

Waiting for the World to Change: Reflections of an Aging Hippie

Thank you, Amber, for those kind remarks. And thanks to all of you, who honor me with the invitation to give the Last Lecture, then honor me again by being here today. Nothing is more special to a teacher than having the confidence of her students and colleagues.

In the audience today, I see a tremendous range of people—students, friends, colleagues, representatives of our administrative leadership—even some folks from the community. Your presence today is a gift. Strangely, I see numerous students whom I do not know; you are especially kind to be here. But since it is undergraduates who have honored me with this lecture opportunity, you are primarily the ones I would like to address in the next several minutes.

When I was sitting where you are sitting today, equipoised between the university and what people like to call “reality,” the world was a different place in many ways. The pivotal question for my generation was, “Where were you when Kennedy was shot,” rather than, “Where were you on 9/11?” From Dallas to New York to Memphis to Los Angeles, we watched in horror and disbelief as our heroes fell, victims to violence: John, then Malcolm, then Martin, and finally Bobby. A Texan was in the White House then, as well, and he was assuring us that the war in Vietnam would end “not in months, but in weeks.” We marched against the war and for civil rights; we marched against the Klan, finding out where they would be next and countering them by marching in the opposite direction, to assemble at the other end and share a word of prayer that they would never be successful.

But ours has always been a generation of hope, as well, and in our youth we witnessed numerous accomplishments. The Civil Rights Act became law. Women had begun the laborious

route to the corporate boardroom. Although we had not yet landed on the moon, we had walked in space for twenty-two minutes. Sony introduced the first Japanese-made color television to be sold in the United States. Head Start programs began. Jack Nicklaus won his second Masters title, and the LA Dodgers took the World Series. Doctor Dré and J. K. Rowling were born, even as T. S. Eliot and Lorraine Hansberry passed away. Many changes that we are all reaping the benefits of now were born in those days, too, like Earth Day, with its call for environmental protection.

On the music scene (as vital to us as it is to you), Sonny and Cher were still married and assuring one another that “I got you, babe.” The Temptations admitted musically that they weren’t “too proud to beg, sweet darlin’.” (In more recent times, those words have become the motto of public educators.) Stevie Wonder was still called “Little Stevie Wonder.” Marvin Gaye looked Tammy Tyrell straight in the eyes and told her: “Ain’t nothin’ like the real thing, baby; so glad we got the real thing.” And two fresh-faced young British boys, only 19 and 22, had just collaborated on their first hit: You may have heard it; it begins, “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

So after all that time has passed, what kind of advice would you expect an old hippie like me to suggest? Perhaps, like my near contemporary, the cartoon figure Maxine, you might expect me to say: “Pull up your pants. You look silly.” Or: “Turn off the phone and drive.” But no. Instead, I would like to share some things I have learned along the way, in hopes that they may make your journey in life easier, more pleasant, more adventuresome, and more worthwhile.

Good advice is available everywhere, and has never been in short supply. The ancients left us a ready archive of it. Marcus Aurelius, who lived from 121 to 180 AD, says, “If it is not right, do not do it; if it is not true, do not say it.” The Bible is a treasure house of good advice, from the Ten Commandments to the Beatitudes. Shakespeare, too, is noted for passing on wisdom, such as, “This

above all, to thine own self be true.” We are surrounded by precepts that can help us to live better lives: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” “Prepare for war in a time of peace.” “Live each day as if it were your last.” “Start saving for retirement when you get your first paycheck.” “Dance as if no one were watching.” And one of my personal favorites, “Friends don’t let friends go to Duke.”

My father’s favorite saying comes from 16th-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, that no one could tell how much good could be done in this world if no one cared who got the credit. (I tried for several years to abide by this one, since I hold my father in such high esteem, but had to abandon it when I became a college professor. As you may know, we are required to be ever mindful of promotion and tenure qualifications, so we have to record each accomplishment.)

Just this year, essayist Diane Israel offered up some of the best advice I have ever heard: “Show up fully. Pay attention. Tell the truth. Let go of the outcome.” Our parents and teachers probably bring us up to do the first three, but we must learn the last one on our own, and it is by far the toughest. Letting go of the outcome is hard, especially when we are convinced we are right.

Here, if I may, is a series of a dozen home truths I would like to leave with you, tested in my own experience.

1. Eat the mayonnaise. Lynn, a dear friend and colleague of mine, loved mayonnaise. It was a secret passion for her, along with one of its more evolved forms, ranch dressing. But she was concerned that ingesting fats could increase her cholesterol and endanger her health. She was right, of course—but I ask you to bear with me for a bit for this brief foray into mayonnaise advocacy. Both Lynn and her husband tried very hard to safeguard her hdl/ldl balance by banning mayonnaise from their home, making sandwiches with mustard only, and so on. But Lynn really missed

mayonnaise. So much so that she turned up at my office door one day with a squeeze bottle of Kraft Real Mayo and asked me to keep it for her in my tiny refrigerator.

From time to time, when she could no longer resist, she came in with a sandwich, reached into the fridge, slathered the bread with her secret stash, and devoured her treat with obvious satisfaction. Lynn isn't with us now, but it wasn't her mayo mischief that took her away. It was another disease entirely, one absolutely unrelated to cholesterol, one that she in no way could have prevented, that blindsided her, robbed her of her health, and took her from us. When I cleaned out my refrigerator shortly after her death, I looked a long time at that bottle of Kraft before I threw it into the trash. I couldn't help thinking that I wished Lynn had eaten more of the mayonnaise.

My point here is that when we come upon something that makes us enjoy life more, so long as it isn't morally or physically detrimental to ourselves or others, why hold back? I guess that, at least for me, eating the mayonnaise has become personal code for what Horace advocated so many centuries ago: "Even as we speak, envious time is running away from us: carpe diem."

My great-aunt Hettie was the first person who taught me to go ahead and eat the mayonnaise. Aunt Hettie was a formidable teacher of the old school. Each month, she put aside a portion of her meager salary into a travel fund. We became used to getting postcards from all over the world each summer as she traveled abroad—to Italy, England, France—wherever her savings would allow. One summer she went to Ireland, where she purchased an elegant linen tablecloth and twelve matching napkins. Having shown it to the family upon her return, she put her prize away in her linen closet, where it remained until her death, waiting for an occasion Aunt Hettie considered special enough to bring it out and use it.

When my mother and her sisters were sorting out the house after Aunt Hettie's death, they came across that tablecloth. Still in its box, still unused, it had fallen apart at the creases, becoming

just a beautiful, wasted rag. So I would like you to take this thought with you: Enjoy today today.

No one will ever enter your home who is more precious than your family and loved ones. The special occasion is now. Eat the mayonnaise!

2. Be outrageous every now and then. You will be more fun to know and you will enjoy each day a little more, knowing that the potential for being outrageous lies right below the surface.

3. Make real friends and nurture them. Laugh with them; listen to them; think of what will make them happy; make time to spend with them; reciprocate their kindness. They will laugh and cry with you, too. And when they do, be grateful. Over the years, your friends may come to mean more to you than your blood relatives do.

4. Don't allow yourself to be bored. Always have projects at hand that interest you, whether you are working on the next novel sure to win the Nobel Prize (or reading one by the last writer who did), learning to tie flies, or taking your children to a tennis match or a play. People who are bored are boring. As children, my brother, sister, and I were never allowed to express boredom; our mother taught us that boredom was the sure sign of a lack of imagination. There are always walks to take, gardens to plant, bikes to ride, or stories to read. One of my favorite literary reminders about the importance of reading, of stories told and received, comes from Leslie Marmon Silko: “I will tell you something about stories . . . / They aren't just entertainment. / Don't be fooled. / They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don't have anything / if you don't have the stories.”

5. Dig for gold. Everyone has something that she or he does best—better, in fact, than anyone who has ever lived or ever will live. Please believe that. Look for that gold—within yourself, so you can find out what your contribution in life is meant to be, but especially dig for the gold in others. You may find a rich vein, just waiting to be tapped. At other times, you may pan for ages just to

locate a few precious nuggets. But keep digging. One of my mentors, folklorist Dan Patterson, puts it this way: “There are any number of geniuses out there, and our responsibility is to find them and bring their gifts to light.” Look how much human gold is being brought to light just a few hundred yards from here by the simple, yet unbelievably generous, gift of our new Performance Hall.

6. See what you are looking at. God expresses himself all around us, every day, in the ground on which we now stand. I learned this lesson when I was a sophomore in high school from my biology teacher, Iris Curry. Ms. Curry required us to do a wildflower collection containing fifty representative specimens. I was completely skeptical about where I was going to find twenty, much less fifty, and I thought she should know that—after all, she lived very near to my house. One day she showed us a series of slides with dozens of the most delicate, eye-poppingly beautiful wildflowers I had ever seen. After class I asked her where she had taken the pictures. Moving patiently from one slide to another, she charted what I realized was the route from her house to school. I felt as if someone had thrown cold water in my face. I thought, “She has been where I am every day!” Since then, I have always remembered to keep my eyes open to what is around me in the natural or the manmade world, looking for little miracles everywhere.

7. After I received the telephone call from Dr. Christine Hult, inviting me to join the USU English faculty, I put on Stevie Wonder’s greatest hits and danced around the house to “Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours.” And I still feel that way. So for career advice, I offer you this simple credo: Find a profession you feel passionate about, one that will excite, reward, and challenge you across the years. Get the best education you possibly can for that profession. Then give it everything you have, without holding back—devote your energy, enthusiasm, intelligence, and caring to this profession that you have chosen. And if you want to make a difference in this world, consider

teaching. This is my forty-first year in public education, and I can tell you with assurance that working with students keeps you intellectually keen and young inside.

8. If you do experience some success, remember always to keep your relative worth in perspective.

From time to time, we all have to be reminded to stay humble. When those times come to me, I think of two stories. The first comes from a colleague of mine in grad school. Not long after we had received our doctorates in English, she sat at her laptop near an open window and heard her son talking to a little friend. His friend (clearly not trapped in traditional paradigms for females) asked, “What does your mother do?” My colleague perked up her ears to hear her son’s reply. “I don’t exactly know,” he said. “She used to be a librarian, but now she’s some kind of doctor—but not the kind that can do you any good.”

The second incident that reminds me about balance happened only recently. A friend of mine, an academic in another state, called me up laughing. “You’ve got to go on ratemyprofessors.com and see what your students say about you. I’ve been laughing for an hour!” So I did. To my surprise, I discovered that one student had given me a chili pepper, which is meant to indicate how “hot” I am. Now, I have never thought of myself as being a “hottie,” so I was of course delighted. But the next student commented, “Whoever gave her a chili pepper must be talking about her sense of humor.” Then, my hotness having been officially challenged to the webmaster, I had been stripped of my chili pepper!

But that’s okay. I right-clicked, appropriated their chili pepper logo, and turned it into wallpaper on my office computer. That way, whenever I log on, I can see chili peppers dancing all across the screen. As in one of my favorite films, *Cinema Paradiso*, where Salvatore at last inherits all the kisses in the world, I have gifted myself with hundreds of chili peppers! (Sometimes, folks, you have to blend a healthy modesty with a positive sense of your own worth.)

9. Travel as much as you can, wherever you can, as often as you can, even if it's just down a new street or a dusty road you haven't tried before. Some of my most enjoyable memories have been harvested while exploring Cache Valley and the adjoining area. Up Blacksmith Fork Canyon, my husband and I have seen moose and ermine. In Benson, we have watched dozens of cranes, some of them doing their seasonal twirl of courtship. We have searched the Utah deserts for fossils and opals and stood where the water level of Lake Bonneville once lapped against its shore. In Park City, we attended the annual gathering of Navajo elders, where we sat in silence for several hours, listening to their stories. And we got to hear the memories of a Code Talker. A Code Talker! Do you know how special that is?

Whenever you reach a new place, whether here or abroad, immerse yourself in the best that your new locale has to offer. Walk the streets; meet the people; visit as many museums, art galleries, and historical sights as you can; taste the local food; learn as much as you can of the local language, if only to show your respect for another culture. When you travel outside the country, don't be one of those Americans who spends five minutes at a famous attraction, then another twenty looking for McDonald's or the Hard Rock Café. Remember, too that non-fiction is the next best thing to travel. In books you can visit Canyon lands, see the Greek islands, or go parasailing in the Andes for minutes, hours, or an extended stay.

10. Be kind. At least, try to be as kind as your nature will possibly allow. Former poet laureate Ted Kooser told us a few weeks ago that the finest advice he had ever received is, "Most people are doing the best they can." I think Kooser is right. And be fair to others. They are depending on you to do the right thing. Whatever kindness and justice you extend to others will come back to you. Even if it didn't, do it anyway. You will like yourself better.

11. Never stop being curious. As Ben Franklin said so wisely, “Curiosity is the hallmark of intelligence.” In particular, never stop reading. Take time for poetry. According to poet Christian Wiman, “Let us remember, that in the end, we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy both.”

Some people are mystified about why a person would major in the humanities. They ask us, “What is it with you? Don’t you like money?” But they must not be aware of our secret passion—a passion for words and ideas. I became an English major not because I craved to join the grammar police and say, “Ha, ha! Your pronoun and antecedent don’t match,” but because I wanted to have a storehouse of words that could enable me to look up into one of our glorious western night skies and think, “Ye stars, which are the poetry of heaven” (Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*). Read widely and deeply in literatures from around the world, of course, but also read about green frogs in Belize, mountain climbing, giraffes, foot binding in ancient China, Nostradamus, kite flying, quantum physics, origami. Just keep your antennae out there for whatever interesting information may come your way.

12. Have faith in something bigger than yourself, and practice that faith nonstop.

Since I began by referring to music, I would like to close in a similar way. You may have picked up on the allusion embedded in the name of this talk—“Waiting for the World to Change: Reflections of an Aging Hippie.” You are right if you think it is a reference to John Mayer’s recent hit, “Waiting on the World to Change.” (Of course, being an English teacher, I had to iron out a little grammatical kink in Mayer’s title.)

In the song, Mayer includes these words:

me and all my friends
we're all misunderstood
they say we stand for nothing and
there's no way we ever could
now we see everything that's going wrong
with the world and those who lead it
we just feel like we don't have the means
to rise above and beat it

so we keep waiting
waiting on the world to change

it's hard to beat the system
when we're standing at a distance
so we keep waiting
waiting on the world to change

now if we had the power
to bring our neighbors home from war
they would have never missed a Christmas
no more ribbons on their door
and when you trust your television

what you get is what you got
cause when they own the information, oh
they can bend it all they want

that's why we're waiting
waiting on the world to change

But I say to you today, if you don't remember anything else I have said—Don't wait for the world to change. Do what you can to make it a better place right here and now. Don't wait until you can end poverty or discrimination worldwide. Change our world in the small ways you already have within your power. Give the next person you encounter a smile. Vote. If you find some change on the ground, donate it to the Women's Center for scholarships. Learn more about an

unfamiliar culture, a different religion. Plant a tree; clean up a stream. Be open to new ideas, even ones that make you more than a little uncomfortable. Put your arm around a discouraged friend. Pick up a piece of trash. Listen to an elderly person. Volunteer for CAPSA. Read to a child for thirty minutes. Say thank you. Study. Study some more. Study harder. Prepare yourself for what life has to offer you so that you will be up to the task. Cultivate a sense of humor; you will surely need it. And always remember the power of one. As anthropologist Margaret Mead reminds us, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” But don't wait for the world to change. Get out there and start changing it. This world needs your unique contribution right now. It needs each of us. This world needs you.

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