

Earlham College
Baccalaureate Address
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Who Are You Class of 2020?: An Open Letter Concerning Holding Fast & Moving Forward In A
Viral Time...And Beyond

Hello Earlham College Class of 2020, James Logan here. I am speaking to you from my office in Carpenter Hall. I'd like to share an open letter I have written to all of you, a letter I hope will keep you encouraged to press on in our current virus-tainted world, a world which now compels us to stay at considerable distance from the more routine face-to-face social gatherings of our daily lives.

I begin by thanking you for the honor of this invitation to address you. Leilani and Olivia, I thank you from the bottom of my heart and soul for the wonderful introduction, which I consider to be a true gift from both of you. I also wish to acknowledge the virtual presence of the College's Board of Trustees, Alumni, as well as my faculty and staff colleagues who have been teachers and learners right alongside all of you seniors who are cyber-gathered here with us today.

I wish to extend a very special note of appreciation and thanks as well to the many workers who labor to prepare and cater the meals that feed the bodies, minds and spirits of the Earlham College community. I thank those (many of whom I may not know by name) for washing the windows, tending the grounds, changing the light bulbs, emptying the trash, and cleaning both the classrooms and bathrooms of our collective lives. Too often you are the ones rendered invisible; yet you are the wonderful frontline people in whom we might experience the humble-yet-powerful root-and-branch of the human spirit among us. You are the very kinds of people who raised me to adulthood in the South Bronx.

Of course, I also wish to extend a very, very special welcome to the many parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family members, and friends, who have given so very much of themselves and their resources to make college completion a reality for those of you who are graduating. Many of you are celebrating your seniors from continents a world away. More than anyone, you know well the kinds of struggles and sacrifices that have made it possible for the members of this senior class to succeed.

So again, with this open letter, I extend a virtual welcome to all who are gathered with us from around the world to celebrate this Class of 2020. Under the current pandemic conditions, this is truly a celebration of significant achievement.

In a Baccalaureate Address to seniors back in May of 2008, I noted that graduating seniors are often told that they will be leaving college to—only now—enter into the “real world.” Of course, this often-expressed sentiment (or some version of it) supposes that while you have been doing the academic work and enjoying the comparative luxury of being college students, “you have somehow been shielded from the contingencies, the complexities, the tragedies, and the promises of the ‘real world.’”¹ As the entire human race now groans under the weight of a global pandemic, I would like to suggest to you, Class of 2020, “that the divide between the college life and the society and world of which the college life is a part is not quite as expansive as some might think.” As I suggested back in 2008, “This is so because life’s contingencies, complexities, tragedies, and promises make visits upon every human being no matter where we are. Our common human desires for safety, security, and protection, for associations with and belonging to something that give purpose and meaning to life, and our desire to be valued and respected by others are real life concerns anywhere and everywhere.”²

Indeed, your Class of 2020 (like every other graduating class around the country, and around the world) has had its sense of safety, security, and protection challenged by a most devastating circumstance, a novel coronavirus pandemic. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually, you have already (for several weeks) been living into an unprecedented world of routine quarantine and mass physical social isolation. Indeed, as this spring semester was suddenly altered without much warning, we have all found that emergency online/remote learning, as well as emergency online/remote teaching, under these current pandemic conditions present serious challenges that lie beyond the strictly academic. These include the exacerbation of sexist, gender-based, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, xenophobic, ableist, and ageist challenges that were already present in the lives of students, instructors, families, communities, nations, and continents the world over long before the current pandemic. Indeed, this COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the already preexisting social pathogens that have plagued human history since the dawn of time.

Around the globe, COVID-19 has shaken loose our common human anxieties and fears about death, and the fragility and meaning of our lives. Living on quarantine from routine face-to-face social gatherings, the world now resides alongside a death-threatening and death-dealing virus that tempts us to abandon our best, most courageous, most generous, and most beautiful selves. In the midst of our life-altering concerns about this ubiquitous coronavirus, we are tempted to turn our lives over the ravages of crippling anxiety, fear, suffering, and loathing, all of which tempt us to seek refuge in the arms of dread, despair, and nihilism.

This novel coronavirus, one that has not been seen before, ravages not only those with compromised immune systems, but also front-line workers and other vulnerable people of the world who live compromised and dangerous lives of sacrifice on the front lines of human courage, delivering life-sustaining provisions to all of us.

I speak here of those essential workers who deliver emergency services on the front lines of our physical health, mental health, and security concerns; those essential workers who drive delivery trucks, or who crowd onto over-crowded buses and trains to deliver, stock, and sell food, as well as

¹ James Logan, “A (Not So) Simple Word of (Audacious) Hope,” *Earlham College Baccalaureate Address*, May 3, 2008, 1.

² James Logan, “A (Not So) Simple Word of (Audacious) Hope,” 1.

provide the other necessities of human life to the masses. Indeed, there now lies before us a general specter of pandemic concern that now haunts the known world.

Beloved Class of 2020, how you and we struggle and care and work with one another through all this will say much about what kind of people we *all* are, the world over. Our dispositions of collective human character in a time such as this will say much, and teach much, to future generations about what kinds of people inhabited the planet earth during this 21st century. For sure, there is no way around dealing with increased levels of premature death when life and history becomes infected in such an unprecedented way. So, like everyone else on the planet earth Class of 2020, you will need to contend with, and work through, suffering and death even as you continued to show the future that you never, ever, gave up on the beauty and wonder of life.

You will play a significant role in setting an example, in the present, for future generations. So, be inspired right now to set outstanding, life-affirming, examples as you move through the world to become the elders of tomorrow. Please remember that the great public intellectual and literary genius James Baldwin was right when he said: “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”³ What is it that you (in the present) will leave future generations to (*actually*) imitate Class of 2020? Please don’t wait until middle age and beyond to think about this, to act on this call to be wonderful, to be daring, to be gracious, to be magnificent, to live the spirit of love out loud in this time of pandemic crisis, and beyond.

So I ask the question Earlham College Senior Class of 2020, who are you?: holding fast to the bonds of enduring friendships, with outstanding academic and creative preparation across all the liberal arts disciplines while offering up thousands upon thousands of hours of community service around the world, you are the young ones who will strive to make the world feel less alone, to help it persevere against considerable odds.

Who are you Earlham Class of 2020? Alongside other classmates, you are the ones who have faced challenge together, danced together, made music and sang together, studied together, organized mutual aid together, and some of you even marched out to the Hash together to get your swerve on. Both on campus and off, you have done what the living Civil Rights icon John Lewis has often suggested young people should do: you have gotten into trouble, sometimes good trouble, some necessary trouble... the kind of trouble that moves the world forward, the kind of trouble that signals to the world that you love justice, that you love human dignity, that you are willing to take risks for the sake of those in this world often considered the least of these as they reside on the underside of history, like those darkly-hued enslaved Africans of the past whom the great and towering Toni Morrison lamented as “trespassers among the human race.”⁴

Who are you Class of 2020? You have been a steadfast comfort in one another's lives when times were hardest, and now you depart from us to join millions of other young people around the world to be the smiles, the laughter, and the joy of the world on the most-dreary and love-deprived days.

Who are you Class of 2020? You are the ones who came to Earlham and lived (out loud) a hunger for improving the world, a world that needs your life-affirming passion, intellect, sense of aesthetic

³ James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown,” in James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 208.

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Press, 2004), 148.

beauty, your spiritual power and love, your audacious resolve to make the world more delightfully human in the service of a just mercy that spans the entire planet...

Who are you? From all over this country and all over this world you arrived at this place, Earlham College, a Quaker institution rooted in pedagogies meant to respond to the world's toughest, most intractable, questions from many perspectives. You brought to us a wonderful abundance of experiences, voices, and identities. And now you move forward to extend audacious hope and a just peace to a planet too often hemorrhaging from war, hungry, poverty, environmental calamity, disease, gender-based violence, mass incarceration, economic exploitation, and associated moral decay.

Earlham Class of 2020, you must continue to hold fast and persevere against intellectual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and pessimistic despair, for as you know, the world will not always be an easy place. But you are prepared for that! Neither has college always been easy. A college education that challenges the mind, heart, and spirit like Earlham College could not help but cultivate in you an appreciation for tough questions concerning the most daunting and intersecting dilemmas of the human condition. But not only that, what college has done for you, if Earlham has done its part well-enough, is to cultivate that which is more just, more sublime, more superbly human inside each of you in the service of changing the world for the better. And speaking of change, my hope is that Earlham has instilled and reinforced in you an additional word of wisdom from the great James Baldwin, who once said: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."⁵

Please remember that human struggle and triumph live in the same body, in the same house. And as such, we learn from (and can be let down by) both the atheist and the priest, the professor and the prisoner, the old and the young, the sage and the idiot... for they may well live inside the same body, the same house...so let humility, hope, love, and mercy endure in each of you. Between the-rock-a-the-hard-place of life stay inspired to grow that which is lovely in the world, for the sake of the world. Drawing upon the audaciously hopeful lyrics of the song "Hey Hey Hey," by Michael Franti & Spearhead, remember this

From the tops of the buildings to the streets below
From the Wall Street banks to the empty homes
Between the lines of the people standing all in a row
There's a crack in the gutter where a flower grows...⁶

So, in prudent defiance of the pandemic circumstance in which we find ourselves, the time will again come when we can (routinely) dance and blossom together in wonderful physical proximity to one another at distances of less than six feet. We will once again pray and hope side-by-side with one another, and live again ever closer to what is best in all of us—soul-to-soul, spirit-to-spirit, heart-to-beating-heart.

⁵ James Baldwin, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," *New York Times* (January 14, 1962), 38.

⁶ Michael Franti & Spearhead, *The Sound of Sunshine* (Album), "Hey Hey Hey" (Song Title): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFPobQ-ewiA>

This unique COVID-19 pandemic is indeed a threat to human intimacy, to kindness, to tenderness, to our embrace of one another at home, at work, at school, and at all other intersections of human life and living. But, we must not let this global pandemic tear at the communal and social fabric of human worth and dignity, even from a distance.

Somehow (with all of your varied talents Class of 2020) you must create and construct ways through the difficulties of our present time, you must partner with the world in the building of life-affirming families, friendships, communities, institutions, civic organizations, governments, and nations. Remember that it was the looming threat of an emerging pandemic that prompted you to plan and hold a mini graduation back in March... because, not just intellectually, but also instinctively, passionately, lovingly, you understood the binding force of true humanity to be inextricably tied to the face-to-face celebration of one another, as the beating of human hearts in-person shoulder-to-shoulder...sipping tea together, attending class together, doing research together, dinning together, dancing, singing, smiling, shedding tears, embracing laughter, and achieving together...

With that graduation ceremony you were mounting a risky-yet-love-inspired resistance to a pandemic virus, the malice of which alienates us from the most awe-inspiring goodness of human closeness... You were motivated (with a day's notice) to get on the front lines against the oppression and brutality of an unseen microscopic menace that was gathering all around us, and all around the world...

Certainly, you were understanding that (here in the present) we are more necessary to one another than ever. I imagine that with the gathering of so many of you at that mini-graduation, you were channeling the distinctiveness of an Earlham College education in this world. Undeniably during your years at Earlham, the distinctiveness of your education could be felt every time you walked to Stout Meeting House past the statue of Mary Dyer, a colonial American Quaker woman who was hung by the neck till dead in 1660 on account of her life-affirming religious free-thinking and support for the socially dispossessed. The distinctiveness of your time at Earlham lies in the spirit of a history that includes the time Martin Luther King, Jr., whose powerful testimony and witness of social justice and love, graced the same Stout Meeting House back in 1959.

The special liberal arts legacy of which you are a part Class of 2020 can be comprehended in the memory of Edward and Newton Uyesugi, who along with other Japanese Americans escaped confinement in U.S. internment camps by way of invitations to enroll at Earlham College during the unspeakable terror and horror of World War II. And, furthermore class of 2020, the distinctiveness of who you are has been passed down to you through the legacy of Earlham's 1958 Alumna, Margaret Hamilton, who four years ago (in 2016) received from President Barak Obama the highest civilian honor in the United States, the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her scientific contributions to on-board flight software for NASA's Apollo and Skylab missions and the Space Shuttle. **In** all of these people (and more) you get a glimpse of generations past who worked to improve the world for a future that some of them would never live to see for themselves.

So, now in this time of unprecedented challenge in your own lives Class of 2020, there will be a great existential reckoning. While actively engaging the world, holding fast in the light, I hope that each and every member of the senior class will know that in times of greatest trouble there is a cry for mutual human embrace. And in such times we recognize that which is most paradoxically telling about the human condition: namely, that we human beings are capable of great strength, but also great weakness; of being sublimely aware, as well as destructively unaware with one another; of both

a lack of understanding about the future, as well as possessing great creative energy and vision for the future.⁷ You, too, graduating seniors, can be capable of inflicting considerable harm upon the world, as well as a wonderfully blessed healing. So, who do you want to be given the many paradoxes and ironies that will make visit upon you in this current viral time, and beyond? I hope you will deal as lovely as you can with the world. Let not your mouths be like, speak like, an open grave to one another, nor your lips dripping with poisoned/cruel vindictiveness for the world, nor your actions be devoid of human compassion and a thirst for sustainable justice in the face of pandemic and hegemonic disorder.⁸

And so, I ask again once more Earlham College Class of 2020, Who are you? I hope that you are the ones who will move forward well in this viral time of both uncertainty and promise. I also hope you find it in your spirits to actively support the life and flourishing of this College, for the sake of this learning community, for the promise of our continued strivings to build a diverse, equitable, and inclusively varied liberal arts peoplehood to serve the world.

During this viral pandemic and beyond Class of 2020, I pray and hope that you, with the power of *the* thunder, the wonder of the sun, and the humility of amazing grace, continue to strive for integrity, to strive for peace & justice, to strive for respect of persons, for simplicity and community, while being human...all too human. May your life's work be a wise balance of speaking boldly-yet-gently, and acting justly-yet-humbly in the world. May you always refuse to give up on human history in the natural world. May candid truth-telling, righteousness, mercy, and I dare say love, abide with each and every one of you as you continue to hold fast and move forward in a viral time...and beyond...

peace, respect, and much love Class of 2020...

be well and take good care

thank you

⁷ 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.

⁸ Cf. Romans 3.13-17, *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1989), 2120.