

Commencement keynote address, "What We Can Clearly See"  
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By Kathleen Dean Moore

Congratulations, class of 2020. You did it. You finished your capstone project. You completed your classes and exams --

despite self-isolation and masked friends,  
 technology-challenged TAs,  
 suddenly blank ZOOM screens,  
 and a professor's face frozen in a mid-sentence contortion.

You managed to tie up all the loose ends, even as you were torn loose from all the plans you had made.

That's okay. There will be time for new plans.

But right now, you deserve to stop and take a long, deep breath.

When you step outside tonight under the gibbous moon, the air will be cleaner than it has been in your lifetime.

The evening will be quieter, too -- the robins' evening chorus will not have to shout to be heard over combusting engines and jack-brakes.

Under the same moon, in cities near and far, people will **try** to breathe deeply, but they will choke on pepper spray and gasp for breath.

A man, say his name, George Floyd, summoning us all, "I can't breathe."

It's not the world you planned for -- graduating *while* people and businesses are locked down by a global pandemic that has thrown 36 million Americans out of work,

*while* millions of people kneel in the streets to protest racial injustice,  
*and all the while* climate chaos screams warnings in the language of yet another hurricane.

So yeah. I get it. This isn't the world you were promised:

I would not wonder if you felt upended, even betrayed, certainly whiplashed at the speed of the change.

This is what a paradigm shift feels like.

This is what a pivot point feels like, vertiginous, squealing, as changes crank the heavy, creaking wheel of the world to make a great turning. It's an altogether breathless time, a portentous time, as the world pauses, to see what will come next.

But I have to tell you, I (this old philosophy professor, this old climate hawk),  
I climb out of bed each morning feeling better about the chances for the sizzling, souring world  
than I have for a long time.

Not just feeling better, but feeling positively energized.

Terrible news is breaking, and suddenly the sense of possibility and power are overwhelming.

You may think I'm nuts. I'm not.

I have been reading ancient Japanese poetry. Mizuta Masahide. Late 1600s. Haiku.

*Barn's burnt down --  
now I can see the moon.*

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*There:* The burnt barn, the glittering embers of the lies we have told ourselves,  
the spurious justifications for wrongs we know cannot endure,  
the excuses we made for institutional cruelty,  
All the excuses burned down,  
the way families in the Middle Ages burned their own homes to stop the plague.

And there: suddenly, the Moon.

In wind that rattles the windows, the moon glows on the campus grounds, pouring milk-  
white light across the lawns and walkways. Each tree stands in the black pool of its own  
moonshadow and we, our minds alight as never before, walk quickly, trying to escape the  
shadows.

Everything is revealed.

What can we see that we did not see before? Three things:

1. We can see clearly now, what we only glimpsed before, that radical change is morally necessary.
2. We can see clearly now, what we might not have believed before, that structural change is possible.
3. We can see clearly now, who we must become, in order to be part of that change.

So. Insights one through three.

*Once, some time ago, I stood at sunset on the edge of a mountain lake while a line of yellow fire  
advanced up the ridge through forests killed by drought and beetles. The moon rose, flaky and  
red, apocalyptic, over a black lava plain.*

*Insight one: We can see clearly now, what we only glimpsed before, that radical change is morally necessary.*

For a long time, we've all known that something was terribly wrong with an unjust world rushing toward climate chaos and global extinction.

But you don't have to take my word for it. Examine the nature of the challenges that you are facing today, as you struggle to enter the economic system.

If I were a powerful American plutocrat, and if I wanted no pushback as I grew obscenely rich by stealing and selling what didn't belong to me --

I would design a system exactly like this one.

I would make sure that education was so expensive, that students had to take jobs they didn't believe in, to pay their debt.

I would make health care so expensive that young people would sell their freedom for it.

I would make wages so low, that people would have to work two jobs or three, leaving them no energy to resist.

I would pass laws to make protest a felony and call out the army to enforce them.

I would bungle the moral and medical challenges of the pandemic,  
                   so there was little choice but lockdown and no jobs,  
                   and mile-long lines for food.

Are you surprised at the challenges you face?

This is not bad luck, people. This is a business plan.

Sure, shit happens.

But sometimes people with economic and political power intentionally design systems in which shit is more likely to occur.

That is wrong. **Insight number one: Change is a moral obligation.**

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*Once, a long time ago, long after dark, I piled a group of my Philosophy of Nature students into my drift boat and rowed out onto a mountain lake. The moon rose, bulging out between black mountains. The students talked quietly about  
                   the beauty of the world,  
                   about how much they loved the world,  
                   and how that love empowered them to defend it.*

***Insight number two: We can see clearly now, what we didn't see before, that real, structural change is possible.***

If you are looking for evidence that change is possible, look no further than to the humane social response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has burned the barn of despair to the ground.

It has revealed to us the depth of human goodness and moral resolve.

It has taught us that change will not come from sudden moral awakening on the part of the federal government. It will come from the conscience of the streets.

Maybe we have been taught to despise ourselves.

Maybe politicians have taught us that we are nothing but haters.

Maybe advertisers have taught us that we are nothing but consumers.

Those are lies. We are moral agents, born to create and protect community.

When the pandemic began to spread, people chose to stop flying. They stopped commuting to work. They stayed home from the bars and the butchers.

They did it for the common good, to save lives.

They did it for the elderly, for the sick, for the especially vulnerable poor and people of color.

The price of oil fell below zero dollars per barrel. Carbon emissions fell 17 percent, to as low as they were the year I was born, a long time ago.

We *can* reduce carbon emissions.

We *can* change economically entrenched patterns of consumption.

We *can* reform the structural injustice of a system that makes the poor and people of color disproportionately vulnerable to sickness and early death.

We *can*, every one of us, make sacrifices for the common good  
**and find that there is no more joyous work.**

Offered a choice between “your money or your life,” we *can* choose life.

We can remember that human beings are kin, woven into an achingly beautiful world of living beings, who all share the same origins, who will share the same fate. We can choose to create a culture based on gratitude, reciprocity, justice, and restraint.

We can, yes we can, change. This is very good news. “It’s not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent,” Charles Darwin pointed out, “but the one most responsive to change.”

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*Insight #3: We can now see who we must become.*

*Once, a long time ago, I stood with two other writers in a pear orchard under a full moon. All our lives, we had felt powerless, but that night, we somehow understood that, like the moon itself, we are children of the Earth, pulled from her spinning surface. And so we will take on the duties of the moon, we promised.*

*We will not turn our faces away from Earthly troubles. . . .*

*The shadow of the Earth will pass over our faces, but it will not erase us; at the edge of that moving shadow, our faces, our characters, will be most clearly seen.*

*And here's what matters. At that point, we didn't know what we would do. But we knew **who we must become**.* And so will you find yourself and your work, which is to seize this chance, maybe this last chance, to redeem the beautiful promise of this world and of your humanity.

Who are the people who will redeem the world? I think I know.

They will be people of intellectual integrity, educated to understand the universal story of a world that is finite, resilient, interdependent, and astonishingly beautiful.

They will be people of radical imagination and vision, reinventing everything, dreaming the world anew.

The people who redeem the world will be people who understand that hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the couch and clutch, feeling lucky. Hope is the red-handled axe that you use to break down doors in an emergency, as Rebecca Solnit said.

They will be people of deep moral courage, who refuse to be made into foot soldiers in the old economy's war against the world, who refuse to be disempowered by despair. They will be people who love this raucous, reeling world, who affirm its absolute value and defend it fiercely and faithfully, for all time.

Class of 2020, you have the education. You have the vision. You have the wild, roaring imagination. You have the hope. May you take a deep breath to summon the moral courage, and may it sustain you in the great work ahead.