

Earlham

COLLEGE

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“A (lacixodaraP) World of Fire & Peace”

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...

For those of us
who are imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
This instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were not meant to survive.

“A Litany for Survival”¹ by the remarkable Black poet,
Audre Lorde (1934–1992)

1 Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 255–256.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you who are here this morning to celebrate (this entire day) the graduating class of 2016. I welcome the College's Board of Trustees, my faculty colleagues, and all administrative and support staff who are present here this morning. I extend, as well, a special note of appreciation to the many workers whose various labors over many years ensures all of us the gift of everyday life at the college. Upon this ground I thank the workers who each day prepare the food that feed the bodies, minds and spirits of the Earlham Community. Thank you for washing the dishes and windows, tending the grounds, opening locked doors, changing the light bulbs, emptying the trash, and cleaning the bathrooms of our collective lives here at the college.

Of course, I also wish to extend a very, very special welcome to the many parents, siblings, extended family members, 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. More than anyone, you know well the kinds of struggles and sacrifices that have made it possible for this class of over 200 graduates to sit before us today. Coming from both near and far, you have endured the contingencies of life that are persistently present in this world. From all over the world you have supported and cared and cried and hoped for this class of 2016. You are testimonies to a resiliency that celebrates life and continuously hopes for the best in our younger generations.

And as for you, the class of 2016, I am happy to see that so many of you could make it here this morning, because I know that over the past week or so the graduation party has already begun. I hope that you are taking well-earned pride in having completed your college education, while avoiding getting too carried away with getting Turnt Up, Crunk, Smashed, Hotboxed, Grad-Hashed, or otherwise too lit the hell up to be coherent here this morning, or (perhaps) too focused on Beyoncé's "Lemonade," which has so many people around the world searching for "Becky with the good hair."

But more seriously class of 2016, not only have many of you enjoyed making new friendships, laughing and singing and loving and dancing and praying and celebrating the art and the science of life, you have also grown in your commitments to fashioning a better world by way of dedicated intersectional study across the liberal arts disciplines. Your work both inside and outside the classroom has interfaced with many of the most intractable challenges the world has known: many of you have studied and engaged issues as far afield, yet inextricably connected, as spiritual doubt and warfare, police murders, poverty, mass incarceration, drone strikes, unjust trade policies and practices, obsessive civil surveillance, decrepit schools, unemployment, political xenophobia and demagoguery, land occupation, forced migrations, the corporate commodification of human life, medical apartheid, ecological catastrophe, lynching trees, rape camps, torture cells, and the diamond-studded lives of plutocrats, whose lives of wealth and power have been formed by the weight of the world. Around such concerns and more, you have been a class of intellect, resiliency and hope; and so we now embrace you with encouragement for a flourishing future ahead as you now prepare to depart from us.

As you have worked to complete your studies, you have been an expressive example of what I am calling this morning "A (lacixodaraP) World of Fire and Peace." Indeed a number of you have participated in the local, national, transnational, and global fires of student protest by supporting causes like Earlham Students of Color Against Racism; Action Against Sexual Violence; Students for a Free Tibet; Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions; and Students for Peace and Justice in Palestine.

Tied to some of your justice advocacy, a good number of you (like many of your college and university peers around the country and world) have gotten up surprisingly early on some weekday mornings to go marching across campus to (as you say) “shut shit down” in the service of “having nothing to lose but [your] chains.” Others of you have responded to the fires of student protest with serious concern, anger, scorn, questioning and bewilderment about the effectiveness and/or necessity of addressing grievances in such a manner. Some even believe that the provocative rise of student protests sweeping the country and world along intersectional racial, gendered, ethnic, class, and pedagogical lines undermine the very institutional and social change protesters want to achieve, whether it be at Earlham College, the University of Missouri, Yale, Princeton, Oxford, Lagos, Cairo, Tokyo, or anywhere else.

Yet, whatever one feels about the merits or demerits of your shouts of protest, your voices (in unison with those around the country and world) have represented the cries and the strife of the unheard. Students who speak and shut with tongues of fire in the service of a just peace will often be resisted by those of us with central authority, powered by a destructive “peaceableness,” which lies behind the veil of willful amnesia and non-inclusive privilege.

In addition to the perceptual divide between confrontational student protesters, and those opposed to their tactics (whatever the merits of the cause may be), many of you have managed to reach this graduation day with the aid of a third way, with the aid of what I will call here the wearing of the subaltern mask. This subaltern mask is the same mask that has been routinely worn by many who have lived in the transgressive generations that came and struggled before you. The power of the mask is paradoxical in that it “peaceably” places the burdens of the unheard directly in front those with great power, even as the mask remains invisible from plain view. What I am saying is that you will find in this world that there is a kind of false peace that leads to the wearing of masks that sustains a people’s paradoxical survival and sanity in the *face* of persistent oppressive power:

The great Black American poet, novelist and playwright Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872–1906) from near-by Dayton, OH, spoke this truth plainly when he wrote in 1896, “We Wear the Mask.”)

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, oh great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!²

² Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, editors. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.), 918.

Dunbar's, appeal to the "oh Great Christ" happens to speak to the distinctively Christian God who offers an oppressed people comfort as well as a difficult, wisdom-laced, politics of survival as they lament, protest and celebrate the many complex and subtle paradoxes of human life. But Christian or not, there are some central features to the paradoxes of history that make visits upon every mature human life there ever was. Indeed, there are numerous paradoxical observations that must humble us all—be we protesters, central authorities, mask wearers, or (as is sometimes the case) some combination of these: In everything we do, we are always paradoxically aware and unaware; we are simultaneously strong and weak; we are both bound and free; we often lack vision for the future, yet we are far-seeing in the present; we have vast knowledge, yet we frequently lack knowledge; we are creative while being destructive and destructive while being creative; therefore even the most righteous and self-righteous among us must continually remain vigilantly humbled by the reality that we humans, through all of time and in our frailty, have had a very difficult time purging even our most creative moral achievements of an unfortunate will-to-power over others.³

Class of 2016, going forward you (and we) all must be humbled by this basic fact of human associational life, even as we seek to destroy the chains of this world by rightly embracing the enduring truth spoken in 1857 out of the mouth of a 19th century former Black slave turned towering abolitionist named Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are [people] who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.⁴

As a graduating class of individuals and collectives committed to a comprehensive and persistent striving toward justice and peace, you know well that your struggles are tied to wider struggles for dignity and freedom in this country and transnationally across the globe. In this particular nation, where most people profess to be Christian, the fire and peace of paradox can be seen in a most challenging and difficult proclamation offered by Jesus Christ to be modeled by Christians living in the temporal world. I speak here of the divine call to enemy love:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of [God] in heaven. [God] causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly [God] is perfect."
(Matthew 5:43-48)

This trajectory for dealing paradoxically and provocatively with the challenges of the world is by no means limited to a Christian politics and confession of enemy love. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), in her classic text, *The Human Condition*, understands that it is none other than the miracle of *action* that interferes with the universal law that speaks to humanity's greatest anxiety and fear, namely, *mortality*, or our *finite impermanence*, or (to put it plainly) *death*.

3 These paradoxical observations are drawn from, Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume I Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, 181 and, more broadly, all of Chapter VII, "Man as Sinner," 178–240.

4 Frederick Douglass, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies: An Address Delivered in Canandaigua, On 3 August 1857," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 3 1855–63*, John W. Blassingame, editor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1885), 204.

Arendt argues that “The life span of [human beings] running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that [we humans], though we must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”⁵ Arendt noted that action, “is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of [human beings]...”⁶ The miracle of action is here defined as the human capacity, *beyond work and labor*, which initiates the radically new, the unanticipated, the unexpected, and that which is unconditioned by the laws of cause and effect.

She suggests that it is “by nature,” that is to say, absent “some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside action’s own reach,” that the moral precepts of *forgiveness* and *promise* enter into public and political practice.⁷ Interestingly, Arendt (though not a Christian) links the miracle of action to “Jesus of Nazareth...who [she argues] must have known very well [the power and importance of action] when he likened the power to forgive to the more general power of performing miracles, putting both [*forgiveness* and *miracles*] on the same level and within the reach of [human beings].”⁸

In what is for me one of the most profoundly plain observations in the history of moral philosophy, Arendt contends that, “The miracle that saves the world, [i.e.,] the realm of human affairs from its normal, ‘natural,’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.”⁹

Getting back to the language of everyone folk, what this means for you Class of 2016, is that the miracle of “glad tidings” that saves the world from its natural ruin is the fact that a child like each and every one of you has been “born unto us,” into this world.¹⁰ Your action in a paradoxical world of fire and peace will mean that even Arendt’s view of things will need to be tempered with the reality that most persons born into this world will end up sowing complicated mixers of fire that illuminates and warms human life as well as fire that fosters alienation, neglect and destruction. From the same child born unto this world may emerge a moral peace soaked with mercy, love and justice as well as a corrupt “peace” grounded in greed, hatred, and lovelessness. You must remain forever vigilant about noticing when the instruments and strategies of today’s redemption transform to become the chains of tomorrow’s enslavement, as the political realist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once noted.¹¹

Indeed, between the cradle and the grave you will be dogged by such paradoxical challenges as you work to live out the miracle of action, the miracles of justice and peace, of enemy love, of forgiveness, of human promise while relentlessly fighting against the complex and subtle tentacles of injustice and a bogus (or deceitful) peace.

So when I think of the call to a better envisioning and embodiment of reconciling miracles as applied to today’s world of *mass protest and strife*, I see a puzzling world of fire and peace as I struggle to understand how we (no matter our religious, scientific, theoretical, modern, post-modern, structuralist, post-structuralist, or deconstructive philosophies or traditions or non-traditions) ought to think about George Zimmerman (the killer of Trayvon Martin); Michael David Dunn (the killer of Jordan Davis); Darren Wilson (the killer of Michael Brown), Theodore Wafer (the killer of Renisha McBride); Peter Liang (the killer of Akia Gurley); Timothy Loehmann (the killer of Timar Rice); Daniel Pantaleo (the killer of Eric Garner); Michael Slager (the killer of Walter Scott); Sean Williams

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 246.

6 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.

7 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.

8 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

9 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

10 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246–247.

11 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 231, *passim*.

(the killer of John Crawford III); Baltimore Police (the killers of Freddie Gray); Ray Tensing (the killer of Sam Du Bose); Nouman Raja (the killer of Corey Jones); Jason Van Dyke (the killer of Laquan McDonald); we remember here too Sandra Bland's death in a Texas jail; Michelle Cusseaux (shot through the heart after a police officer busted into her house to take her to a mental health facility as she stood with a hammer perhaps confused, frightened, defiant); Marlene Pinnock (filmed on the side of the road being beaten in the face full-force by a state patrolman); Black teenage girls man-handled by grown White male police officers and school "safety officers"; the many Black women raped and battered by Oklahoma City Police Department officer Daniel Holtzclaw, and Dylan Roof (the killer of the Mother Emmanuel Nine after a Bible study that, in the name of the Love of Christ, welcomed in a stranger who would then turn and shoot them to death).

In the context of a counter-cultural vision of non-violent justice, peace, love and hope, I have also been contemplating student life and education on this campus in the context of the retaliatory vengeful violence that often accompanies the long entrenched memories of those who continue to be systemically and hegemonically wronged. Taking African Americans as a case in point, the paradoxical miracle of action, will mean not only confronting the White/European-American supremacies that haunt our historical memories and material present, we (like so many others) must confront some of our own understandable, and all-too-human blood-thirst for revenge or retribution, as tragically expressed in the executions of New York City police officers Wenjian Lu and Rafael Ramos (by Ismaaiyl Brinsley), and the White Texas cop Darren Goforth, who was shot 15 times in the head and back by Shannon Miles, and the dozens upon dozens of Black males struck down on the streets each day in fits of Cain on Able, brother on brother, violence forged by persistent poverty, despair, and nihilism. Any miracle of action that might save the world cannot turn its back, or throw its hands up, on any of this.

And although I have just given examples of the blood-soaked fountains of rage that are part-and-parcel of living in the United States, persons all over the world, even as we celebrate here today, bear the heavy burden of forging miracles of active promise in fiery times such as these.

Indeed there is a fire that burns for the miracle of love and hope *in action* every time a suicide bomber ignites a vest in a public place; every time a drone strike wipes away the innocent along with a combatant; every time a transgressive body lies prone on the streets or hangs from a jail cell; every time the bodies of women and girls endure heightened risks of terror in domains as different as a house party on a Friday night or a war zone anywhere on the planet earth; every time the body and soul of a child gets mangled in the grotesque transition from innocence to a child-soldier and human-shield; and **even** every time the fires of vengeance pumps a bullet into the skulls of persons marked as the oppressors.

Class of 2016, your standing and marching and writing and praying and signing and shouting and loving and critical self-examinations alongside those who reside on the underside of history, signals the risks of association that might require all of you (and all of us) getting our easy convictions about justice, reconciliation, peace and linguistic decorum fucked-up for the sake of human dignity.

Your pursuits of human dignity in whatever future you chose to pursue will (in all probability) require from you a difficult, funky, smelly, pissed off and regurgitated type of love that must be purified with a hold-up-not-so-fast, always-in-a-state-of-becoming, pursuit of care, kindness, tenderness, respect and persistent hope for one's self and one's neighbors: individually, communally, *and* transnationally across vast institutions and nations...

I say all this in the context of having had enough of you give the honor of speaking this morning to a Black professor among you, which itself represents a mighty paradox of fire and peace. I am reminded of this truth as I, the college, and the Richmond community, endures the routine sight of a pickup truck that carries, not one, but two Confederate Battle Flags past this campus several times per week. This reality marks a troubled history, which attempts to render your speaker this morning a New York City/South Bronx nigger with a Ph.D. In so much as many of you have stood side-by-side, hand-in-hand, against such a heritage of terror and hate (as presented in various ways all over this world), I offer the following final words as you soon depart from us:

CONCLUSION

The road to a true, sustainable, and just peace will be paved with the paradoxical fires of both destruction and renewal. *And in the context of this most for-real truth, hope must be the last thing to die.* Not only do I ask that you not simply settle for the numbness and emptiness and brutality of a “peace” that grounds itself in various forms of alienation and estrangement devoid of justice, I ask most fiercely that you do not (yourselves) become consumed by the fires of hatred and lovelessness no matter your adversary. I ask that you embrace the possibility of a justice, a hope, a love that affirms life without vengeance and crippling, unrelenting, hatred, scorn and vindictiveness.

If you end up becoming a member of any central authority of this world, commit yourself to always doing the hard work of examining the obstacles to justice and peace that your own silence, “well-meaning” concern, and collusions might foster. Indeed, tend to the all too convenient amnesia and safety of a false peace clothed in privilege and entitlement, and burning with the invisible flames of quietism and smug contentment, which scorches the collective body, soul and spirit.

Don’t miss out on opportunities to be brave, to have courage, to persevere, to accept that things will not always be comfortable on the journey to a better hope, which often prevails when some of you (who can) risk not being the always-conforming “safe” ones; but, instead, taking off your masks to be honest while at the same time refusing, too easily, to give up on the promise of others or yourselves.

Peace and Love to all of you, class of 2016; go forward into your future with both a heart on fire for justice and a heart determined to know a wise, promising and reconciling peace... Drip not with vengeance, hatred and scorn, but be soaked with audacious hope for better human associations of sublime beauty. For, perhaps, the sentiment of the great Black Genius James Baldwin was right:

We can all be beautiful
Such a miracle is the least that one could ask for