

Being Well

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Amherst College Baccalaureate Address

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I want to begin by thanking Harrison Blum, Director of Religious and Spiritual Life for the college for the generous invitation to address you today. I believe deeply in the work of spirit, religion and ethics in our world and consider it a huge honor to be asked to add my voice to your understanding of it today.

I would also like to thank all of the students, parents, families by birth and by choice, for you have endured an unbelievable burden to complete this journey through a time of unsureness and catastrophe. But you made it. You will always carry that success with you.

I would also like to thank the faculty, staff, and in particular President Biddy Martin, as she prepares to move on. Together, all of your leadership has made this environment possible.

Finally, I would like to thank the ancestors of the past who are part of a conflicted past of colonial history, including the displaced people of Nonotuck, the labor and wealth derived from people who were enslaved.

And I would like to thank the ancestors of the future who I know will be resolved to a future grounded in equity and mutual thriving.

And as always, I give thanks to God and the spirit for getting me here, keeping me safe, allowing me to ask questions and offer my own perspective in this world.

I will let you know that I very briefly mention self-harm in this message. If you are in need of support, please seek help, you are not alone. The national suicide prevention lifeline is 800-273-8255

I have a confession to make. As I stand here before you, an ordained member of clergy, fully fellowshiped as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I am also available to the world in a video where I am not wearing very much clothing. Back in 2003, I was a fitness model, and I had the great privilege to be featured in the P90x fitness videos. I appear in the segments of the series titled “Core Synergistics”, “Yoga-X” (which sounds much more provocative than it is) and “Ab Ripper X”. It is the last one of these where I am wearing sneakers and a fairly skimpy pair of gym shorts and nothing else except my dreadlocks and sweat. Most people don’t usually recognize me these days, but there was a time when the series really took off around 2008 and people were stopping me on the street. It was a very weird feeling...good, but weird.

In addition to being a model, I was also a personal trainer and group exercise instructor. In that time of my life, I learned to really value, protect and maintain my overall health. When a few years later, I added a massage therapy license to my qualifications, I felt complete. I worked with a variety of clients in fitness and wellness, but the most significant of these was working with people who were HIV positive. I received stories from them about how they felt they didn’t have access to working on wellness alone, rather it was always put in the context of maintaining their immune systems...their wellness was pathologized. No one’s body...no one’s being deserves to be pathologized before it is respected and honored and loved.

From these stories and more, I began to formulate a personal theology and a professional commitment to embodiment. By “embodiment”, I mean how we inhabit and generate the human experience of having bodies and what that means for us to have a healthy society.

It was this thinking that drew me to ministry.

I share my depth of knowledge about bodies, wellness and health as a foundation for my ministry so that you understand how significant it was when I took a leave of absence this past fall for my mental and physical health. My body and mind were not allowing me to work in a healthy way.

My coping methods were hurting me more than they were sustaining me and I felt like I was slowly falling down a drain.

I'm not alone in that feeling over the last few years. I'm sure I'm not alone in that feeling in this room. At Harvard where I am a chaplain, the most important conversation among our community and with health providers, and equity leaders on campus is about the devastating effect that the pandemic and the general state of the world is having on students. I feel deeply for each and every one of you who has scaled this Everest of higher learning in the midst of everything else going on in the world. It is an astounding achievement.

Of course, other generations have also faced their own horrors. World wars come to mind; racial segregation also; for my generation in the 1980s, it was graduating into the midst of the dawning of AIDS crisis which for a gay man like myself felt at the time like more of a "when" not an "if" because there were no treatments, and the government still wouldn't even talk about it. I miss marching down 5th Avenue during the early years of pride parades chanting "we're here, we're queer, get used to it!" I don't, however, miss the unexplainable and untreatable death, or feeling like sex was a War zone. I miss too many of my friends and lovers.

What is different for you however is that the challenging world you are facing is one that is connected and measured in milliseconds and terabytes not in hours and handwritten letters in the mail. The wonderful and incredible immediacy of our world comes with a pressure to respond and an urgency that earlier generations don't fully grasp. Quality is in part for you measured in quickness and access, where for us it had different metrics. And it is not just you having to navigate it, it is all of us. But you are the next leaders, which means you carry with you a fluency in the world of immediacy, an expectation that it can work and assumptions about how that world can function for you as it leads to the next generation.

One of the things that is humbling about being in ministry is how much I get to interact with and understand about beliefs. And I mention this because one of the experiences you are inheriting in this intensely connected, and wildly global and fast-moving world is about beliefs. Not necessarily about

having specific beliefs, but this world of connectivity includes the fact that beliefs and ways of being are bumping up against each other like never before. Whole societies that would never have firsthand experience of each other are at the virtual table together every day. Even in this room, the range of cultures and experiences is more vast than the founders of the college may have ever imagined they could be.

And it is in this spirit that I want to turn to the topic of this talk...being well.

Being well...wellbeing. At its heart, being well, is not any different than it was 1000 years ago. What has changed is how we talk about it, how we understand it in ourselves, and how we regard wellbeing in each other.

In truth, we aren't smarter than people in the past either...we simply know more about what we don't know because we have more immediate access to it. One thing is true, though. Because of that access, *trust* is more crucial than ever. And trust has changed with greater access and exposure to the world. How do we trust, in a world of racism, sexual and gender marginalization, political radicalism and government sanctioned violence? How do we be well in that world?

In the past, before we were so connected, people who were fighting for equal human rights liked to raise the call that "we are all the same". This was particularly true in work around integration. "We are all the same under the skin", some would say. I'm here to shatter that myth and to tell you...no we are not the same. We are none of us the same. In fact, what makes me thrive may very well be completely toxic to you.

What I want for my body, may be an abomination to you.

What I believe around my mortality, may be an insult to you.

What you think is right for society, may literally be death for me.

Being well, may not be well being for everyone. This is what the interconnected world tells us today. And we are confused and bewildered and shaken by this knowledge.

In that confusion, some turn inward; others try to sway those who disagree with them; still others turn to violence...as revenge against others for feeling harmed, or to self-harm as desperation to escape.

So, I come to you today, as a human before I am a faith leader, to invite you into another kind of relationship with trust. What if trust wasn't in fact built on our sameness. What if it wasn't all about being able to see myself in you. What if instead, trust...real trust...meant I could be present with you in all of your difference? To be able to recognize you more clearly. You see, I've come to understand that trust is being able to say "we are different...and we are bound to each other in that difference."

Human beings are a happy accident. Some would say of biology. Others of the divine. And part of that accident of what I believe is both faith and science, we have infinite variations. Yes, there is a common theme, but wild and spectacular variations of color, shape, size, ability, cognition, viability, age. Indeed, it is our capacity for difference that is the one thing we share as human siblings. That two entirely different people can create another totally different and independent being is miraculous, and I'm sure deliberate.

And what if we learned to trust our inevitable and infinite difference and found this as a foundation for being well?

Dare I say that if we could embrace this kind of trust and this kind of knowledge of each other, we would find real solutions to our great and pressing problems of today:

...to the log jam that exists in our political systems.

...to the fact that we seem complacent to tolerate and simply move on from catastrophic acts of mass death, whether they occur in nature or whether they come from our own hands.

...to our ongoing struggle to recognize the full power, autonomy, wisdom and breadth of womanhood.

...to being mired in a comprehension of gender that limits itself to body parts.

...to operating under the misconception that we are destroying the planet when Mother Earth has endured worse insults than human beings; rather we are destroying *our* ability to inhabit it.

...to measuring human value against standards of bodily and mental capacity and capability that are impossible to standardize.

...to the full weaponization of religion.

...and more.

My wellbeing may not mean the same as being well for you. But my wellbeing is how I am whole. If I can trust you to honor my basic human need for wellbeing to thrive in my difference from you or with you, but different from you...I can be whole. And you deserve and are entitled to the same. You can be whole. We can be whole together. We all deserve wholeness as a basic right of being human.

So, hold on to that which makes you you. Your beliefs, your dreams, your fears, your ambitions, your understanding of what ultimately makes life sing. But hold on to that uniqueness not to separate yourself from the person next to you, but to draw you closer to every other being that contains that same dazzling potential for difference and variation. Be connected through our collective wisdoms; be connected by technology; yes, all of that. But first be connected by being well in whatever way that makes you and subsequently all of us most wholly human.

Amen, blessed be, be well.