

1997 Convocation Speech at Dartmouth College: Louise Erdrich
(Class of 1976)
(Sept. 23, 1997)

CONVOCATION SPEECH

Ahneen, apijigo megwitch. Niminwehndam ikidooyeg noongoom
onishishin geezhigud.

I entered Dartmouth in 1972, a member of the first freshman
class of women and in the first class of Native Americans. I had
never been east of the Mississippi. I didn't know what a bagel
was. I found Brooklynese both strange and moving. I'd never met
a Californian, never heard the term prep school. I was
frightened of my new surroundings and overpowered by the classes
I was sure I'd fail.

And I did fail.

I am standing before you, now, not as the invited alum, not
as the returning honoree, but as someone whose biggest
accomplishment has been to fail, and fail with all of her heart,
at many things. I am not here to tell you how to succeed. You
have plenty of people who can tell you how to do that. I'm here
to tell you how to fail, for there is an art to it that I have
learned.

I will tell you about it by telling you what has happened since I first accepted the honor of speaking at this convocation.

At the time, my family life and that of our children was intact. In the months after, my husband Michael Dorris, a vibrant member of the Dartmouth community, took his own life. I thought, of course, of cancelling this engagement and retreating completely from public life. But I knew that if I did, I would lose a very powerful chance to address those of you, and that includes all of you, whose lives will include grave setbacks and shocks, and yes, failures. I would lose the chance to address you human to human, as though there were no age, no difference, no podium between us. I would lose the chance to speak to you as someone who entered Dartmouth more scared than you, more confused, more filled with irrational self confidence, yet without any self esteem whatsoever.

And yet, somehow, I am standing right here talking to you.

Had I succeeded in everything I tried at Dartmouth, I would not be a writer. For instance, math. I entered before the invention of the microchip, when the computer itself, at Kiewit, was the size of a tennis court. My programs, based on dream logic, threw the system into such a tizzy that I passed Math for Poets only on the condition I did not approach the computer again. I headed for Sanborn, made my home at the English

Department, and embarked on a life of failing passionately at the thing I love to do most.

One thing I could do at Dartmouth, one thing that did keep me going, was my work study job at Thayer Dining Hall. I rose before dawn every morning, went in, and made breakfast. I am proud to say that I believe, whether or not it is true, that I was the first woman at Dartmouth to be trusted with the pancake spatula. I had a terrific boss who'd once been a high ranking army cook. He taught me to poach and scramble. He also taught me organization, tenacity, and how to crack 30 or 40 dozen eggs four at a time. I can still crack eggs one-handed, and I learned that there are many people here, besides professors, who will teach you what you need to know. So let the people who work all around you to make this a good place, people in the accounts office, library, dormitory, buildings and grounds, also be your instructors.

Challenge is an inevitable part of education. Despair and exhaustion are part of challenge. You will hit some walls here - - emotional, intellectual -- part of growing is that sometimes you clear them and sometimes you don't. Whether you clear the walls or not, the stress of trying can deplete you to the point of depression. I have to say this in the light of our family year. Treat any signs of depression as you would a dangerous virus. See the excellent doctors here. Get help. See your dean.

Talk to your friends. Depression is an illness that feeds on isolation.

I can tell you, no one who loves a suicide will ever be intact again. We are left holding the curve of the question mark, above the dark period of that decision.

And yet it is possible, I hope, to hold that question in the open as an archway for others to safely pass beneath. True knowledge, deep knowledge, includes the pain and mess of life, but also, and most importantly, I think, it includes extraordinary, everyday, joy. Knowledge doesn't come in a tidy package. In the years to come, reach out to others with trust. Cultivate your inner resilience and strength, because to trust, you must have the soul of a great athlete, one who can rebound when trust is violated, and revive to throw yourself again and again at the goal of understanding.

Fail with the same attitude that you succeed. For the two are more alike if you regard them with an open mind. Failure is a consequence of taking risks. So, if you have taken a risk that leads to failure, you must see yourself as having succeeded in taking a true, real, important risk. A chance. A challenge. There is honor in that.

With this attitude, many of your risks and failures will turn to opportunities. If I hadn't taken risks beyond my

understanding, for instance, I wouldn't have the opportunity to speak to you now.

During this year of listening to loss, I was at times advised to turn my problems over to a higher power. But higher powers don't have to pay taxes while in shock, make edible meals, wake grieving children up on cold, gray mornings and at the last minute find cleverly stashed school shoes. No higher power wanted to take on those mundane jobs. There may be times you, too, have to dig deep for strength, so I want to tell you about the person I found to fill in for me when times got tough.

I turned my problems over to an earthen soul, a person I call Nurse Louise. My Nurse Louise took care of the weaker, frightened, uncertain, impulsive, sorrowing Louise who had, once upon a time, immersed herself in her fictions. Nurse Louise, a realist, came to my rescue. Told me to look inside. I did. Instead of an inner child, I found her, an inner grandma, a tough old lady with an attitude.

My inner grandma -- and I'm sure you all have one, or a similar person -- told me not to give up reading to my children, acquiring pets, running, planting flowers, enjoying parents and family, playing piano, loving deeply, hurting, praying, growing tomatoes and learning languages.

For several years, I have been studying my native language, that is, Ojibwa. The final reason I wanted to be here was this -

- to speak to you here on this historic occasion in a language that by all rights should have disappeared a century ago but, like native people, is alive and enduring today.

I want to say to you things that only can be said in Ojibwa.

It is a language in which everyone is related, and, significantly today, in Ojibwa there are no gender distinctions. Everything is either animate or inanimate, alive or dead, and that distinction is the result of a private understanding of the world. There is no word for greed in Ojibwa. No way to convey the concept of personal ownership of this immense and flowing earth. It is a language entered in the Guinness book of records for its endless number of verbs. Ojibwa words describe every movement and temperature and visual sense of water. It is the language that my grandfather Anishinabe Patrick Gourneau, his father Keeshkimunishoo, the Kingfisher, and my great aunt Shyoosh, a healer, spoke. It is a language that my late husband, Michael Dorris, taught me to appreciate.

Ikwaywug, ininiwug, Dartmouth --

Nibago sendam sana gigah nandagikendan, nibagosendam gigah gikina waabaaman, meenawa giminobimaadisin omah. Chi gikino maday wigamigoong a'aw mazhii gewag mekina. Gibimosaym a'aw mikina giga nisidotamawaa.

Mino aya sana.

Women and men of Dartmouth, I dearly hope you learn here in the fullest way and lead a good life, that is, a life of kindness, challenge, vision and consideration. This college has prepared a road for you. As you walk this road, you will understand that the beauty of the road lies partly in its difficulty, just as the most scenic roads traverse the roughest terrain. Don't forget, you walk in others' tracks and leave tracks as well. Make them straight, keep your path true, for these tracks will forever show the character of your passage.

Live well, in blessings.

Apijigo megwitch.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lewis Edson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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