

How To Love the Broken World

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Thirty-nine years ago, my college commencement was held in an unairconditioned gymnasium on the hottest day Alabama could serve up. I tried to talk my family into letting me skip the ceremony, but my grandmother, a retired schoolteacher, put her foot down. “We’re going,” she said. So we went. All I remember is trying not to perish in the hallucinogenic heat.

My grandmother began her career in a two-room schoolhouse in the country. She was still teaching 40 years later when Alabama public schools were finally integrated. What my grandmother knew, and I did not, is that glorious days like this must always be cherished. It’s right to celebrate a hard-won achievement. It’s right to drink in the pride of family and friends. It’s always right to give yourself over to joy every single time joy is on offer.

It is also right in this liminal moment, this time of looking both before and beyond, to ponder what it all means. What did the years of study and camaraderie really add up to? What new challenges will you be obliged to face in the years to come?

I can’t tell you what it all meant, but I think I understand many of the responsibilities that will fall to you as the years unfold.

You are children of the 21st century, and yours is the first generation to recognize the inescapable urgency of climate change, the first not to deny the undeniable loss of biodiversity. You have grown up in an age permeated by the noise of a 24-hour news cycle, by needless political polarization, by devastating gun violence, by the isolating effects of “social” media. You

have seen hard-won civil rights rolled back. You have come of age at a time of existential threat — to the planet, to democracy, to the arc of the moral universe itself — and none of it is your fault.

I wouldn't blame you if you're wondering why somebody of my generation, having wrecked so much that is precious, could dare to offer you advice. My only response is that age has exactly one advantage over the energy and brilliance of youth: Age teaches a person how to survive despair.

The years have shown me that hardship is only one part of life, and not remotely the largest part. Hardship always lives side by side with happiness. Pain always finds its fullest partner in joy. Love takes many forms, some of them surprising, and people are almost always kinder than we expect. The world is beautiful. People are good.

So I am here to remind you to hold close the people you learned to love during your school years — the friends who became like family members, the professors who nudged you to do the work they knew you were capable of. Everywhere you go, there will be new people you can love and who will love you back. Everywhere you go, there will be new beloved mentors. Look for them. Hang onto all of them, old companions and new. You will need them, and they will need you.

Remember, too, the groundskeepers you passed on the way to class, the people who sat behind the counter in the financial aid office, the servers at the food line. Remember their kindness to you, and their patience. Learn from them. Make a point of being kind.

Remember these friends and these mentors and these helpful strangers. When you're in a waiting room and an angry commentator on the corner television is telling you that the world

is full of awful people who are trying to hurt you or take away what's rightfully yours, think about all the good people you know. Remember how very many good people you know and how many times a perfect stranger has been good to you in tiny ways — offering to push your cart back to the store, waving you ahead of them in traffic, sharing an eye-roll at the gate when yet another flight delay is announced.

When you question the goodness of people who don't share your politics, ask yourself these questions: Who is profiting from your anger? Who is getting rich by making you afraid? Someone is. Someone always is.

Not counting uncooperative politicians and partisan media figures, most people are sincerely trying their best to get along. If you talk to them, they will listen. If you listen, they will talk to you. Most people are good. Remind yourself that most people are good.

As you enter the world, remember, too, how beautiful this place is. Remember the gentle fog. Remember the rocky bluffs and the immense diversity of trees. Remember the green coves and the green ponds and the birds that migrate by the hundreds of thousands through the night sky above your dorms. Remember the gentle deer picking their way through the fog on their impossibly delicate hooves. Remember the cry of the broad-winged hawk teaching her fledglings to hunt.

Wherever you go, even in the deepest city canyons far from these mossy coves, there will be fascinating creatures who are trying to live out their lives in the same place where you are trying to live out yours. Make room for your wild neighbors. Learn what they need and how you can help them. It will make you feel better about the mess your species has made of things if you can find a way to help.

We are, all of us, creatures. We belong to this gorgeous world in all the same ways that the coyotes in the cove belong to this world. In all the same ways that the fog-shrouded trees belong to this world. You may come someday to feel trapped in asphalt and concrete, but you are not trapped. When you are restless or lonely or afraid, go for a walk in the park or a hike in the woods. Plant a little garden, if only in pots on the sidewalk. Being in the wild world will make you will feel better. Get your hands dirty. I promise you will feel better.

And merely by falling in love with the world, you will begin to make it better. Human beings will work to their dying breath to save something they love. Fall in love with the wild world, and you are taking the first step toward saving it.

The world is beautiful. People are good.

Days will come when even those simple truths will be hard to remember. When the self-doubts creep in and the worries descend, think of the frogs singing in the springtime ponds or the hawks crying in the sky. Think of the classmate who lent you her textbook or the stranger who took the time to call a tow truck when your phone was dead.

The world is beautiful. People are good.

If you can remember those two things, you will find your way to understanding that nothing ever came of despair, that change only happened because good people worked together to make an unfair world to do better. My grandmother didn't close out her teaching career in an integrated classroom because Alabama politicians suddenly decided to do the right thing. As with every other sweeping change for good, desegregation happened because good people working together with other good people became an unstoppable force for change.

Already your generation — the lockdown generation — is forcing those in power to confront the injustice of gun violence. Already your generation has seen how rapidly the economy can transition to clean energy when technological innovation comes together with political will. You have had a taste of what good people working together can do to force those in power to do better by fragile human beings and the fragile planet alike.

As you head down this mountain, you will be prepared for whatever challenges may come if you remember only two things:

The world is beautiful. And people are good.

And remembering these things will help you remember how good you are, and how much good you can do, too.