

Connection in the Age of Information
School of Information and Library Science (SILS)
University of North Carolina
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Commencement Address Delivered by Cathy N. Davidson

I cannot imagine a more important time to graduate from a School of Information and Library Science than now. If we think of our world-changing Information Age as beginning in April 1993 when the Mosaic 1.0 browser was made available to the general public, here *you* are, certified experts in the science of our Information Age. You have the tools, experience, and knowledge to understand this mystifying, electrifying historical moment that the rest of us are grappling with. What *doesn't* count as “information science” in 2012?

This is such a remarkable time. Harvard librarian and historian Robert Darnton says there have only been three other Information Ages of this scope and magnitude in all human history, technological turning points that allowed no going back. The first was the invention of writing in 4000 BCE ancient Mesopotamia; the second, the development of movable type in 10th century China and in Reformation Europe with Gutenberg; and then, in the Industrial Era, the third Information Age happened because steam-powered printing made books cheap enough for middleclass and working class people to buy or borrow for learning and entertainment for the first time in history. And here you are, graduating from the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina just as humanity's fourth great Information Age comes of age—twenty years or one generation in.

How *much* information? 294 billion emails, 2 million blog posts, and 864,000 hours of YouTube video churned out each and every day. *We need you, Information Scientists!* No one ever dreamt the World Wide Web would connect us like this, each to the other, massively and globally, in such a short time in so many ways--personal, economic, intellectual, social, and political.

Connected. That's the keyword of *our* Information Age. And here you are, in 2012, graduating just in time to help us understand what these new forms of virtual, distributed, distance, networked connection might mean to us all. What an achievement, an honor--and what a *responsibility!*

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Graduation is a momentous occasion, a collective social rite of passage and leave-taking. Think about it. Very little else in all of human life is accompanied by such designated, prescriptive ritual. You can be married in a cathedral or in city hall, dressed in a flowing white dress or tuxedo and tails—or, depending on how your proclivities run, costumed as Mickey and Minnie, Hawkeye and the Black Widow, or bungee-jumping in a t-shirt and flip-flops. Graduation? Gown, hood,

mortarboard, tassel: we prescribe the style, the color, the shades and details of rank and distinction, even the ritual gesture of moving the tassel from one side to the other signifying passage. *There's no going back.* You can't divorce a diploma. Not even a felony can revoke its privileges. Once legitimately conferred, a degree cannot be rescinded, withdrawn, or denied you. Lots of what we do in our lives is arduous, precarious, and tentative in the getting. I can think of almost nothing else so permanent once acquired.

Perhaps it's that finality—in clothes, language, gesture, and diploma--that signals and underscores the sadness of commencement, that curious word doubly meaning beginning and ending, ending and beginning. We commence together in a *procession*, a *march*, into a shared space, an assembly, a *convocation*, a summoning together. Diploma'd, graduated from this collective rite of passage, we then commence on all the rest of life. You know the metaphors: life's journey, the solitary destiny, the lonely road without a map.

Except . . . in humanity's fourth great Information Age, maybe we don't have to leave our connections behind. Maybe this Information Age does afford us better ways of assembly even after the pomp and circumstance are over.

I'm reminded of a class I taught a few years ago, a rather infamous student-directed, student-created, student-graded class called "This Is Your Brain on the Internet." We'd begin each session with a collaborative learning exercise known as Think-Pair-Share. Students would take 90 seconds to jot ideas on an index card, such as "What are the three most vital issues from this week's reading?" Next, they'd pair up for another 90 seconds to discuss which of the six ideas on their respective cards was most vital. Each pair would "share" their thinking with the rest of the class and that became the basis for our group discussions.

On the final day of this very special course, I tried a variation. After the individual exercise, I asked all 25 students to talk together and come to consensus about the single one most insistent question for us to talk about during the final hour that we'd ever be together. I said I'd be back in five minutes to find out what they came up with.

When I returned, they were silent. I could feel the sizzle in the air. Their eyes sparkled. I sensed something big had happened. "What's on your card?" I asked them.

"How do you become an adult?" one student ventured on behalf of the group. There was a slight quaver in his voice. *How do you become an adult?*

I was stunned. In decades of teaching, I'd never encountered students confident enough to ask such a humble, vulnerable, real question.

Isn't that the question we all ask at commencement, at this ending that is also a beginning? Whether you are 22 or 62, "how do you become an adult?" is what

we're all trying to answer. There's no lesson plan for adulthood. Being a student can certainly be challenging, but the route to graduation is both collective and prescriptive, with the various hurdles lined up, one after another. Your job is to jump over those hurdles with as much speed and grace as you can muster, and then the race is over, and you graduate and you receive the degree that no one can take away from you. Done.

Adulthood is almost the opposite. No one gives you a diploma for figuring out how to live a meaningful, generous life. Making it over life's obstacles doesn't lead to a degree--it well might lead to even more obstacles, and circumstances can sometimes snatch even the most prized victory away from us. A thirteen-year-old, shouldering a burden, can be an adult; a ninety-year old, quaking and fearful, can feel the child.

How do you become an adult? My students and I spent our last class together talking about the many issues at the heart of this complex, unanswerable question, the one none of us ever stops asking. One young woman in my class noted that, while being a student meant being constantly together—in dorms, at parties, in class—life on the other side of graduation seemed dauntingly "*individual*." Someone else piped up that at least *that* problem could be solved with a list serv or a Facebook page. From the occasional email I receive from one or another of them, I know the students in that class came up with a way to still stay in touch with one another.

In the fourth great Information Age, distance doesn't have to mean loss in the same way it once did. If Modernity—the third Industrial Age of Information—was characterized by alienation, how can we use the conditions of our *connected* Information Age to lessen human alienation, disruption of community, separation, loss? I'm talking about the deep "social life of information," as John Seely Brown would say, not just its technological affordances. How can we make sure that we use the communication technologies of our Age to help one another, even as our lives take us to different destinations? How can we make sure our social networks are also our human and humane safety net?

As I look out at you, at the SILS Class of 2012, I feel a sense of awe. Think of how many collective hours you, in this room, have spent thinking deeply about the issues facing our world. Think about how much you are needed in the world, how much you have to offer. On your way to this moment of commencement, you have grappled with the Age's defining questions. Here are some of your own key words, extracted from the titles of your own dissertations, your master's and honor's theses: identity, confidentiality, mapping, reputation, intellectual property, data, feasibility, collaboration, access, evaluation, navigation, distance, transparency, diversity, literacy, credibility, curation, file sharing, user-generated content, metadata, disambiguation, time management, privacy, piracy, user performance, social networks.

How many times, in your work and in your life, will you have occasion to think about those words again? Unlike some diplomas that sit curled up in a drawer, yours will be called upon to serve you, time and again. Amid all the punditry and prognostication, others will look to you for right answers. You won't always have them. Sometimes, you'll feel despair, when systems or technologies or behaviors are changing so fast all around you that even the knowledge gained at SILS can't help you solve the problem in which you're supposed to be the expert.

At that moment of crisis, I hope that you will recall what it felt like to be here, today, proud and knowing, diploma'd, in this room. Look around you! Here you are, surrounded by colleagues, classmates, friends. These are your *connections*. This is your *network*. When that day comes when you don't have the right answer, you will be able to turn to someone who was here with you today. They might not know the answer either but I promise they'll be able to think along with you—*Think-Pair-Share*—and, together, I know that you will come up with something vital.

The connections, the relationships, you have formed in the past years to arrive at this convocation are your graduation gift, your most valuable present from SILS to carry with you on those "adult" years ahead.

I believe that. And I'd like to start on that right here.
Please, I'd like all of the graduates to stand up for a moment.
Now. Please rise, and turn to someone near you.
Shake hands. Congratulate your fellow graduate on making it to this commencement.

And now make your colleague a promise. The words are simple, but powerful, and I know you won't forget them: Please say to one another, "*I promise we will stay connected.*"

It was Herman Melville who said that "we cannot live only for ourselves . . . a thousand fibers connect us" to one another and, "among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects." That is the feedback loop of our human connection, beginning and ending, giving and getting, each to all.

Here, in this room of librarians and information scientists, at the dawning of humanity's fourth Information Age, I believe we are connected by sympathetic threads.

Congratulations, dear graduates, on your remarkable achievement. I am honored that you have allowed me to share in this very special, collective, connected moment of commencement, ending and beginning. Congratulations, to the SILS Class of 2012!

