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Commencement Address  
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The Problems That Don’t Yet Exist

Friends, classmates, peers who are just now learning of my existence:

I feel like I’m on the brink of an existential crisis. I’ve felt that way for the past ten weeks, and if I’m being honest, for much longer. I bet that you’ve been feeling similarly. The familiar structure that has existed in our lives since the age of 5 is about to vanish, potentially forever.

Maybe these questions of my existence are coming on because I’m starting to see that I’ve changed while at Carleton. Or maybe, it’s because I feel as though I’ve changed, but my predicament of not really knowing what the future holds for me still hasn’t. For many of us, the future isn’t quite so clear. Because of Carleton, I’ve come to see that as something both terrifying and thrilling.

Jimmy Kolker, a Carleton graduate of the class of 1970, delivered our opening convocation address three years ago. He graduated in a year when HIV had never been clinically observed, but he later went on to serve as chief of UNICEF’s HIV/AIDS division, and to lead the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief worldwide. When he graduated, he didn’t know what careers his life would encounter either.

But during his 2010 Convo speech, he said a few words that still, three years later, chill me to my core. He applied his own life journey to our current college experience, and said: a liberal arts education prepares you to solve the problems that don’t yet exist.

Oh no... I’m uncomfortable even making sustained direct eye contact, and now I’m supposedly part of a group of people tasked with solving the problems that don’t even exist??

But maybe he’s right.

Throughout these past four years, we’ve been presented with problems that don’t have clear answers. How can we model these data that don’t follow the rules? How can we make these arguments have a real-world impact? Or, more frequently than I’d like to admit: How can I write this 20-page paper about this thing I don’t really understand and it’s due... tomorrow?

The Carleton experience is unique in that it isn’t designed specifically to make you feel smart, or make you feel like a good writer, or motivate you to change the world. But we have gained those things, nonetheless. I think it’s because the Carleton experience, at its core, exists to push you to be brave. It pushes you to be brave by surrounding you with deeply supportive people.

It exists to do that, and I think it succeeded.

We entered Carleton not knowing the empathy and integrity that would exist behind every door. We’ve encountered professors who are willing to sacrifice their entire evening to talk about an
idea we have for the final project, professors who are as excited for our summer internships as we are. We’ve had deans who, after receiving our quiet emails asking for help in assisting a depressed friend, make sure that our friend gets the help they need. But also, make sure that we are doing ok.

We’ve found friends here who will support our craziest ideas. “Let’s write poems and mail them to complete strangers, let’s try to start a bee club, let’s take the advanced ice skating class despite having no prior experience.” Ok, why not! Our friends here are smart and hilarious. Our friends will feverishly scream for us as we writhe around on the ground in leopard print leggings to a poorly executed dance routine to a Katy Perry song. Our friends will read our favorite parts of *Franny and Zooey* aloud to us just because they know it reminds us of home.

Somehow, over four years, a network of strangers has become a constellation of comfort – people who understand us and deeply care about us. A community of passionate, curious, and supportive people has enabled us to gain a tremendous amount of courage. What’s the cost of making a mistake when you’re surrounded by people who really care about you?

We’ve lived these past few years in a unique world where our peers don’t compete with us but encourage us. In feeling that supportive push of our friends, professors, and everyone else, we’ve hopefully arrived at the conclusion that we’re being encouraged to take new risks because others can see our worth. The people sitting around us really believe in us. And we should believe in us too, a feat in and of itself that often requires the most bravery.

So to Jimmy Kolker, that Carleton grad from 1970:

I could say that we’re prepared to solve the problems that don’t yet exist because we’re well-rounded, because a liberal arts education has equipped us with an arsenal of knowledge. And that very well may be true. But above everything else, I think we’re prepared to solve these unknown problems because we’re up for the challenge. Because we’ve seen so many other Carls say yes. Because this community has nourished within us a spirit that isn’t afraid to fail.

Mister Rogers once said, “If only you could sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.” Our families and friends sitting around us have had a profound impact in shaping who we’ve grown to be. And we grew stronger because of the support of our Carleton family -- people who pushed us and love us for who we are.

We owe it to ourselves and our communities to continue living with the courage granted to us by our Carleton experience. For as long as we can feel our own worth, we must have the strength to be brave.

Bravery, that unique Carleton trait within all of us, is exactly the tool that will solve the problems that don’t yet exist.