



INAUGURATION SPEECH, MAY 2018  
LYNN MORTON

UNDERSTANDING



Thank you, Pamela, for that generous introduction. You have been my mentor in leadership for the past 14 years. I have learned so much from you. I am deeply grateful for that.

Greetings! To our students, faculty, and staff, my friends and family, and to our honored guests. I am filled with gratitude for the presence of my family, my fellow presidents, my colleagues from Warren Wilson College and former colleagues from Queens University of Charlotte, my friends, for all of you who have taken time out of your busy lives to be here with me, with us, today. Thank you. I am grateful every day, not just this day, for history, relationships, and the new people who have come into my life this year, for this beautiful mountain land that we steward, for these students, faculty and staff who learn and do, hands on, all in, every day.

The title of my talk today is simply, Understanding. I feel sometimes that I've spent my entire life trying to understand things, starting with something called "new math" in elementary school. What happened to "old math"? I never did understand that. And then there was something in college called "transformational grammar." I was not transformed, and I never understood how the grammar was either. As a college professor for most of my adult life, I spent a great deal of my time helping students understand poetry (particularly the notion that everything in a poem is not a symbol, and a poem is not just a word puzzle), helping them understand literature of various kinds, and helping them understand the classics, such as writings by the ancients that were so influential on



western thought — but also to understand the not classics, such as writing that is non-western and created by people outside the mainstream,

So when I say that I didn't understand these things or that I was helping my students to understand, it would seem that arriving at an understanding of a subject or a person is the GOAL. But recently I've been thinking that the understanding itself is less important than the PROCESS of learning to understand.

We don't put a lot of emphasis on process. We're results people, typically, in our culture. We get all worked up when we have achieved something, but sometimes the achievement looks like it appeared out of nowhere. For example, with the exception of learning a language, because virtually no one ever claims full and final proficiency on that one, we say, "The baby is walking! My daughter rode her bike for the first time last weekend! I won the tennis game!" We don't spend a lot of time celebrating the many times the baby looked like she wanted to walk but didn't, the times the daughter fell over on her bike, or even the many lost games and racquets thrown into the bushes on the way to winning that tennis match.

Take writing, for example. What matters is the result, but there is a whole process involved, and it is often difficult. Once I thought writing was easy. That was in elementary school. In teaching writing, and in doing a lot of it, I realized that nobody cared much how I got there, the result was what mattered. But the process is really important and worth paying attention to. In the weeks leading up to an important talk or when I am writing a piece, I listen to intuition. Often, a word will repeat itself, or a phrase, in my mind, and that is my way into the subject. In the case of writing this talk, for today, the intuition, or the universe, was largely silent. The first words that entered my mind were unhelpful. "Fried chicken. Resolution. Resolution to eat less fried chicken." This was obviously not going to be easy.

So, right at the outset, I am going to confess to you that this is the hardest talk I have ever written. I feel like I am walking on eggshells. That I might offend someone, or cause too much controversy just by talking about the topic of understanding. That is either deeply ironic or very revealing, or both. We are living in a time when college campuses have become as polarized if not even more so than the rest of the country. In past weeks, the Chronicle of Higher Education has featured multiple stories about culture wars, political polarization, students and faculty standing in so-called Free Speech Zones screaming at one another. That is almost enough to convince me to talk about something benign,

like...bees....something I don't even really feel strongly about in order to play it safe. But I bet you can tell by now I'm not going to do that.

So, I think it's important to frame this talk. What I'm interested in today, is not free speech, political polarization or politics at all, trigger warnings, hate speech and the definition of it. I am interested in something related to all that, but I am not about to tackle those issues in 15 minutes in one of first public and probably videotaped talks. I may be bold, but I am not stupid.

Instead, I am interested in these questions today: How can we live each day with intention so as to improve the hours, days, and lives of those humans around us? How can we rebuild that which is collapsing, shore up that which is drifting, redirect that which is heading towards the negative? How can we be open to joy, to the challenges of truly seeing other people? How can we understand before we judge, listen before we speak, make balm instead of napalm? What does it mean to understand another point of view, another person? Could it be much richer than hanging out with only those who agree with us or calling out those who do not agree with us? What makes a more meaningful existence?

These are questions I struggle with myself. I am far from perfect or fully formed when it comes to this discipline, this process, of understanding. Once upon a time, when I was much, much younger, I thought that the most important thing in the world was to show how smart I was by wittily making



fun of other people. Once I thought that I was right about almost everything, and my job was to convince other people that I was right about almost everything. I used to say things like, “I refuse to have a battle of wits with an unarmed person.” I am happy to say, that gradually, I began to change, to want to make the world a better place. To want to understand more and judge less.

I struggle with this personally sometimes, particularly in recent years. There was this one night that was deeply embarrassing, so of course I’d choose share it in front of several hundred people. But it’s important to show that I am not standing up here lecturing you from a place of serene self-actualization. This particular episode humbles me and makes me remember how far I myself have to go in this discipline of understanding.

Hypothetically, let’s call it election night, let’s say in 2016, when I was watching TV to see what would happen. When I found myself surprised by what was happening, like any other highly educated person I went to The Oracle to see if I could understand what was happening. I opened FaceBook, and I realized from the feeds that something astonishing was indeed happening. In fact, I contributed to the seriousness of the events unfolding by insightfully asking on my feed, “Hey, what is happening?” When my political science colleagues were silent, I thought perhaps my grandmother had been right about the rapture, the rapture was happening, and everyone with any insight into the matter had been transported into heaven, leaving only us confused people. And then someone I didn’t know, a friend of a friend on FaceBook, wrote her view of the answer: “What’s happening is that America is being saved from itself.” And another wrote, “What’s happening is that we’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore.” Then there was the comment, “I guess all you liberals are really surprised.” These comments sparked the beginning of the dawning realization about the deep polarization and misunderstanding in this country.

We should have seen it coming.

Friends, this whole thing has not been going well. Thanksgiving dinner has always been fraught, what with Uncle Jim drinking too much and talking about the Viet Cong and all, and what with that underdone turkey even though Aunt Sue told you a million times to make sure it was defrosted before you put it in the oven, not to mention those children who have never been disciplined properly -- but now we have (as we say in the south) a whole ‘nother level of disagreement to engage in. Or alternatively, if we all agree politically, we can spend the whole time together agreeing about how positively awful everything and every PERSON on the other side is and feeling really good about that and about ourselves.

Okay, it's scary for all of us, maybe for different reasons, but we are at least united in our nervousness. So I figure we have three choices: we can stay in our separate corners only venturing out for the occasional screaming match, we can try to ignore the polarization and politics (my mama said never to talk about politics or religion at the dinner table anyway — she didn't mention public speeches in front of hundreds of people) or we can work together to try to figure out how to make the world a better place, one relationship at a time, one understanding at a time.

Some will counter that protest makes the world a better place, and obviously they are right. History shows that actively resisting and not being silent anymore is necessary and effective, so I am NOT arguing that we should not get out there and stand up for what we believe in. What I am advocating is that on a personal level, every day, we can seek to see each individual as a fellow human being who has an interesting world view that we can try to understand. We can intentionally walk through the world with a spirit of compassion, we can stop talking long enough to listen, and we can acknowledge that reasonable people can disagree, unreasonable people can also disagree, and that even we can be unreasonable at times.

The only way to get there is to focus on the process of understanding and stop thinking so much about what it would look like if we were perfect at it. Because friends, we're never



going to be perfect at it. It takes intention, and it takes work. And who better to do this work than us at Warren Wilson College, because we are not afraid of work!

Our College's history shows that we at this institution are truly and uniquely qualified for this work. First, we don't just say, we DO. This very special work college was founded, on this beautiful land right here, as the Asheville Farm School for Appalachian Boys, by the Women's Mission of the Presbyterian church, driven by a mission to offer access to education to those who had no access, in a physically and socially challenging part of the country the Women's Mission knew very little about -- the southern Appalachian mountains. Reflect on that for a second. Women, in 1894, at a time when they themselves had relatively little access to education, founding an entrepreneurial farm school to teach young men their letters and numbers and also some useful skills in farming. The young men, all in their late teens and twenties, labored on the land in exchange for the education that otherwise none of them could have afforded. Now THAT is thinking outside the box.

And then, not long after, the mission was expanded to include young women. In 1942 during WWII, the Asheville Farm School merged with the Dorland School for Girls and the Asheville Normal School for Teachers. The iconic and progressive Arthur Bannerman and dean Doc Jensen, heads of the school for half a century, had argued for the admission of women a decade before, at a time when education was largely segregated by gender and certainly by race. But finally, their ideas became reality. And even before WWII and certainly after, international students began to flood into Warren Wilson as a result of Presbyterian mission work and the migration of post-war Europe. This two year junior college, again ahead of its time, in 1952, admitted its first African American student, Alma Shippy -- who lived in the residence hall, Sunderland, right behind you -- before the courts ordered desegregation. The welcoming of international students continued through the years, and the college embraced students from all of the world with their variety of religions, world views, and skin colors. All this year, I have met these living alumni from Nepal, China, Finland, Africa, Europe, Japan. Understanding other worldviews is part of our DNA. And we are doing what we can to celebrate, again, this part of our identity.



This year, we welcomed students from

- Sri Lanka
- Lithuania
- South Korea
- Northern Ireland
- China
- Japan
- France
- Argentina
- Costa Rica

And next year, we hope to include students from these countries as well as

- Zimbabwe
- Ghana
- Afghanistan
- Belize
- Jamaica
- The Gambia
- Brazil

Warren Wilson College's ever-evolving work program has offered access to education to students who never could have afforded college, a large number of international students, affluent students, students from all over the country and the world, all working side by side in community. In keeping this

College running they learned, just in the process of doing it, how to understand one another.





So, tell me, why wouldn't we be a leader in how to foster understanding, community, and bridge divides of politics, ethnicity, economics and worldview?

The origins of the word "understand" tell us a lot. The word comes from the Old English *understandan* where the "under" came from words that meant, literally, "in the midst of." The origin of "under" before Old English were from Proto Indo European *\*nter-* "between, among" (the source also of Sanskrit *antar* "among, between," Latin *inter* "between, among," Fun fact: The Greek word *entera* is related, but it means, amusingly, "intestines."

So to stand among, to stand in the midst of, is to understand. Think, too, about the word "stand." It is active, expressed in "taking a stand," "standing up for your rights, standing for your ideals" and "standing around aimlessly" is different than "lying around aimlessly." We should stop thinking of understanding as an activity only for passive people with no courage for a good fight, and start thinking of it as an active choice requiring training and discipline. To do it properly, you can't fib and just say "I understand" in order to get out of the conversation, not that any of us in relationships have ever done such a thing.

So to be clear, I am not advocating that we can change the world by sitting on the sofa and being nicer to people, or just saying gently, "I understand." The relatively new term "slacktivism" refers to a type of passive activism (now there's an oxymoron!) in which people stay home and "like" social change and political movements rather than going out and actually doing the work. In response, organizations like UNICEF have launched social media campaigns in which they asserted "Likes don't save lives" and encouraged people to actively support UNICEF through donations and direct action rather than passively supporting the organization by liking their advertisements to show how much empathy they have. I'm not advocating this form of slacktivism, and I'm not advocating disengagement that we call "understanding." Not at all.

I am advocating that we can change the world by doing some really hard stuff -- actively seeking out opinions and people different than ourselves, standing among them, and working to understand their points of view, their worldview, who they are. In the process of this work, we might actually learn more, we might become smarter, stronger, better people, and over time, our culture might become a better place to live. Certainly we could stop feeling like every conversation is a potentially dangerous place to be, a minefield.

All I am saying, is give peace a chance. When encountering a viewpoint or a person unfamiliar or even uncomfortable to our initial understanding, could we resist the urge to stereotype, typecast, demonize, and instead, just ask a question? Then could we listen to the answer? You don't have to abandon your values or your beliefs to try to understand where another person is coming from, or to stand with them in our shared humanity.

I am very proud of the work we are already doing here to, well, give peace a chance. This past January, over 325 people on our campus--students, faculty and staff, all participated in a dialogue called Free Speech and Inclusion in a model created by Tufts University Center for Democracy using a roadmap for deliberative dialogue from Campus Compact. You may have heard that we have a few passionate opinions around here. Nevertheless, 38 of our folks trained all Fall semester to facilitate a deliberative dialogue, and we successfully entertained eight possible viewpoints on free speech and no one got hurt. Faculty, staff, and students all talked about their assumptions, about what they had learned, and even about what made them uncomfortable with current free speech debates. And in the process, people across our campus talked to people with whom they had not even previously spoken. We will be having a campus wide dialogue every January where we hone our skills in talking together.

It feels good to connect with another human being. It feels good to have self-discipline in what could be an argument and



turn it around to become an opportunity for connection. Debate has its place, but rarely does anyone ever truly win. To test this thought, think about the last argument you had with a loved one. Who won? But then think about the last time someone understood you. When someone “wins” an argument, they stand over you. When they stand with you, they understand you.

Warren Wilson College, I stand with you. My fervent wish is that we will stand with each other, beside each other, in the finest hour of our long and inclusive history, in a time when doing so may be harder than ever. We have the will, and the discipline, and the desire to make the world a better place. Together, we can show the world how understanding is done, how yes, you can stand up for your values while standing beside your fellow human being.

As your president, I am deeply committed to this vision of Warren Wilson: that we lead in developing understanding on our campus and in our communities. I’m so grateful for the opportunity to lead you on this path, to walk with you in understanding, and to be the place where you know you are understood.



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