

Reunion Presidents' Panel
Saturday, June 4, 2016

What did the humanities teach you about yourself as a student, teacher, leader?

Thank Kim for organizing. Fun to be together again. Special pleasure to be on the same reunion cycle with Nan, inching toward the head of the alumnae parade, my passionate purple flamingo class whooping it up behind your serene green one.

I drew the humanities somewhat by default, I think, as an English major who strayed. English prof who told majors just before we graduated that she hoped we wouldn't relegate our interest in literature to the NYRB. Confess pretty much have. But I never regretted decision to major in English.

Do have enduring affinities with the humanities, reflected -- among other places -- in the Newhouse Center for the Humanities, one of the legacies I most cherish. We (all three of us) celebrated the Center this winter in NYC at a beautiful memorial service for SMN, a warm, wise, and loyal alumnae leader -- and a fellow English major, as was Lulu Chow Wang, last week's eloquent graduation speaker -- great class of '66.

It was in my first week at W that the major chose me. Freshman English prof, Arthur Gold (later legendary), was new that year. Sat cross-legged on desk & said the study of literature was his life's passion b/c it opened a doorway to the mysteries of the human condition. This was what college was meant to be. I was hooked.

I devoured the great literary works, took a lot of philosophy and political science too. In many ways those encounters showed me who I would be: a dweller and a digger in the garden of words, and ideas. I loved that place and that pursuit; love it still, always will. And my life has been enriched by it, defined by it really.

The 4 years at W -- the *first* 4 -- gave me a deep respect for the academy as a place for preserving & extending time-honored traditions, while making new & challenging connections ... a space to explore the highest ideals by which we humans might live. And it offered me a beginning appreciation for the variety of interpretive modes & angles of vision in the different disciplines and the value of multiple perspectives.

It sowed the seeds for the person I later became -- the leader I finally became, one who came to understand leading as *learning*, starting "from within." This required certain disciplines I've written and spoken about.

I didn't always succeed at them -- far from it -- and so a sense of proportion and humor were indispensable. Before I could become a leader worthy of anyone's trust, I would have to get over myself, curb my perfectionism, lighten up, and connect my mind to my heart. Learn to trust myself.

I've had a lot of help with that over these five decades -- from caring & forbearing teachers, colleagues, friends -- starting as a student here, and extending through the years. I am tremendously grateful for it all.

How is studying the humanities different at Wellesley?

Well ... it matters, surely, that Wellesley is a women's college, as careful as we are to avoid essentialist traps, to recognize gender as a continuum, a social construction, a negotiation -- inseparable from race and class, from place and time, from social structures, politics, global economic forces -- all of that, and much more.

But still ... Wellesley as a college, and our humanities disciplines, have historically resisted forces that have been sweeping the larger culture, including higher education. These pressures are often linked to the dominance of market thinking (productivity, efficiency, competitive achievement), which feminist scholars trace to the patriarchy ... to myths of mastery, individualism, independence, instrumentalism -- ideologies to which W faculty and students (and alums) have often opposed.

And so I would say this of the special role of the humanities today -- and the humanities here. These disciplines can encourage us to ask the challenging questions about who we are and where we're headed. The big existential questions that drew me to major in English, and that loom ever larger now, as we face larger and graver threats -- including very serious environmental challenges.

We come to terms with these threats, I believe, when we carve out spaces for deliberation, reflection, encounter, spaces that nurture intellectual and emotional resilience in a spirit of honesty, compassion, mutuality -- when we bring care and attention to the present and together imagine a world that could be.

This is work as demanding and intricate as is the scientific method that has brought us the immense benefits of modern life. It is re-balancing work to which the humanities and arts bring fresh ways of perceiving and knowing -- that build on modes of inquiry developed over thousands of years.

This is the work of making and sustaining connections to which many of the alumnae gathered here have dedicated *their* lives and it is work that has never been more essential than it is right now to human flourishing around the world.

What did being Wellesley's president teach you about leadership?

Taught me a lot -- among much else, to try to sense and speak what needs saying, however difficult. So I want to bring up an all-hands-on-deck issue that's less about leading W than leading ourselves ... all of us.

It's an issue to which I wasn't paying as much attention while president as I have since ... as it's become increasingly clear that we humans are posing a grave threat to the Earth's fragile ecosystems on which all life depends.

I've been asking myself what's mine to do in the face of this and have resolved -- as a start -- to say at least something about it in every talk I give. The challenge, always, is how to bring it. My daughter jokes that I might get some "likes" on Facebook if I would stop posting stuff that makes everyone miserable.

But immersing myself, as I did last weekend, in our class record book convinced me that many of us are indeed worried that we are living in the shadow of a reality too painful to confront, living beyond our limits, beyond planetary boundaries we have already transgressed.

We're troubled by the conflicts climate warming is already causing, the suffering already being inflicting on those least responsible for causing it, least equipped to adapt, least able to resist the powerful forces bent on protecting their private interests at public expense. We agonize over the waves of refugees risking everything in search of safer ground on which to raise their children.

A friend, a philosopher who spends all her time now raising the alarm, says she is invariably asked, "What can one person do?" Her answer ... "Stop being one person." She's part of a small Council Sarah Buie, class of '71, and I are leading. We're reaching out to others ... something all of us can do.

Something else a classmate wrote in our record book. "We may lack the power to avert the harsh changes we see ahead," she said, but we can "choose to stay centered and offer calm and new perspectives as a form of support for those we encounter."

We can pay attention, inform ourselves, change our habits, spread the word. We can vote, get out the vote, engage politically, even participate in nonviolent resistance if we choose. We can learn and witness, speak the truth as we see it emerging. Refuse to look away. Tread lightly. We can avoid, as best we can, causing harm to any other. We can try not to cast shadow and instead to find sources of light.

And so, this too. We can raise up the values that bring us together here -- back to this beautiful college where all seems possible. We can reach out to strangers and mirror their intrinsic worth, connect more, linger more, laugh more,

express our gratitude, and then open to a happiness, poet Mary Oliver describes, a happiness, which when "done right, is palpable and redemptive."

What would you have wanted to know when you started as Wellesley's 12th president?

How fast the time would go.

I had 14 years and it wasn't nearly enough, as sure as I was when I left that it was time to pass the baton.

I suspect it's partly the influence of the half-century I and my classmates are marking but I am acutely aware these days of what an English professor referred to as "the one-wayness of time."

Last Friday, I watched the live streaming of Lulu's lovely commencement address, felt with Kim the nostalgia of her last chance to preside over that joyful ritual, saw in the faculty procession so many fresh faces, and listened to Kim's tributes to retirees who were just reaching their prime when I first arrived.

[Nan: and who were hired in my time.]

The time does race by as we pass the baton along.

As with so much of life, this suggests a paradox.

Knowing how fast it would go would have pushed me in two directions: on the one hand, to focus sharply and drive the agenda forward; on the other to live each moment in its fullness and complexity.

And so it comes down, again, to balancing heart and mind, and to savoring the enormous privilege of the time I did have here, at the helm of this college we all treasure, and serve, each in our own time, and in our own way.