Karin de Jonge-Kannan Commencement Speech

05/03/2019

Faculty Address

Dr. Karin de Jonge-Kannan

Thank you, Dean Ward, for your kind introduction.

Having never before given a commencement address, I turned to the internet for examples and ideas. Turns out, commencement speakers aim to inspire the graduates with visions of the success that lies ahead. They talk to graduates about dreaming big, becoming a leader, achieving great things, .... And I'm going for none of that.

Now, I'm sure that with your CHaSS degree from Utah State University, you are equipped to achieve many wonderful things. But I'm here to tell you that, contrary to popular belief and cultural mantra, success is not the purpose of life. Yes, you can go forth from here and become successful, achieve great things. But in a world where you can be anything… be kind.

In a world where you can be anything, be kind.

I am a linguist, which basically means I'm a word nerd. I spend my days thinking about words and their meanings. So, as I ponder the word 'kindness, I think of two semantically related words: love and compassion. Compared to kindness, love can be a pretty abstract notion, something that does not necessarily require interaction. I can love someone without doing much of anything. Yes, love is good, but perhaps something else is better suited as our mantra for being in this world.

Compassion, maybe? Being kind and being compassionate sound like pretty much the same thing, right?

But 'passion', which is the root of that word, actually means suffering. Com-passion means to suffer together. A required ingredient for compassion is that the other person is suffering and you enter their suffering with them to try and relieve it.

Kindness, on the other hand, has universal applicability. Kindness requires only you and another person, and a connection between you, no matter how brief. You can be kind with words, or actions, or even just your facial expression. You can be kind by offering your time and a listening ear. Kindness does not ask whether the other person is deserving, or even how you feel about that person. You can be kind to people who annoy you. You can be kind to strangers. Choosing to be kind does not depend on whether you are successful, rich, smart, beautiful, or perfect. You don't even have to be spiritual or religious. Whether you’re employed or not, pursuing a splendid career or stuck in a humdrum job, changing the world or changing diapers, you can choose to be kind.

Yes, I hope you do great things with this CHaSS degree. I hope you will fulfill at least part of your dreams and that you will find meaningful employment. Will you become famous or win awards, or become a leader in your field? Maybe – who knows. But in a world where you can be anything, be kind.

Good luck, and Go Aggies!