

# Earlham

COLLEGE

## BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS MAY 10, 2014

### *A World Yearning for Your (Sometimes Funky) Love*

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I would like to offer a warm welcome to all of you who are here this morning to celebrate, this whole day, the graduating class 2014. I welcome the Earlham College Board of Trustees, the faculty and administrative and support staff. I extend a very special welcome to the many parents, siblings, extended family, and friends, who have given so much of themselves and their resources to make this day a reality for those of you who sit before us in this graduating class. Indeed, some of you have traveled over continents to be here today.

I would be remiss if I did offer, as well, a very special note of appreciation to the many workers who have labored to bring your college years to a successful end. To the workers on whose behalf banners flew from Carpenter and Earlham Halls right up till a few days ago, I thank you. I thank the workers who make the omelets and tend to the salad bar that feed the bodies and minds of the Earlham community. Thank you for washing the dishes and windows, tending the grounds, changing the light bulbs, escorting students across campus in the middle of the night, emptying the trash and cleaning the toilets of our collective lives here at the College. You are like the air we breathe, the air we scarcely notice apart from your absence.

As for you, the class of 2014, I am happy to see that so many of you could make it here this morning, because I know that for the past week or so the post-graduation party has already begun. I hope that you are taking well-earned pride in having completed your college educations.

As it so happens, this year, 2014, marks a couple of significant half-century milestones in American history:

In 1964, civil rights organizations including the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized a voter registration drive, known as the Mississippi Summer Project, or Freedom Summer, which aimed at dramatically increasing voter registration in Mississippi...Freedom Summer, comprised of Black Mississippians and more than 1,000 out-of-state volunteers, [most of them White], faced constant abuse and harassment from Mississippi's White population. The Ku Klux Klan, police and even state and local authorities carried out a systematic series of violent attacks: including arson, beatings, false arrests and the murder of at least three civil rights activists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>History Channel Online: <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedom-summer>. Accessed April 30, 2014.

This year of your graduation from college also marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The passage of the modern Civil Rights Act “ended [legal] segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.” The Civil Rights Act “is considered one of the crowning legislative achievements of the civil rights movement.”<sup>2</sup>

Although this year’s national commemorations of Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 are critical milestones worthy of extended comment, I do not focus on them here this morning. Rather, I focus on a major principal and virtue that stood in powerful relation to the crucible of Freedom Summer and the democratic hope of the Civil Rights Act. The principal and virtue I speak of here, this morning, is the simple-yet-not-so-simple four-letter word “Love.”

My focus on “Love” expresses a major aim of baccalaureate services; namely, “to touch upon the moral and spiritual roots of the educational process and encourage commitment to a more just world.”<sup>3</sup> To this end, I offer my remarks on love this morning straight from the heart, hoping that, by the end, none of you will think that I have lost my mind. Those of you who have sat for, or who have visited, my classes while at Earlham College know that a critical aspect of my pedagogy (my art of teaching) is to bring the voices, passion, and street knowledge of ordinary, everyday, making-a-way-out-of-no-way-people into the sacred and sanitized halls of academia. Such voice honors the truths that my beautifully Black mother, and many of her I-gots-the-blues-but-I’m-still-standing-here-goddammit friends, taught me. The language of love (taught to me by my mother) is a resilient love, which she wrapped around her child, a descendent of Virginia and South Carolina slaves, from birth. A slave descendent who now speaks of love to a 2014 class of students representing the world over.

The language of love signals a complicated, subtle, sublime, and contested grammar expressive of human strivings in the name of individual personality, communal belonging, national and international strivings for justice, and spiritual ascension. I more than suspect that, for better or worse (and all points in between) the grammar of “love” has been a constant moral, spiritual, and/or political companion at the heart of your educational process. As already mentioned, I saw the banners flying from Carpenter and Earlham Halls expressing “heart,” that is, love for workers. And I speak to you this morning from a piece of college ground that has bordered what we know of as the “the heart” of our campus since around the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> And I know that the grammar of love, as expressed in the human struggle for meaning, purpose, respect, justice, intimate companionship, and dignity has been an integral part of your social media lives here at the College. When I see some of the posts on Earlham Anonymous, Earlham Confidential, and Earlham Compliments, I know (in the words of one of my students who sits among you here today) that “the struggle is real.” The struggle has not been just out there someplace in the world; the struggle has lived at the very heart of your many intersecting experiences right here at the College.

Some of you have worked for justice through your Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions efforts. Some of you are Students for Peace and Justice in Palestine. Others of you have gone all-out to advocate for the politics of Veganism. Some of you have committed yourselves to Action Against Sexual Violence. Still others of you have demonstrated active concern for a more equitable

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<sup>2</sup> History Channel Online: <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-act>. Accessed April 30, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Swarthmore College: <http://www.swarthmore.edu/commencement.xml>. Accessed May 1, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> A fact I learned from my esteemed colleague and historian, Professor Tom Hamm.

distribution of racial, gender and class representation and power across the institution's offices, departments and programs. And more than a couple of you have found a sense of solidarity and belonging while participating in Dance Alloy or running around in the woods at something called the Hash. Just as importantly, and this too must be acknowledged, many of you have taken political and moral stands against numerous aspects of the efforts I have just mentioned here.

A basic and intractable truth in all of your efforts, no matter what views you hold, or commitments you endorse, is that the realities of love on this campus and in this world can bring you together to celebrate a love for life; but it can also really kick you in the ass. Indeed the human yearning for love (in all of its complex manifestations) can be as funky as hell. This is so because the very fact of the existence of a social and cultural grammar called love reveals an unfortunate bone-deep truth concerning human associations in general, an unfortunate truth that we humans constantly resist with the power of love. And that truth is this: no other creatures on earth engage in intra-species violence and other forms of harm as routinely, intensely, and wantonly as do we human beings. We humans consistently display a will-to-power that far exceeds our basic need to survive and flourish comfortably.

This basic fact of associational human life is frequently on display in everything from domestic violence, petty robbery, rape, and murder, to the willful neglect of the most basic survival needs of the world's most vulnerable persons, to the monstrous narratives of civil war and genocide that routinely accompany human history. But even in the midst of all the major and minor challenges that do and will accompany your own lives within human history, the power of love against the encroachments of loveless alienation and destruction will seek to find a way to break through to a new and better place, where justice, grace and mercy dance out loud.

When you look carefully at the world, you will notice that even when the justice, grace and mercy of love becomes battered and bruised beyond recognition, the hope of new life-affirming Love comes into world. Even when love appears to be all but dead and buried, out of the ground of hope we still find ways to celebrate life: we dance, make love, sing and shout, we think and reason and imagine a human present and future bound by love, even if by a thread.

Indeed, the world we live in yearns for, and constantly demonstrates, the powerful resiliency of love. And I maintain that all of you represent the resiliency of love for which the world yearns. The world yearns for the love of each and every one of you as you depart from Earlham College and go on to make contributions to the world's stability and flourishing. The world yearns for the beautiful families many of you will extend out into the future; the world yearns for your future vocations and professions that will signal the best of love in the world; and the world yearns for your contributions (both great and small) to true and sustainable justice.

I mentioned earlier just a few of the justice initiatives that have involved the active participation of many of you over your years at Earlham. I suggest that much of your advocacy and commitment constitutes a pursuit and embodiment of love. When at your best, you have demonstrated the ways in which the intellectual life of the mind finds expression in the cause of human security, belonging, and acknowledgments of dignity. My hope is that you will carry these expressions of love, present in both your minds and hearts, forward into a world that is yearning for your love.

Never, ever, forget that the promise of love must actively engage with the realities of our times. Whether your own grammar of love finds its ultimate sources in the spiritual and intellectual roots of religion or theology, or post-colonial and critical theories, or adherence to some social or hard scientific method, or the creative imaginations of the visual, performing or theatrical arts, or whatever other earth-bound ideas you give your allegiance to, do know that the on-the-ground-in-temporal-time realities of the world will be yearning for your love. It will be especially important to remember that the pursuit of love in the world will sometimes be funky. That is to say, sometimes the pursuit of love will smell like booty butt, as it kicks your metaphorical ass. In a world yearning for your love, there is sometimes going to be a physical and moral stench that accompanies our human associations.

So as you go forth Class of 2014, ask yourselves two basic human questions: “What does (sometimes funky) love require?” and “How might the power of (sometimes funky) love be summoned to confront not only that which is problematic with the world, but also that which is catastrophic?”<sup>5</sup> I, of course, do not have the ultimate answers to these questions, because such questions yield answers that are always in a state of becoming. But I do know this Class of 2014:

Alongside the dignity and majesty with which people wash the blood from the bodies of the dead, killed in the line of human conflict, there is a funky-up love-problem that needs your confrontation. I know that when you look into the eyes of parents who must bury their children at the dawn of their young lives because of malnutrition, lack of water, substandard medical care, or bloody conflict initiated by adults, you will know there is a funky-up love-problem somewhere in need of solutions that some of you will, no doubt, help fashion. When you have to work so hard to convince young Black men in the United States about the value of their lives in a “mass-incarceration” and “stand your ground” nation that extends far beyond the state of Florida; a nation where so many view young Black men and boys as nigger-shit who do nothing but listen to “rap-crap,” you know there must be a funky-up love-problem somewhere that needs your attention. When you kneel face-down (in cyberspace) at the corporate alters of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and pledge your theological allegiance at the shrines of hedonistic consumerism and just-me-ism, as if these were the highest measures of what it means to be human, you know there is, somewhere, a funky-up love-problem in need of your action. When you can feel it, in your gut, the gross indignities of a world-wide slave trade that ensnares predominately (but not exclusively) women and girls in numbers far too numerous to count, you know there is a funky-up love-problem somewhere that yearns for your (funky) attention, in the service of a love called justice. Indeed, when it comes to the bounds of Love and justice, the Nigerian human rights advocate Leo Igwe is right to say, “justice is the first condition of humanity. [It is] imperative for human existence and coexistence.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> An idea often presented in public by the American philosopher Cornel West when speaking of that which just be tracked by a prophetic witness: “Wrestling with the catastrophic” or “Attentiveness to the catastrophic” and not just the problematic.

<sup>6</sup> See Leo Igwe “Humanism and the Quest for Justice in Africa” (February 8, 2010), in *Butterflies & Wheels* Online. <http://www.butterfliesandwheels.org/2010/humanism-and-the-quest-for-justice-in-africa/> Accessed May 8, 2014.

As you go forward into a world yearning for your (sometimes funky) love; that is to say, a sometimes tear-soaked-pissed-off-yet-refusing-to-give-up-on-one-another-or-the-world-kind-of-love, take the complicated lessons you have learned here at Earlham College with you. Make sure that you go forward with a wise mixture of toughness, gentleness, joy, courage, prudence, temperance, and mercy. Do know that anywhere and everywhere you go to speak truth to power, power is going to talk back, and sometimes even bust you in the mouth. Be ready for that. It is important that you continue to speak your truths even as you gear up to have them contested and challenged by others—and sometimes rightly so.

Remember, too, that Love, as a complex and subtle grammar of profound human interconnectedness and belonging, “cannot lie dormant: It clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; It comforts the sorrowful; It shelters the destitute; it binds up that which wounded; It fights poverty, seeks justice, [respects and preserves the natural world] and foretells peace.”<sup>7</sup> Such Love must never be “an escape into the safe heights of pure ideas”; Real Love, Real Funky Love, “is an entry into the need[s] of the present, sharing in its suffering, its activity, and its hope.”<sup>8</sup>

And just one more thing Class of 2014, as you go forward from this day, remember the College you leave behind. I know that for some of you this will require a whole lot of the very funky love of which I have spoken. For we are not, and can never be, a perfect institution of unspoiled goodness.

But my hope, nonetheless, is that for the people who sit behind me who have played important roles in your training, and for the workers and many others out there among you who sit and stand and have participated in your strivings here at the College, that the grace of your prayers for us might find a way back to us from wherever you go in this world. If you are not inclined to prayer, maybe even a small measure of your good thoughts will do as the College moves forward to training future generations who like you will enter into a world yearning for their (sometimes funky) love.

Peace, Love, and much Respect to all of you. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted (with some paraphrasing and addition) from the following sources: Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. C. J. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 307 and Allen Boesak in Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Influence: Toward an Economy of Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 72. Original Boesak source, “God van de armen” [“God of the Poor”], in *Met de Moed der Hoop, Opstellen Aangeboden aan dr. C. F. Beyers Naudé* [*Encouraged by Hope: Essays Dedicated to Dr. C. F. Beyers Naudé*] (Baarn: Bosch, Baarn en Keuning, 1985), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted (with some paraphrasing and addition) from Eberhad Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, translation from the German, John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 100.