

University of the Pacific 159th Commencement Address
May 14, 2016
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Good morning! Good morning to President Eibeck and her mind-reading, supremely accommodating staff, and to Board Chair Kathy Janssen and all of the University Regents, and to the extraordinary, accomplished, and giving Faculty of University of the Pacific, teachers and role models to their core. And good morning to everyone who works so hard to make this place ripe and welcoming for learning, from the bakers who came up with the tasty frittatas at breakfast to the geniuses who arrange the benches and chairs on the lawns so they're perfect for studying under the campus's green canopies of shade. And – good morning to all of you, the Class of 2016, all 1,262 of you! *You* are why we are all here. Look what you did! This is for you, this celebration, this recognition, with all the banners and pomp and circumstance! You *earned* this. CONGRATULATIONS!

So next time you have that dream that you overslept your alarm and missed the final for the one class you need to graduate, guess what! It's not true! *This* is your dream, and it's real.

And I must thank you, every one of you, for allowing me to share in this moment with you. To be welcomed back to my cherished alma mater with such warmth and pride, to be recognized for doing what this university prepared me and encouraged me to do, and to be given the privilege to speak to you is humbling almost beyond words, and I am staggered and grateful. It's like a dream for me too, one that I truly never imagined. Storyteller though I am, *this* scene never occurred to me, even though I was once sitting with you, right here.

Well, not *exactly* sitting right here. My graduation was held outside on Knoles Lawn, with the sunlit rose garden in full celebratory bloom on one side and on the other, Knoles Hall in its cool regalia of green ivy, the circle of marble columns whispering to itself in the shade. I don't have any photographs of that day, and over the years my memory of it has compressed like a diamond to become one central, crystalline vision: my beloved professor, Dr. Arlen J. Hansen of Pacific's English Department, receiving the annual Distinguished Faculty Award as I whooped it up from the audience.

Now, the first thing you need to know about Arlen Hansen is that he is the number one reason I'm here speaking to you today. He is the reason I had the courage to pursue my dream of being a writer, and the reason I ended up having something to write about, and the reason I eventually became a professor, too. More on how this relates to you and *your* dreams in a bit.

The second thing you need to know is that Dr. Hansen liked to promote the idea of himself as a cynical curmudgeon whose wizened heart had shrunk from suffering foolish students none too gladly. He had a droll, wisecracky sense of humor, and he went nowhere, I mean no where, without his pipe, which was basically a portal to his mind, a ritual means of accessing his thoughts, a prop he abstractedly fiddled with or clamped between his teeth or stared at as he paced back and forth at the front of the classroom while he lectured, or he was patting his pockets for it or knocking ashes from it out the window of his office in Knoles Hall. *Eh, pigeons*, he'd say, *beat it*, pushing the window out wider to shove the slow ones off the ledge. (Yes, people: Professors used to actually *smoke in their offices AND in class!*)

But beneath his crusty exterior, that grouchy, impatient mask, Arlen Hansen was the kind of teacher that Pacific's reputation is built upon – a mentor, a guide, a paragon of curiosity and intellect and sweeping knowledge and generosity. On my graduation day, I felt no less joy for Dr. Hansen as he received his award for great teaching than I felt for myself, about to collect my diploma. I began celebrating – loudly -- as soon his name was called. *So* loudly and obnoxiously, in fact, that before he started fiddling with his pipe to conjure up his acceptance remarks, he squinted out from behind his wire-rimmed glasses at the sea of graduates and spotted me, making my ruckus. I don't know about these days, but back then, students got to weigh in on professors who'd been nominated, and I'd most definitely had a few choice words to offer about Dr. Arlen J. Hansen's distinguished teaching of *me*. There we were, at my graduation, hundreds of people between us across Knoles Lawn, yards and yards apart, but really, face to face. Eye to eye. He was grinning when he raised his pipe and shook it at me like a threat. "Eh, you'll get yours, Moses," he said.

So...here I am. I think maybe he was right.

I cannot tell you how many times over thirty-two years I've played that moment back to myself like a movie. Remember, that was 1984, way back in the dark ages before cell phones and digital cameras. The first camcorders and PCs and VCRs were released while I was at Pacific, and this unknown little company called Apple introduced something called a Macintosh the year I graduated. Who knew! No such thing as a selfie then! But...hey, there is now...

Selfies: In 2013, the year many of you were freshmen, "selfie" was the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year. Selfies have become so deeply embedded in contemporary society that cultural critics are calling them "the defining visual genre of our age." We like them not just because selfies allow us to be seen, but because they let us be in charge of *how* we are seen. They allow us to present ourselves to others in ways that make us feel good.

Selfies remind me of the term *saving face*, which originated in ancient China but is now understood worldwide. It means, of course, to avoid humiliation and to preserve one's dignity or status. The concept incorporates an unstated

understanding that to save face requires a self in the company of others. It sounds pretty much like the function of a selfie: you are literally *saving* your face, meaning recording it for posterity for yourself and for others, and at the same time you are *figuratively* saving it, editing from your “face” whatever might embarrass you, to help you secure your status, maybe even gain status, among those others whose esteem you value. The implication, of course, is that a face is a very powerful thing.

And it is. Babies’ faces are Darwinian survival tactics: they evolved those big eyes and huge foreheads and cute little chins to appeal to their parents’ most primal notions of beauty, so to encourage holding and feeding and soothing and protecting. Baby faces ensure the continuation of the species. Very clever, those babies.

“The face is where you start from,” writes the novelist Charles Baxter. “Everything of importance is to be found there.” Years before we learn to read words, we learn to read faces. By a few weeks of age babies begin to mimic smiles and yawns and scowls, to register facial expressions showing anger or sadness or joy – or indifference. Our self concepts are significantly formed by the attitudes and emotions we see reflected in the faces of our earliest caregivers. Our faces are how we recognize each other and ourselves. The face is central to our concept of humanity, the mutual pact we make as members of civilized society: to see the face of another person, to see face to face, is to acknowledge a mutual obligation as human beings. You cannot deny the humanity of someone when you have met their gaze, when you have seen their face.

I thought about this a couple of months ago when I took a class of writing students to Paris over spring break. At the Louvre, the first priority for everyone was to see the *Mona Lisa*, which in real life is a painting only about as big as a fully open laptop. She hangs on a wall by herself, and the crowds in that gallery are notoriously huge, making it hard to get close enough to see the lady with her enigmatic smile. This time, there were definitely dozens and dozens of people from all over the world packed around the little painting, lots of them student groups like mine, but something was different. Everyone in the Mona Lisa gallery had their cell phones raised, taking pictures, videos. When we squeezed in closer, I saw that the inner circle of people -- gathered around what is arguably the most famous face in the world, one of the great masterpieces of human artistic expression -- were all standing with their backs to the painting, taking selfies. They were making duck faces and squinching and angling their faces and bodies just so, so they’d look good with Leonardo daVinci’s sublime achievement in the background, like wall paper. Adam Gopnik, writing about selfies in *The New Yorker* last fall, observed that “the need to memorialize the moment takes precedence over living the actual experience.” He wondered if selfies are like “visual crabgrass ... covering over and crowding out our deeper investigation of who we are?”

How strange it is that we are looking at our own faces more and more, and at the same time, as a society, we have begun looking at the faces of others – not their selfies, but their faces -- less and less. As a teacher, the change is dramatic. Where

once I entered a classroom to find students engaged in lively conversations, now they are each separately absorbed in the virtual life happening on their electronic devices, staring fixedly down at their phones or laptops. Sociologist Sherry Turkle calls this being “alone together,” which is also the title of her latest book on how technology is changing our relationships and even our concepts of selfhood.

The reason for this shift is obvious. It’s our screens – screens that we have welcomed into our lives to make things easier and more immediate and more globally accessible, but that, when used to excess, do exactly as the word *screen* suggests: a screen is an apparatus that separates or shields from view. To screen is to shelter, to protect, to hide, to conceal. A screen is a kind of mask, which any of us who have ever found ourselves in an online conversation with an anonymous flamer can attest. Our screens are separating us from each other, keeping us at a remove from each other, protecting us from doing the often hard work of truly connecting. They encourage the kind of concealment that can result in the diminishment of the humanity not only of other people, but of ourselves.

Humanity. The humanities. Such a seemingly simple word. An abstract concept that becomes very, very real when you look into the eyes of another human being.

When I arrived at Pacific as a freshman, I had no idea what was meant by “the liberal arts” let alone “the humanities.” I wanted to be a writer, I wanted to write stories and novels, and I didn’t see the point of taking any classes that weren’t going to teach me how to do that. And then I met Arlen Hansen.

Now, Arlen Hansen’s specialty was American fiction, and he was also a writer. He understood that the purpose of fiction, like the face, is to make us feel the humanity of other people as well as our own; to be a writer of fiction is to become a bridge between the self and the other. He knew that fiction, the creation of stories, began with the face: with our careful observation of the faces of other people. The first responsibility of any writer is to observe and to recognize. Not merely to look, but to see. “A novel is a mirror walking down a road,” he told me, quoting Stendhal. “You need to go places. Meet people. You need to take Henry James’ advice: ‘Try to be one of those people on whom nothing is lost.’”

He knew that to become the kind of writer I wanted to be, the kind of writer he taught about, learning the technical mechanics of writing was only the tip of the iceberg. I was an English major, and English literature was a solid foundation, but to be a writer I would need more. I needed to branch out intellectually and experientially. He mapped out a plan for me, an education that swept through disciplines all across the university, art history and women’s history and psychology and religion and geology. Courses in subjects I would never have given a second thought if he hadn’t encouraged me. And he encouraged me not simply because a well-rounded liberal arts education is the scaffolding upon which every Pacific education is built, but because he recognized me. He saw me. Literally: every week we would meet at the marble columns outside Knoles Hall to talk over everything I

was learning. The columns were like Arlen Hansen's other office, and it's where my education, the education of my self, really began.

"Geology? You mean, like, rocks?" I remember asking him. It turned out I loved that geology course. Rocks and weather patterns and mineral qualities – I ate them up. The feel of a chunk of mineral on my palm, the technical terms for its properties ringing poetic in my ear: *adamantine, lithic, to cleave*. Then one day the professor asked me to stay behind after class. "Kate," he said, "I can see you like the material. You show up every day, I see you back there scribbling your notes. I know Hansen put you up to this. But you are one terrible geology student. Your test scores stink as bad as that dead cow I found floating upstream on our last field study. I'd bet money that you have no future in the sciences. I tell you what: if you keep showing up to class every day and take the tests, I won't grade them. I'll pass you because you're enthusiastic, even if you don't know what the hell you're doing."

To cleave: in geologic terms, cleavage is the capacity for certain types of rock to split along particular planes of susceptibility. To cleave is to separate. But to cleave is also to cling, to be faithful. A liberal arts education does both: it fosters intellectual exploration, the strength of mind to form one's own opinions and respect the beliefs of others; to trust in curiosity and possibility. It is that widening, that separation, but it is also a coming together of will and dedication, a love of learning that clings.

That's what Arlen Hansen and the rest of my teachers at Pacific gave me. They taught me how to develop the mind and imagination and heart and curiosity and skepticism and humility I would need to have a rich and satisfying inner life, to be the best self I could be, and from there I could imagine myself anywhere, at home in any dream of my making.

My education at Pacific taught me to not be afraid to be unedited, to not be afraid not to know. It taught me to let my true self be seen. And to strive to see the truth in other people. To look at them and see them, for the betterment of both of us. This is the gift I received thirty years ago as I sat with Arlen Hansen every week under the marble columns, talking, face to face, about all I was discovering. I didn't fully understand at the time how my education at Pacific would be so integral to my life and work as a writer, not to mention to my human happiness. But now I understand. So let me act as a kind of emissary from your future.

Like me, during your years here at Pacific you have been given a rare gift, a precious and irreplaceable key that fewer and fewer people your age are receiving – most of them don't even know what they're missing. If my experience is anything to judge by, the lasting value of your education at Pacific is probably something you won't fully discover for a long time. In fact, like me, you might find that you continue to discover its value, recognize its value, the longer you live. Its greatest value is not how it will raise you above other people in a competitive job market, or help you get into graduate school or launch a start-up. What you've been given at the University of the Pacific is the key to making the most of your singular humanity. Your self. And

you have been handed that key by people who recognized you for who you could become, who saw you in all your authenticity. And gave you back the same.

So remember the story of my graduation on Knoles lawn, Arlen wisecracking, pointing his finger at me: "You'll get yours, Moses." The truth is, I'd already begun getting mine. And so have all of you. The proof is coming in a few minutes from this stage. I can't wait to see the looks on your faces.

Thank you.