

Oregon Institute of Technology Commencement Address, June 11, 2022, by Terry L. Cross

You may also view a [video of this commencement address, and the full commencement, here](#). Terry Cross is introduced at 35:15 and his remarks begin at 38:25.

"Good morning graduates, parents, loved ones, educators, staff, and other witnesses of this joyous event. Graduates, my words today are for you, and I hope you will take them with the sense of honor that I hope to convey. For truly I want to honor what you have accomplished by reaching this moment.

At some point in the recent past each of you decided to seek a college degree, to submit yourself to a process of self-discovery and intellectual development. (And probably considerable debt.)

You chose Oregon Institute of Technology, a university that has been described to me as an oasis where students feel safe to explore, grow, and simply “be” in a world in which discerning the truth and testing your identity can be daunting and for some even dangerous. OIT is a prestigious institution and the degree that you have earned is truly valued here in Oregon and elsewhere.

When you began your studies here, none of you could have predicted what would unfold in the world as you worked toward your degrees. The circumstances of 2020 “shattered” all our expectations. As one student put it, the pandemic was “super unexpected.” It would test everyone, and you, as students, would be tested in a myriad of ways. It is said that unanticipated hardships are the most difficult to manage. They are also the most likely to negatively impact morale. The Peace Corp used to have a tag line that went, “Join the Peace Corp, the toughest job you’ll ever love.” They were trying to prepare people for the hardships in front of them. They knew that when people anticipate a challenge, they are better prepared for it. None of us had that advantage with this pandemic. It hit fast and it hit hard.

Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain. It is tension resulting from demanding circumstances or adversity. That’s college. Trauma is a deeply disturbing or distressing experience, an emotional shock, or a life-threatening experience. Stress can become traumatic when it is unmitigated or unmanaged, when it’s chronic, oppressive, or dehumanizing or when it is collective, as we have all experienced with COVID-19.

The pandemic has been a collective trauma. But it was not the only collective trauma we have faced recently, violence, racial injustice, insurrection, war, draught, wildfire, climate change, and economic uncertainty have all strained the seams of our social fabric and they threaten to dismember our social norms. Theda Newbreast of the Blackfeet Nation says that when collective trauma dismembers our world, as colonialism did to our Indigenous peoples, our job is “remembering.” The double meaning is intentional. We put ourselves back together by remembering who we truly are.

As you prepare to embark on the next phase of your journey you face an uncertain world. Chaos, hostility, inflation, a volatile stock market, the threat of gun violence, and not knowing what the next COVID variant will bring. These circumstances are giving us emotional whiplash in ways that most of us have never experienced before.

Despite all of this, or perhaps because of it, you are the class of resilience. You are adaptive. You are dedicated. You are strong. We know this because you are here today. In the Spring of 2020, you made the pivot to online learning, you shifted to evening classes, you multitasked, managing life, child rearing, internships, jobs, health, and self-care, all while in isolation. You faced uncertainty, not sure what would happen next. But most importantly, you learned from it. You learned new and important skills for a changed world. You gained strength. You earned a degree.

I am a grey hair. I speak to you today humbly as an elder in my Haudenosaunee culture and, some would say, in higher education. I want you to know that while your experiences have been unique, you are not the first to face turmoil and uncertainty. Life and change, and indeed our entire human experience occurs in patterns and cycles. This is one of the teachings of my culture. All concentrations of systemic power change with disruption like the earthquakes that occur with the shifting of tectonic plates. We are now in one of those times of disruption. How we handle it will determine our future.

In my youth we faced assassinations, racial injustices and riots, an unjust war, and more. In my parents' generation it was the depression, the Second World War, and the holocaust. For my grandparents it was the Great War, the 1918 flu pandemic, and tuberculosis. And before that it was settler colonialism, killing 80 percent of our population and taking 99 percent of our land. I raise these past episodes not to diminish what you are experiencing now but to affirm that collective trauma does recur in cycles and patterns over time, and we get through it.

What will the future be like? "We won't know until we get there" said one of the OIT students I spoke with in preparation for this address. You are emerging into a grey zone between disruption and normalcy, but it will be a new normal which will never be quite like it was before the pandemic.

Finding a preferred future will depend on making decisions to act jointly. To seek balance between competing interests. To release the energy of tectonic shifts in manageable shocks.

Change is inevitable. You can count on it. And, you have a choice. You can act on it or simply let it act on you.

Will you choose to use your newly minted degree to contribute to the common good and to help create balanced sustainable changes, or will you watch others shape the path ahead for you? You see, we can manage this time of disruption poorly (as we are seeing evidence of today), or we can do better if we use our knowledge and skills working together to create a more harmonious and civil society. Borrowing from Leonard Cohen's song Anthem, "There is a crack in everything." But, "It's how the light gets in." You can be that light!

I urge you to choose the path of the “Good Mind,” a Haudenosaunee concept that calls on us to use our discernment to sort truth from rhetoric and to assert our highest selves. Lead with kindness, respect, restraint, and compassion. Balance personal interests with the common good, in thought and deed. Know that those who came before you, your family, your ancestors, all faced their own uncertainties and still made a place for you to become vital, whole, contributing beings.

Today you make this transition better prepared than when you got here, for whatever comes. Many people likely helped make that possible, but..., you are the ones that persevered to make it here today. Congratulations!

I am honored to say in my language, “Nya:weh Sge:no’,” “I give thanks to see that you are well.” Now, in conclusion, I charge you with this, go forth and “remember a better future” for all of us.”