of grace. A couple of weekends ago I traveled to my alma mater to chair its governing board. While there I was reminded of the importance of grace. You see as the school year came to a close, a video surfaced on social media of a Concordia student saying hateful and racist things in an alcohol-induced haze. When it first surfaced, we had no way of knowing its vintage—yesterday, a year ago, two years ago? An investigation found the video featured a high school sophomore rather than a college freshman. We learned that when it first surfaced the student apologized profusely and soon thereafter withdrew from social media, hoping to distance herself from an act she protested she deeply regretted. Unfortunately a young man became angry with the young woman's male companion in the video; he rebooted the old screed. That act re-anchored her to a moment she had wanted to escape.

Some might argue such is the price to pay for egregious, outlandish and offensive behavior. Others might ask, how do we learn to forgive? Is there not

room for restorative justice? If we can rehabilitate the incarcerated must we forever imprison an adolescent whose behavior to date implies the actions that night were aberrant—that is singular in occurrence and behavior.

This incident, in fact, may have died quietly with the end of an academic year, save for the local newspaper’s decision to retell the story a week after graduation in a top of the fold account. As I reflected on their treatment and decision to publish, I found myself drawn, over and over again to the word grace. Is it possible for a community to gracefully forgive a member who made a mistake, apologized and seemingly has made amends? Is it reasonable to expect humans to err, repent, learn and move on?

A Grace-Filled Community

It would be a horrible mistake, for me, a historian of the modern age to begin to expound upon deeply held theological debates about grace, especially ones with rich scholarly traditions like divine grace. Yet, our growing diversity has to be understood as an asset to define, leverage and value. In that video one can find profound evidence of bonding—perversely so—as the speaker asserts the primacy of her racial group while denigrating all others. A community emboldened by grace recognizes the importance of intragroup bonding but invites—no encourages—intergroup bridging. This story, sad in its particulars,

asks us to consider, how in this highly fractionated age, do we build not just vibrant, or good, or inclusive communities, how do we build grace-filled communities?

Humans first formed communities as a way of marshalling sufficient resources and as a means of guarding those resources. A hunter traveling alone was always susceptible to injury or death, thereby endangering a family who depended on his or her resourcefulness. The coming together of several individuals insured continued survival if one succumbed to unfortunate events. This active multiplying of individuals into communities helped produce kingdoms, empires and today's nation states. Along the way we created new ways of marking insiders from outsiders. In simpler times, language, lineage or color told the tale of who was in and who was out. Larger aggregations and more formal state systems required ever more complicated apparatuses. Today passports, birth certificates and governmental requirements determine and regulate the boundaries of formed communities. History has shown at their worst such regulations spark deadly nationalism, even as we pray they do no more than spawn feelings of national pride.

Graduations remind us that we too have our rituals of inclusion. We don our caps and gowns to signal our place within the academy. Different colored robes acquaint the casual viewer with a hint of previous connections as well as the ways in which we entered this community. Baccalaureates, like convocations, call us back together after periods apart. They served to punctuate, in a temporal sense, the continued forming of community.

But on this day, as you prepare for graduation, I invite you to ask have you done enough to build a community known for its grace? What are the tenets of a grace-filled community? Let me suggest four.

We begin with responsibility. A grace-filled community is not consumed with rank or status. It practices the principle of open communication and structured action. This means that hierarchies are flattened. All are invited to speak, but if action is to follow the conversations, they do so through the structures of the College—committees, departments, faculty and staff senate or its equivalent, administrative officers, the board. No one dares say, “it is not my job so I don’t have to worry about it.” Members of a grace-filled community own the process to the end.

No one gets a pass. A grace-filled community demands multiple architects. That new student graciously accepts his or her place among their elders, always expecting the most. They enter fully cognizant of what they have achieved and what they are still to learn; they enter with confidence but not arrogance; they enter expecting as much of themselves as they expect of others. For them there is no sense of entitlement, for they know what they did yesterday in no way guarantees what they will accomplish in the future. While they pursue their degree they promise to stop long enough to be noticed and to try to improve the community now called home. A grace-filled community, after all, seeks institution builders.

Students understand that a grace-filled community does not begin or end at the campus's edge. They seek out those neighborhoods rich with aspirations but not material possessions. Where others see the dispossessed they see young and old who dream—who dream of a world never seen but one that's sensed; who dream of a world where hard work and perseverance inoculate you from life's miserable underbelly of poverty, crime, incarceration, drugs and death. These students understand that becoming a prisoner need not mean the end of one's humanity. It is a community in which new students are taught to talk to their older classmates, for they are expected to become mentors and friends.

A grace-filled community requires a staff that understands the difference between a job, a career and a calling. If getting out of bed five days a week, 48-50 weeks per year only translates into a job, you are failing yourself and those around you. Nor is it simply a career that offers unbounded opportunities for advancement that should be your sole motivator. Members of a grace-filled community understand that they, too, are institution builders, and that the smallest gesture, when no one is looking even, is what's expected of them. So if they see a piece of paper on the ground, they don't walk by it just because that is not their job. They pick up the paper, toss it in the receptacle, hoping all along that others will take heed and do the same.

Members of a grace-filled community exhibit the patience to embrace each encounter as another teaching moment, no matter how many times you have heard the question posed or how off putting the questioner becomes. Remember some people mask their insecurities by seeming exceptionally entitled. An abundance of privilege is no virtue in a grace-filled community; in such a community, we often find out how dependent we are on the good graces of others.

Faculty have a disproportionate role to play in the grace-filled community. Students come to campus to work with us. Often our books or articles have captured their attention. They see themselves as would-be scholars in our image. Some may have heard us lecture, and found themselves moved by what was said and what they heard; they are here now to emulate. Never assume that your fame is all they seek; in fact, I suspect many are intimidated by your accomplishments. While here, you will be accessible and you will challenge their orthodoxies, sometimes substituting deep knowledge for their abiding faith. Of course, accept no silences in class because a grace-filled community requires every voice to be heard. Help them to comprehend the difference between student and scholar, and that irrespective of the degree they seek, Bowdoin produces scholars.

In this community of grace, faculty, in partnership with administrators, remain ever alert to the challenges and opportunities of the day. Rather than plotting strategies to react, they design plans that anticipate. Such faculty and administrators own the college. They are the first to say, we need to diversify our curriculum, update our pedagogical approaches, anticipate digital delivery systems, reduce our reliance on traditional means of revenue, and support our

students generously, reach out to alumni frequently, celebrate our intellectual accomplishments fully, and remind all we must mold an ethical world.

Finally a grace-filled community is peopled by those who care about others as much as they care about themselves. Returning to the story of the Concordia coed, in a grace-filled community we slow time and ask what we know before jumping to conclusions only partially informed. Perhaps it is our age, when so many confuse fast and quick, expedient and prudent. How many times have we all sent an email, when in hindsight a phone call, which may have taken longer at the outset, would have been better? Colleges are enduring institutions, inhabited by a variety of people. Both the schools and their inhabitants need care and nurturing—they need the gift of grace.

In closing, my wish for you, the Class of 2019, is this: Leave this place with hope and drive, determination and humility, purpose and playfulness, and a commitment to bringing grace to whatever community you enter next. Remember, building and sustaining a grace-filled world should become your legacy. I believe that Bowdoin has prepared you well. We count on it. Thank you.