

Invited Commencement Speech for the Liberal Studies Program Spring 2016
Jerry Garcia Ampitheatre, McLaren Park, San Francisco, CA. May 27, 2016.

My warmest congratulations to the 114 graduates of the Liberal Studies program at SFSU, class of 2016!

We are so, so proud of you! Hats off to all of you -- those who have chosen to go on to become teachers, have minored in special education, health education or business, and others with a wide array of interests, including a growing number of female students interested in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math careers. Well done!

It is a great honor and a huuuuge pleasure to be here today at such an important moment in your lives. Thank you to the Liberal Studies Student Organization for the invitation to be your speaker, and for organizing this beautiful ceremony at the amazing Jerry Garcia Ampitheater. Thank you, as well, to my colleagues in the new School of Humanities and Liberal Studies, chair Cristina Ruotolo, and office administrator Andrea Olson. We wouldn't be here without you. And let me just add that the new book, "No Simple Highway: A Cultural History of the Grateful Dead" was recently authored by one of our own lecturers, Peter Richardson. Viva!

I've been a fan of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead band forever. I agree he's one of the greatest rock'n'roll musicians of all times. A native of San Francisco, his songs, such as *Love in the Afternoon*, *Take Me*, and many others, often touch on the strongest passion that governed his life: the longing for love. We share this passion in common, as I'm sure most of you also do. And love is what I have found and feel for you, from the depth of my heart, my dear Liberal Studies students.

The reason for this strong feeling of love for you has to do with your thirst for knowledge. This deep, gutsy, voracious desire to learn more and to make this information available to others – family, students, community, and the world – is what I admire in you. I share this thirst for knowledge, the curiosity and perseverance you have so decidedly expressed in your theatre plays every semester. I mean this in the spirit of the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology that we have developed inside and sometimes outside of the classroom, such as when we did improv theatre at the United Nations plaza in San Fran, and were joined by passer-bys, elders, and the homeless. Fantastic!

In this respect, most of my students present here today have also become playwrights and actors in their own right – another *fait accompli* in addition to your many other accomplishments, emphases, minors, and second majors! We are so proud of you!

And this takes us to the third passion we have in common: a stout compassion for the suffering of humankind, the dilemmas of our communities, ourselves included. The 100-plus plays you have written and performed in the past two years (two years, only!) reveal very clearly the predicaments of being a full-time student; working full time; being a parent or caring for siblings and the elderly.

Here, let's take a little break and look at the social life of numbers! It occurred to me, just last night, that because most of you are first generation college students, your family and friends may not know exactly how much effort you've put toward your degree. So here are the facts, a quick assemble of figures, an estimate of your incredible devotion to your college life.

Getting a LS degree requires 120 units. Most classes are 3 units, so that means, roughly, 40 classes. (Most of our students, however, are transfer students, who often graduate with 130 to 140 units). It takes each student at least 60 hours a 16-week semester to complete each class (instruction time, studying, and advising/counseling included). If we add transportation, meals, and a bit of inevitable socializing, we've got about 80 hours per course, per semester. Since most students take 4 to 5 classes per semester, that's 320 to 400 hours of work.

In addition, because most of our students work 30 to 40 hours a week – they work to pay the costs of college – that's another 600 hours a semester. Together, school plus work totals about 1,000 hours per semester. Translating a semester into weekdays, we get 80 days. So 1,000 hours divided by 80 weekdays equals 12.5 hours, meaning that students spend about an average of 12.5 hours a day just between school and work. If we add about 9 hours of daily sleep, we've got 21.5 hours (out of 24). That leaves students a mere 2.5 hours a day for other important activities, like personal care, healthcare, and exercise.

In sum, for those of you who don't already know, here's a rough estimate of a Liberal Studies student's daily activities: 12 to 13 hours of school and work, 8 to 9 hours of much needed sleep, and 2 to 3 hours to scramble and be healthy and happy. This means that, on average, during 4 to 5 years, our Liberal Studies students are dedicating most of their time to studying and working to pay for college, with very little time, if any, to take care of themselves and have some fun. It's a sacrifice.

Now, imagine this: studying and working all day, trying to get some much needed rest and a bit of leisure on weekends, all the while living in a world where we are faced with the mounting dangers of racism, in a society supposed to be color blind; debt, in view of the all-consuming need to accumulate wealth; isolation, in this age of digital connectedness; climate change, and the denial of those who reject science... and I would add, the ultimate goal of being healthy, happy, and living a life of dignity. By a life of dignity I mean leading a life where you are aware of your basic human rights and you fight for their protection.

In more detail, to make sure I'm being understood, and fully comprehend how your actions can change society: The topics and titles of your real-life theatre plays (and other artifacts you have produced) reflect just that: your first-hand experiences with racism, debt, isolation, mental illness, and sexual assault – here, in the sanctuary city of San Francisco, which supposedly protects undocumented immigrants and the homeless, and here, at SF State, which claims to be an institution committed to teaching, learning, and social justice. So let's have a quick sample of the pervasive real-life conflicts faced by our students today. The point is to show you how much I've learned from your personal experiences, and how much we have learned from one another throughout the years. Here are 10 Theatre play topics and actions that can be taken to change the world, addressed by LS students this year of 2016:

1. Bullying – how each of us can be an agent of change, and stop discrimination.
2. Suicide – recognize suicidal behaviors and reach out to counseling.
3. Sexual assault and rape on and around campus – join the End Rape on Campus organization.
4. Gender violence -- be aware of your Title IX rights.
5. Racism – use social media to curb racial profiling and police brutality.

6. Gentrification – how to be college students and pay your rent every month.
7. Opioid addiction – raise awareness of presidential candidates funded by Big Pharmaceutical companies.
8. Teacher shortage in California: show strength in numbers to curb outsourcing of foreign teachers.
9. Abortion: deal with family values, religion, and the government.
10. Fascism: face hatred and eugenics in the 2016 presidential campaign in the U.S.

Here, we see you addressing head on the conundrums of a globalizing world, while being full time students, workers, care-takers, and parents. Yes, we do have the social and biological sciences helping us figure out how to best tackle these predicaments. The books we read this year included *The New Jim Crow – Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, by Michelle Alexander, as well as *How Children Succeed. Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, by Paul Tough. These and other resources have helped us better understand the world we live in and help create.

I do, however, really want to emphasize that it was the knowledge that you, students, gleaned from your life experiences, as students, parents, and employees, and your compassion for the oppression and the suffering of others, that really made a difference. A huuuuge difference. Without your knowledge and compassion, I wouldn't have learned what makes you, Liberal Studies students, such a unique, caring, and engaged group of amazing people. As my guru Paulo Freire says – you know, the internationally renowned educator and activist, Paulo Freire – “there's no teaching without learning.” I practice his advice every day, at school and at home, at work and out in my own neighborhood throughout south Berkeley.

But more than that, your dedication to a popular and liberatory education means that on top of everything you do, you are offering the SF State community, and your loved ones, what we call public service. You are the ones offering words of wisdom to your community, and to the broader population, state and nationwide. You are the teachers, the future of our humankind, the future we aspire to – even if with trepidation, given the global chaos we are faced with today. You, my dear Liberal Studies students, have already put into practice what we call hope – but rather than a passive state of just sitting around and hoping for the best, by hope I mean an active spike of optimism – another one of those cherished character strengths.

In fact, I have found in you evidence of how strong your character is: you have grit (and DO you, like the Warriors' fighting spirit!); zest (your enthusiasm and energy are contagious!); social intelligence (your fantastic ability to get along in a culturally and ethnically diverse environment!); curiosity (your strong desire to learn!); and gratitude (your incredible readiness to show appreciation for, and to return kindness!). For this, I highly commend you.

Gratitude, in fact, takes us inevitably to the practice of gift-giving – that well-known economic action (known to most of you, my students, since we studied it) that clashes abruptly with the greedy spirit of capitalism. Gift-exchange asks us to give, rather than to take, to circulate, rather than to accumulate (as we, anthropologists, have long argued). Its triggering act is the obligation to give, and in this context, I'd say to share knowledge is a gift – to give and to accept, trying to understand the knowledge generated by others. In a nutshell, this requires generosity and solidarity, and tolerance for cultural and ethnic diversity.

Last but not least, it's been proven beyond any doubt that we all need our sanctuaries, places in time and space where we can experience days of inspiration, when we can experience freedom not just as a cool activity, but as a mental state – to express joy in the silence of the moment when it becomes possible to ponder and enjoy life in its entirety. This is what makes us more and more human. And in this respect, I insist that you take action. All the papers, plays, stories, and other works of science and art you've produced throughout these years at SF State and beyond, the leaders you've admired, and every tiny little thing you've ever, ever accomplished – this is all the consequence of action. You have choices. Be the champion of your own life. Action cures apathy, pessimism, and hopelessness. Be, and continue to be, the agent of your own destiny.

-- We have much to commemorate, today and tomorrow, and into the future. So without further ado, I'd like to extend, once again, my warmest congratulations to all our graduates, who have confirmed that you are agents of change. Like the characters in the plays that you have so fabulously written and performed, YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT.

In Peace and Solidarity,
Mariana K. Leal Ferreira, Ph.D.
Berkeley, CA, May 27, 2016