Welcome to the Earlham community, Earlham College Class of 2016!

Welcome to a new world of what is contingent.

“Contingent”—not exactly a word you hear every day. What my son and daughter like to call, with a bit of snarkiness, “an SAT word.”

But hey—this is college—and people are going to be using all kinds of words you don’t hear everyday—but don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.

In fact, by your second week, you might hear people talking about “radical postmodernist critiques of hegemonic social formations.” This will be scary. But even more scary is that by your second week, you’ll know what they meant! And before the semester ends, you may end up concluding that you are yourself the consequence of a social hegemonic formation—and it’s high time you did something about it!

But back to the business of entering into this “community of what is contingent.”

Now the opposite of what is contingent is what is necessary. The “necessary” is what has to be the case, what is inescapable—it’s “the given.” What philosopher Michel Foucault called the “order of things,” or a “discursive formation”—whoops, there I go again. OK—I’ll stop it. Actually, as some of you may know, I like to think of the necessary or given as simply the “blue pill” reality. By contrast, the contingent is what is not necessary, what does not have to be the case, what is escapable—the “red pill” reality. (I know it’s often easier to watch a movie than read Foucault—but we’re going to make you read people like Foucault anyway).

Now here’s something that might worry you. By the time you reach age 18 or so, you and your world can seem to have become very, very necessary. Very non-contingent. The global economic system seems to be in a nosedive with no pilot able to pull us out of the plunge. Ice caps are melting, and the climate seems out of whack, and it’s starting to look like 105 degree summers are inevitable, the new normal in Indiana. The political system seems…well…let’s not even go there.

What is even more disturbing is that you may be thinking that you yourselves might be becoming necessary, inevitable.

Locked into the masks and roles that have seemed necessary to negotiate high school social relationships and family dynamics, you may have come to feel that you
have become captured by those masks and roles-- that your social role has become your character, and your character is fast becoming you destiny.

But—to go back to where we started--in coming to Earlham, you have now arrived at a place of contingency, not of necessity.

Earlham is a place where you do not have to be the unreal person you constructed for social convenience, or survival--for what has been constructed can be deconstructed, and refashioned another way. And Earlham is a place from which the world looks equally alterable—here at Earlham, we can see the world as waiting for a transformative touch that will suddenly reveal it to be the contingent thing it always has been, rather than the godlike, necessary thing it pretends to be.

And Earlham is not only a place for you to discover the contingency of yourselves and the world; Earlham is itself contingent: humanly constructed, Earlham is always open to refashioning, to new directions. If you ask why something done here is done the way it is, and you get the reply, “because that’s the way we’ve always done it,” I hope you might recognize the unease with contingency in that statement, and might resist its alluring comfort of the necessary. Instead, I invite you to welcome and embrace contingency.

And to the parents here--who I’m sure by now are wondering: good grief, are people at this place going to talk like this all the time?--I will offer a more down-to-earth version: while we will do our very best to take good care of your children and return them to you in four years, we will not give them back to you in quite the same condition in which you gave them to us.

For if we’re any good at all at what we do here, your child will definitely be altered. And they will see the world around them as alterable.

They will ask the inconvenient question. They will not let the important matter rest. And they will be not just obsessed about, but intellectually informed about--and capable of impacting--some matter of high importance that is not just about themselves.

All of this will show that they are contingent, and therefore free, creatures--creatures who can shape themselves—and all of this will make you proud (even as you realize that, despite your very best efforts, what your child is becoming is just not going to be a miniature version of yourselves!).

So--welcome, again, class of 2016--you collection of incalculable and thoroughly unpredictable contingencies.

I look forward to meeting each of you soon, over dinner at my house, in the weeks ahead. Look for my invitation. Like all of us in the Earlham community, I will be
fascinated to discover--as you will be fascinated to discover--just who you really are, and what you might do . . . next.

David Dawson