

Becoming comfortable with change.

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Introduction

Good morning everyone. Thank you Parsa for that introduction, and thank you, the class of 2026, for the opportunity to speak here today. This is both the highest honor I have received in my 30 odd years of teaching at Earlham, and the most daunting task I have received, well other than teaching a first year Earlham Seminar. I would like to welcome the friends and families of the graduating class to campus, and the many alumni and friends of the College who help us make today what it is for you, and Earlham what it is for all of us.

I feel compelled to make an observation about Parsa's introduction. A couple of days ago, when she asked for things to say when introducing me, my reply included plain, accurate, phrases like "lackluster undergraduate career" and "neglected to earn a Ph.D. until well after he was already teaching". Apparently, by the time she actually started working on it yesterday afternoon, she had discovered LinkedIn. What she just gave you was the most generous rendering of the events that I can imagine.

Disclaimer

As some of you know, I subscribe to Pocket Legal Services™. Having a good lawyer available 24x7 has saved me endless amounts of grief over the years as a teacher at Earlham. Traveling overseas with a group of college students, maybe to an island in the North Atlantic known for its glaciers and volcanos? At some point, possibly more than once, you will need timely, high-quality, advice. A couple of physics majors and an art major show-up at your office door a few days before graduation to ask if they can borrow your cutoff saw and arc welder? Check with legal first.

When my pocket lawyer heard that I would be giving the baccalaureate message she suggested that I should provide a bit of framing for my remarks, something along the lines of a broad disclaimer, to make sure we are all on the same page before I get to the substance of my talk.

- 1) The introduction you just heard was done by a young, brown, Muslim woman; she introduced an elderly, white, Jewish guy (that's me), who is giving the message in a ceremony whose roots are deep in the early Christian universities of England. Does this strike anyone besides me as a bit odd? Maybe a conversation with central casting would be in order before next year's graduation.
- 2) While preparing for today I read about the history of the baccalaureate ceremony, and thanks to Earlham's Archives, browsed programs and remarks from many of our earlier baccalaureates. The ceremony is variously described with words such as reflective, somber, religious, and spiritual. I am pretty sure that my colleagues, and my friends and relatives, many of whom are here today, do not use words like those to describe me.
- 3) This is only the third time I have spoken to a large group of Earlhamites, and this is by far the largest and most consequential of the three outings. If TIP #7 is correct, that you learn more

from failure than you do from success, today's talk should go much better than my earlier two.

Now that I have given you a TIP it will be easier to explain what one is. TIPs are timely information pods, small phrases that encapsulate some useful guideline or maxim that is applicable in the moment. Almost all of them are derived from other sources although they are uncredited here. They are sprinkled throughout my remarks today, and yes Cayden, they will be on the exam.

- 4) She also suggested that one way to help an audience develop empathy for a speaker is to mention your dog, so, I would like to introduce Anthony, our 12 pound rescue of unknown genetic makeup.



This is a roughly 1:1 scale image of him. I would have brought him along today instead of just a glamour shot but he is even less comfortable around lots of people than I am, his veterinarian has not yet approved my campus canine management plan, and he barks, a lot.

With all that, I hope you are not surprised if this doesn't go exactly as planned; which leads me to TIP #3: under promise, over deliver.

Change

While thinking about what I might offer today that would be useful as you move into the world I considered many themes. Reading through baccalaureate messages from the past 40 years or so

showed me the breadth of topics people had previously considered: poetry, rhetoric, tyranny, peace, racism, privilege, doing good, and many others. Some used personal stories, some employed Homer, Moby Dick, or another literary figure, still others took the audience on rich metaphorical journeys. I found that process very intimidating; many of them were written by really sharp colleagues and former professors of mine whose command of ideas and expression far exceed my own. What I did find that I thought could be both useful to you in this moment, and "in my wheelhouse" as it were, was the notion of working with change. What was on the minds of your predecessors in-title 25 years ago was different than those of 15 years ago, unsurprisingly, which were again different from those just after the pandemic, etc. etc. Some topics came and went, some resurfaced time and again; lots of change.

Given my work with technology over the past 45 years or so change is something I have had to learn about, and along with many of the people gathered here today, I have also spent a fair amount of time over the past year contemplating and absorbing significant changes here on-campus as we have sorted how to recast ourselves to be successful in the evolving landscape of higher education.

So, I had a topic, change, and I had two perspectives to approach it with, technology and our own history as a college. So I read, and wrote, and read, and re-wrote; I collected ideas from former students, more on that later, and managed to produce a document which when read aloud clocked-in at just under 40 minutes; clearly well out of bounds. With my copyeditors scalpel in-hand I made the difficult decision to cut the enumeration of all the pranks I was involved in as an undergraduate; gone is my exposition on Moore's Law and how it drives our modern transistor-based economy; and most tragically, gone too is my insider's tell-all from our Faculty Meetings, tentatively titled "Watching the falafel being made". What is left is a short tour of technology and the pace of change it drives, a Reduced Shakespeare-esque rendering of changes over time at Earlham, and crowdsourced advice from your predecessors. Let's get going.

Technology and change

The changes driven by transistor-based technology, which now play a part in almost every manufactured good from greeting cards to cell phones to solar panels to Artemis, are happening more frequently, and playing-out more quickly, than they have previously. Let's look at voice communication and artificial intelligence as a couple of proxies for the whole enchilada.

It took about 125 years from the introduction of the landline phone in 1877 for that tech to be in 90% of the households in the US around 2004. (Side note, that number is now about 25% and it continues to drop. Technology tends to disappear much more quickly than it appears, does anyone here remember the iPod?)

Cell phones were introduced in 1984, but it was the early 1990s before you started seeing them regularly. About 25 years later in 2014 90% of adults in the US owned one.

So called smart phones were first available in 1994, but nobody except business people really noticed until 2007 when the first iPhone was released. It took about ten years until 90% of the adults in the US owned a smart phone in 2017. Ok, I am going to go off-script for a minute. Imagine, I happen to make it to the weekly dean's meeting a few minutes early, why does my "smart phone" remind me to

go to the weekly dean's meeting when it knows where I am, and where the weekly dean's meeting is held? Rant off.

The history of generative artificial intelligence, or chatbots as they are more commonly known now, dates back to the mid-1960s at MIT, but few people outside of a lab saw them until Siri dropped in 2011. ChatGPT became generally available in 2022, and according to the Pew Research Center three years later in 2025 about 62% of US adults interacted with AI at least several times a week.

An author I enjoy, William Gibson, once said "The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed." I think those examples illustrate that well.

Again, the changes driven by technology are happening more frequently, and playing-out more quickly, than we as a society have experienced before. As teachers we can only teach you what we already know and how we learned those things; but what we really want to elicit in you is the ability to figure-out what we do not yet know, and how those things can be learned.

The College and change

Next, I would like to consider the college that is about to confer a degree on you, a self-described liberal arts college. As I alluded to earlier there has been much discussion of late, on and off campus, about just what we have to teach, or cannot teach, and still call ourselves a liberal arts college, or even Earlham. There are many aspects of these discussions that remind me of conversations we had about our direction in the early 1990s, and then again around 2010. It seems as though we have been having an identity crisis of a sort every 15 years or so for some time now.

We were founded as the Friends Boarding School in 1847, and became Earlham College about 10 years later. In the early 1860s there were four disciplines represented among its four faculty members: Geology, Mathematics, Ancient Languages, and English. One taught both Mathematics and English, apparently multidisciplinary has a long history here. We broke new ground in 1864 when Joseph Moore began teaching Darwin's newfangled theories, making Earlham the first school West of the Appalachian Mountains to teach evolution. That was certainly a change for this part of the world. I should note that was only about five years after the initial publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

In 1897 we celebrated our 50th anniversary, and we had covered a lot of ground during the intervening years. The College had developed a curriculum that in many ways reflected the world it existed in. The program from that anniversary celebration listed departments of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, German, French, Anglo-Saxon, English, History and Economics, Philosophy, Mathematics, Civil Engineering, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geology, and Astronomy. We also offered an extended course in the English Bible, and a five year course in music. Given that the faculty was described as having fifteen professors and a few assistants that is an amazing breadth of material. The program also reported that in addition to Earlham students and faculty over 8,000 people from across the country visited the Joseph Moore Museum that year (over 10K visited last year). Around the turn of the century we were one of the few colleges to receive funds to build a Carnegie Library, which we now call Tyler Hall.

Fast forward fifty or so years to the post World War II era and you find a program in nursing in conjunction with Reid Hospital, that Civil Engineering, Anglo-Saxon, Speech, and many other courses of study no longer existed, and that our teacher training program as it was then known was going strong.

By the 1960s we had stopped teaching nursing, but our Japan Study program was beginning to flourish under Jackson Bailey's leadership and we had helped Indiana University East to get started. With the help of the Lilly Foundation we also built a new library, Lilly Library, and Head Librarian Evan Farber began to assemble what became a Nationally lauded program in bibliographic instruction which continues to this day. It was also during the 1960's that the community, under the guidance of a local Quaker builder Ed Nicholson, physically built Stout Meetinghouse. If you look at the parquet floor you can clearly see that it was installed by newbies, something which I love to be reminded of whenever I am there.

Looking into the 1990s we had added Miller Farm and the ag program, Peace and Global Studies, the Wilderness Program, a robust off-campus study program, and more majors including, finally, computer science. Traditions came and went: Big May Day, Air Guitar, Sunsplash, and many others. A few years ago the College brought back Engineering, and next year we will graduate our first class of engineers in about a century. The faculty also recently approved the redevelopment of a nursing program. Sometimes change brings you back to a place you have been before, but that's ok too.

That is a lot of change for an institution, and yet, here we are, still very much Earlham. I believe our values have remained largely unchanged through all of this, and that as we recast ourselves, again, in this moment, that we will continue to live by and teach those same values to future Earlhamites.

Thoughts from your predecessors

As a teacher it is hard for me to resist giving advice to a captive audience of students, my apologies to the rest of you. This is the portion of my remarks that I crowdsourced. For the first week or so after agreeing to this I was in a panic, and like most people in my profession my instinct was to turn my problem into an assignment for other people. So, I wrote a message to 20 former students who I am still in regular contact with, who had graduated between about 2005 and 2020, and asked them what they wished they had heard when they were sitting where you are now. The age range was an effort to balance enough distance from their today to have some perspective, but not so much as to need corrective lenses to see back in time to their own graduation. Like most assignments I give the response rate was short of 100%, but many did turn something in, and in those there were a number of gems. While the Venn diagram of their responses did not represent complete agreement there were a number of recurring themes which I have synthesized into this list.

- The immense value of being part of a community in a place
- Accept change in yourself, and change in others
- It is ok to be nervous
- Do not worry if your path in life does not follow a straight line
- There is enormous power in making slow, steady progress over long periods of time

- Embrace diversity in all dimensions
- Struggle leads to learning and resilience
- Food is a powerful tool for building community
- Making change, both small and large, is important and empowering
- It is ok to not know the answer, and it is ok to ask for help
- Find ways to do interesting things with good people and worthwhile opportunities will naturally follow
- It is worth staying connected to the Earlham alumni and faculty network

I should pause here and acknowledge my fellow members of the class of 1984, would you raise your hands please? Many of them have served on Earlham's Board of Trustees, on Alumni Council, and in other roles at the College for ages, in effect volunteering their time so I can be paid to do what I love, teach. Actually, I am paid to grade and to be a dean, I would teach for free. Thanks for that.

- Learn how to be empathetic
- Develop your self awareness, use it to help you learn how to effectively work with others
- As bad a position as you might be in, there are almost certainly other people in a far worse place
- Fight all the isms. Many communities and individuals have no choice but to learn how to overcome repeated setbacks, affronts, injustices, and insults. They cannot just step away, the onslaught does not falter.

It is in the context of those last two that I note that a beloved member of our community and friend of mine was recently subjected to just such a racially based affront. My heart goes out to him. I should acknowledge that as an old, cisgender, white, male, who comes from a place of privilege, I may be heading onto thin ice here. The problem is that I have too many friends, family members, colleagues, students, former students, fellow firefighters and EMTs, whose lives are regularly buffeted and diminished by one ism or another to keep my mouth shut. It all needs to stop, and for that to happen we all have to play a part. I dare not suggest what that part may be, only that you take what you learned and experienced here at Earlham into the wider world and help your own community to stamp this shit out once and for all.

Many of these remind me of the principles and practices we aspire to live by and teach here at Earlham. Funny that, maybe they were paying attention after all.

The closing

Which brings me nearly to the end, and to my next-to-last TIP. It looks like I will clock-in at about 20 minutes, which based on a little script fu I did while preparing for today is solidly beneath the median length of 25 minutes for published baccalaureate messages at Earlham over the past 43 years. TIP #1: less is more.

Before closing I would like to thank the people who directly and indirectly contributed to these remarks. The Earlham Archives; Thomas Hamm and Jenny Freed's lovely book *Earlham College* (prop); Malik Barrett, Bonita Washington-Lacey, James Logan, alums Zoey Stoffregen, Liarucha Basuki, Dave Hovemeyer, Faith Jackobs, Porter Libbey, Sara Salloum, Skylar Thompson, Seth Hopper, Steve Pokorny for the 50th Anniversary program, and Karlye Teders, who is an alum but not a former student of mine. More important is that she is Anthony's live-in veterinarian. Many thanks to all for your help; which tees-up my last TIP, #9, which I believe is actually an African proverb: if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

Thank you again to the class of 2026 for this wonderful opportunity to give you one last lecture. Now, go make some part of the world a better place, stay in touch, and as our colleague Gene Hambrick says, "Go EC".