

Commencement Address
Marlboro College Graduate School
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President McCulloch-Lovell, Dean Glejzer, Dean Conley, Marlboro Faculty, Graduates, Students, Family, and Friends.

It is an unusual honor for me to be speaking to you today. I have had the opportunity to teach many of you along the way to this day. So speaking to you has a more personal connection than I suspect most commencement speakers have with their audience. I have witnessed your commitment to the Marlboro Graduate programs and know just how much you've done to get to the place you are today.

My connection here is primarily through the MBA for Managing Sustainability Program and I will focus on that subject, sustainability, this morning, but regardless of which program you are leaving, sustainability is a topic to which you will have to pay close attention. Your work at Marlboro will help you cope with the world out there, a hurting world in many respects. You can tend to those injuries in whatever institution you land in, including, as I know, new enterprises created by those graduates choosing an entrepreneurial path. But whatever path you take will, I hope, have a bright white center stripe, labeled, sustainability. That goes for all of you, not just those finishing an MBA.

Some of you already know that I study and write about the topic of sustainability, usually taking a highly critical view of what is currently being done in its name. I offer an alternative vision I believe will put us on the right path. Today I would like to talk about three opposing distinctions that are critical to sustainability. I am sure all of you have been instructed to know the difference between the first of these: right and wrong. You are here due in large part by putting this polarized choice into practice. Given the universal knowledge of this most basic choice, let me move on.

There are two more such critical polar choices you will need to make if you want to contribute to the healthy, flourishing world that sustainability, as I define it, refers to. Sustainability always needs something to refer to; otherwise it has no practical meaning. Do not be fooled by the empty way it is being used everywhere today. Whenever it is used as an adjective, for example, sustainable business, it means keeping going whatever noun is referred to, business in this case. My vision of sustainability, a noun, refers to the presence of flourishing, that is, living to one's full potential. A flourishing world is not perfect, or utopian, but one where everyone is intentionally acting out of care for themselves, other humans, and all the rest of the world.

The second of the two choices is between complicated and complex. Knowing the difference is very important to how you go about solving problems, both in your profession and in your life in general. Complicated situations and systems are those that can be explained by a set of rules that can be written down on paper. If we are careful in applying the rules, the system usually works as planned. The occasional breakdowns can usually be fixed by reapplying the rules.

But a more serious problems associated with complicated systems is that they frequently produce unintended consequences or, in the vernacular, side effects. These unwanted outcomes are not side or insignificant, and are as much of the output as are whatever the systems were designed for. The cancer-producing effect of smoking is one example. Cheap, easily available high calorie food creates excessive obesity. But none of these has the scale of the unintended consequences of following the rules driving modern cultures in the US and other affluent nations. Global warming arises from the dominant use of fossil fuels. Inequality, a result of excessive reliance on markets, diminishes the fullness of human life. When put together these effects have been given a now familiar name, unsustainability, that is, the presence of many indications that our global socio-economic system is failing to produce what we humans would like it to do.

Unsustainability or any failures of systems to do precisely what we want can ultimately be traced back to the inadequacy of the models and rules to fully describe the real world in which they operate. On paper, they seem just fine, but in practice they lead to failures. That's because the real world is not just some very complicated machine as it has been conceived since Rene Descartes invented the scientific method, the now only "authorized" way we follow to create knowledge about the world. In spite of such authority, the world, especially when human beings are involved, cannot be reduced to a closed set of such rules.

In contrast to being complicated, all systems that depend on human intentions are complex. This difference is so critically important to sustainability, I will repeat it. By complex, I mean systems and situations that cannot be reduced to a finite set of rules or formulas. Humans add a dimension of unknowability because human behavior does not, thank goodness, follow a set of analytic rules. Donald Rumsfeld, not one of my favorite people, captured the difference between complicated and complex very well in remarks he made back in 2002 about the situation in Iraq:

There are known knowns . . . things we know that we know.

There are known unknowns . . . things that we now know we don't know.

But there are also unknown unknowns. . . things we do not know we don't know.

We write computer programs using known algorithms. We manage all kinds of

organizations using strategic rules like those taught to MBAs. Further, because the rules are reduced to some mathematical format, the important outputs become numerically measured: profit as the measure of a firm's product, GDP as the measure of a nation's production, or wealth as the measure of an individual's well-being. The more complicated the systems we work with, the more likely we are to make mistakes, but we can, in theory again, add sufficiently to our knowledge to fix them. Conversely, trying to describe complexity through scientifically derived rules always leaves out something that even supercomputers cannot supply. Because complexity cannot be reduced to a closed set of rules, there are always going to be unknown unknowns. We can't do anything about the existence of such unknown unknowns, but we can change our ways of designing and problem solving to acknowledge this fact. More about this in a few minutes.

The second critical polarity is between need and care. Our entire socio-economic system is built on a very simple premise: humans are insatiably needy creatures. We are assumed to have some innate set of needs and preferences built into our minds. We spend our lives filling these needs in order of our preferences. Interestingly, no neurobiologist or psychologist has ever discovered either the needs or preferences in our brains or bodies. Need is only an invention, but an invidious and insidious one.

Our current institutions are built to satisfy needs. They also simultaneously reinforce the very idea of need, creating a vicious cycle that leads to hyper-consumption that, in turn, depletes and destroys the life-supporting capabilities of Earth. We spend our resources in pursuit of the needs we are told by the voice of our culture we must continuously satisfy. Like addicts, we consume mindlessly, never becoming satisfied, always needing more. We laugh off our addiction with consumption-themed sayings, like, "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping," or we listen to the advice that President Bush gave the Nation shortly after 9/11. He told us to, "Go shopping." People joke, "the one with the most toys when he or she dies wins." Wins what I really don't know.

Humans, as well as the Earth, suffer from the unintended consequences of our hyper-consumptive economy. For one, we live on a treadmill, mimicking Sisyphus, never able to stop pushing our burdens uphill. Happiness is always just over the top of that hill we can never reach. Virtues esteemed since antiquity are disappearing in the mechanical, transactional way we live. Friendships are counted rather than nourished. We hire professional potty trainers replacing the important relationships nurtured between parent and child. Frank Bruni, writing for the New York Times, recently noted an increase in hiring personal trainers, He wrote:

What therapists were to the more cerebral New York of yesteryear, trainers are to the more superficial here and now: designated agents of self-actualization, florid expressions of self-indulgence, must-have accessories, must-cite authorities.

Care is the polar opposite of need, those “florid expressions of self indulgence,” that Bruni mentions. Care can transform the vicious cycle to a virtuous one, producing more and more flourishing. Taking care means attending to a set of worldly tasks common to all people, including, for example, subsistence, learning, family, creativity, spirituality, and the entire non-human world that we call our environment. These and a few other categories are not just random thoughts, but represent all the ways human beings have shown care since our species evolved. Human beings, even before the invention of language and complicated tools, had to take care of such categories in order to survive and prosper. Care means understanding what is going on around you and designing your actions accordingly.

Caring is never ending. One might say that life is just a continuing series of caring acts. But continuing is not the same as insatiable. Each domain of care can be satisfied at some moment. Once a child becomes an adult, the earlier familial caring can be set aside. Whenever all the domains of care have been satisfied, at least for the moment, flourishing comes forth. Flourishing is an active idea. Care implies the intentionality to create change in the world, far beyond the mere satisfaction of need. Care carries a sense of responsibility to contribute to flourishing everywhere, a sense completely absent from need.

We cannot delegate the responsibility to care for the complex, interconnected world on which our very lives depend to some complicated technological machine and its operators. Each of us is an integral, interconnected part of our planetary system. Sustainability cannot be produced from the workings of the vast machine we call the economy merely through eco-efficient operations. Only the intentional caring efforts of everyone working together can create flourishing. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” idea works even better if applied to care. Significantly, Smith originally invented the phrase, referring not to self-interest, but to empathy, a quality closely related to caring. If we are successful in creating flourishing over an extended period of time, not just at random intervals, we can, then, claim that sustainability has arrived, at least until it disappears again.

Selecting the wrong distinction in each of the pairings has contributed heavily to the unsustainable state of the today’s world. Society places sanctions on those who act wrongly. The results of the other two choices are less recognized. Treating complexity as merely complicated always creates unintended consequences, because, as I noted earlier, our analytic models never quite fully describe the real world to which we are directing our attention. Insatiable needs within a finite world is clearly impossibility, even with ever more efficient technology. Further, the economic system designed to titillate and fill our needs produces its own unintended consequences—the externalities we learn about in environmental economics. Climate change is perhaps the best-known example of the

damage to the environment done by economic outputs nobody owns or wants. We are surely and not so slowly using up the resources that the next generations of humans will have available to nurture them. We are already destroying the life support system for many other living species. Extinction rates have multiplied in recent years. I could go on for quite a time counting the many ways our current cultural set of beliefs is failing us.

That's a lot of bad news but I bring some good news also. The good news is that the many of the environmental and human problems all of you will have to confront are, at their roots, caused by actions based on the two beliefs I have discussed: complicated and need. Our present societal mantra might be, "Life is just a complicated maze that we needy humans must navigate." The key terms, complicated and needy, are beliefs only: they are human constructions and, as such, can be replaced by others, better chosen to deal with the real world out there.

It's very important to keep the difference straight, especially when you are trying to solve challenging problems—exactly what your programs at Marlboro enable you to do. Complexity demands a fundamentally different framing than does complicatedness. Fortunately, such a framework, pragmatism, exists and has been available formally since the end of the 19th century. Pragmatism, as opposed to the positivist ideology of the normal sciences, can be described simply as learning how something works by observing it in action, not in some isolated laboratory or computer modeling exercise. This process gives us *understanding*, more powerful in action than theoretical, context-free knowledge. Such experiential learning presumes that there is no positively true answer to our questions about how the world works and, consequently, only one way to go. We learn about complex systems by mucking about, carefully tweaking them, and making adjustments according to what we observe. Gardening is the epitome of pragmatism. The success of a garden rests on the artfulness of the gardener, not on some tome on agricultural science. Learning when to go by the book versus when to garden is critical to your ability to reduce unsustainability and to create flourishing.

I have offered you now two important ways to create sustainability in your everyday activities at work, home, school, atelier, and elsewhere. The first is to think and act pragmatically, testing your ideas against some measure of success that you share with all others involved. Pragmatic knowledge is always a community output. Always remember what you did so that you can start from there when you next encounter a problematic situation. Pragmatism is not efficient in the economist's sense, but it is effective and will get you through complex situations with less likelihood you will create unintended effects opposed to your intentions. Pragmatism's methods force you to be both present and intentional in whatever situation you are involved.

The second is to care for your world, rather than to seek the satisfaction of your imagined needs. Think care, not need, whenever you are acting. If you are careful about the

language you use and act accordingly, you and your collaborators will start to reverse the dangerous course we space travelers are on. Think about what are you doing to take care of the essential domains of life? Think of providing your customers and clients such goods and services that will build their capacity to care, rather than provide something they merely “need.” You leave Marlboro with tools to do this that most students never get. If you attend to these two critical distinctions, a new mantra will arise, “Life is a complex maze that we caring humans must muddle through.” The small differences in language from the earlier version will eventually create an entirely different, potentially flourishing world.

Let me end with a few words from Antoine Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, that I used to close my recent book, *Flourishing*. This short passage represents for me the epitome of care. The whole story of *The Little Prince* is built around themes I have been talking about: caring, pragmatism, the dangers of narrow-minded ideological thinking. In the last chapter, the Little Prince meets a fox in the desert who speaks to him about care in an allegorical way. The Little Prince wants to befriend the fox, but the fox replies that first he the fox, must be tamed. The Little Prince asks him, “What does that mean– ‘to tame’?” The fox replies, “[Taming] is an act too often neglected . . . It means to establish ties. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”

It would very hard to find more evocative words to describe caring. But the line that touches me the most is the secret the fox tells to the Prince as he says goodbye. “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” This is a great metaphor for pragmatism. Someday, when flourishing comes home, the poets among us will write the story, but until then, each one of you will have to work with these ideas, lacking the fabric a good storyteller like-Saint Exupéry can weave.

Thank you, and may you find flourishing in your lives and in those around you.