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I've been here for two years yet this already feels like home. We are here changing each other, you and I. Thank you for making me a better version of myself. Speaking on behalf of my colleagues, I hope that we have helped produce better and gently aged versions of you.

Ok. If you've been paying attention to the world, we got issues. There are so many things that my reflection, my mirror between the world and me could be about, let me tell you what my reflection is NOT going to be about:

Let's start with Trump. LeBron, treason, drone strikes, Benedict Arnold, conversations, the nosological status of Pluto, Netflix and chill, alternative facts, THIS IS WHY, the PIC, POC, AT&T, BP, goatees, alt-right, new left, avocados, decentering, the Obamas!, driverless cars, bombshell news, intersectional identities, emails, Agent Orange, peak oil, peak whiteness, peak blackness, Sabra, Shea Moisture and the real efficacy of boycotts, both the whip and the nay nay, hand sanitizer, The Oscars, Steve Harvey's career, the Dakota Access Pipeline, Coachella, dear Rachel Dolezal, poor Cecil and Harambee, concussions, 21,000 pound bombs, hipsters, bombogenesis, fishbowls, e-books, Uber, Gungam Style, CRISPER gene editing technology, 5-hour energy, free-trade, organic, chia seeds, seed banks, unjust wars, Ebola, zombies, Snapchat, American Idol, hamster wheels, artisanal maker blogs, fleeces, Nascar, karaoke, Kardashians and Kanye w/a side of Taylor Swift, the ecological impacts of Keurig coffee pods, fracking, chemtrails, biocides...us.

Ok. Phew. I do want to talk about failure.

### **Mountain of Failure**

I learned more from my many spectacular failures than I ever did from my successes. I'm coming to appreciate that in order for me to succeed, I must be willing to fail. Failure is the steep price of admission. Like those islands in the South China Sea that China is dredging up or the Palm Frond Island for the global super-elite in Dubai, you have to erect an underwater mountain of failure in order to live on a small island of success. I keep my feet firmly planted on the soft ground of that tiny island today.

I stand before you perched on a great mountain of well documented failure. In the spring of 1995, my freshman spring term at Dartmouth, I have to tell you, I was kind of a mess. I basically became a juvenile delinquent. I wisely enrolled in Education 20, "Contemporary Issues in American Education" taught by the esteemed educator Robert Binswanger. I thought that I might want to be a teacher and this course represented the most obvious path toward that goal. Well, that plan didn't work out as I had hoped.

I ended up failing Education 20 that term, failing Introductory Economics the following spring, and failing Education 20, yes, a second time, in Spring 1998. I failed that thing two times, and the second time it was by a scant 2 points. TWO POINTS! But, Professor Binswanger was right to fail me. I didn't do enough of the work well enough to pass. He didn't let me skate at all. I was so bitter for that loss.

And yet, I also earned a D and a handful of Cs (7 to be exact and honest). Enough As and Bs to keep it respectable. I graduated with a 2.62 GPA.

If you think you're amazed to see me standing here, a brand spankin' new tenured associate professor, just imagine what my own parents are thinking. There they are right there with us tonight! Hi, sweet parents. Thank you for letting me sort things out in due time.

My body doesn't remember the great successes in the same way it has taken on those massive failures. Oh, and there were more failures. More losses. I took many "Ls" as we used to say back in the day. So many great failures. But... I needed each and every one of those losses. I try to keep my toes spread out in the dirt.

This is why I try to practice graceful living today. I need grace. I would not have survived if not for the grace that accompanies other peoples' presence in my life. Thank you, Robert Binswanger, for failing me. I needed to fail.

## **G-R-A-C-E**

Near my old house in East Point, Georgia, the community in Southwest Atlanta that I lived in before I moved here, there was a Christian-owned grocery store called Wayfield Foods. It was a B-grade supermarket for poor and working-class patrons. The kind of place that sells packaged animal innards like chicken backs at the butcher's counter and no-name juice drinks and off-brand candy.

One day, I went there to grab a something quick and proceeded down the isles, 6, 5, 4... You know those overhead placards that list the categories of items in the isle, like "Bread" "Mexican/Asian" "Sodas"? Isle 4's placard had the word "GRACE" on it. G-R-A-C-E. I looked again, thinking I got the letters mixed up. Nope, it said GRACE. I was having a rough and hurried day, so I thought "Awe, that's nice. GRACE." Stunned, but not entirely surprised given the whole Christian-owned thing, which I thought, at that point, was a not-so-subtle suggestion to the poor and working class patrons to keep their heads up amidst crushing and systematic oppression, I went to check out.

I asked the sister at the counter if she knew that she could find GRACE on Isle 4. She thought I was messin' with her. I was, but I wasn't at the same time. We found the manager and walked over to look at the sign. GRACE, it read. We walked down the Isle only to find a warm divine area of the isle that contained... condiments and foods with the brand name GRACE. We laughed.

For context, GraceKennedy Foods has been making and distributing foods out of the beautiful island of Jamaica since its incorporation in 1922. Bear in mind that Jamaica did not achieve political independence from Britain until August 6, 1962, forty years later. Obviously, this is one of those colonial-type outfits.

Anyway, that same semester, spring 2013, I told my Sociological Theory students about my experience at Wayfield with GRACE. I told them that I loved them and that I would work tirelessly to see them do well in our class. I would offer them grace at every turn. You missed class? No problem. You are late on your assignments? Cool. Your life is falling apart? I can and will offer my help and support. So many people have done and will do this for you.

But, there would come a moment in the semester that my love and empathy for them would slowly turn into bitterness and resentment. My grace, boundless during the semester, would eventually run out. And, at that point, I would have to send them... down to the Wayfield Foods at Headland and Delowe where they could buy their own GRACE for about \$2.49 instead.

At the end of that semester, Ms. Lashonda Edwards, a bright student with Jamaican parents, brought me my own bottle of GRACE hot sauce. She said that her family used it since she was a kid. It turned out that Lashonda needed grace that semester. This very bottle she gave me is still

unopened, although there's always a chance that I might have to bust it out on some of my Wesleyan students. It sits in plain sight on my desk towards the end of the semester as not-so-subtle open threat. Give too much grace and people might think you can be taken for a fool.

Thank goodness no one had to open their reserve bottle of Grace Hot Sauce on me. I could not have arrived at this moment without the kindness and grace-filled presence of other people in my life. You could not have arrived at this moment without similar practices of grace touching you when you hurt, when you failed, when you fell short, when you doubted. I think we need A LOT more grace in this world of ours, where every day is a stroll down Isle 4. Every day is an invitation for you to extend grace out into the world, to other people, to our fellow life forms, to Mother Earth herself.



### **Be Humble**

Even before you got to Wesleyan, you were masters of achievement. Prolific experts at feather gathering, your caps were already brimming with bright and fancy plumage. Internships, externships, fellowships, scholarships. Awards, trophies, medals, ribbons. Achievements of the highest order!

And tomorrow, you're going to get one more feather. I know that feels good. So good.

Perhaps you are already chomping at the bit to tackle the next intellectual and occupational challenges. You might take a few weeks off, live at home for a while, maybe travel a bit, and then, you'll bounce to do consulting in New York, or a PhD program in Chicago, or a non-profit in Charleston. Ready to grind it out again, like you always have, reliably and efficiently, collecting lightweight and empty paper that makes flying possible. Paper chasing.

If you look at US currency, the dollar bill, it reminds you that it is a promissory note. It means that the US government promises its possessor that this paper is worth what they say its worth. It's a promise, really. But, I don't need to tell you that promises can be broken.

Broken, I felt like a walking promissory note for years. I promise you that I'm worth what I say I'm worth! Now, I'm not hating on feather collecting. There can be nobility and integrity in chasing paper.

And yet, perhaps you've already started to realize that the meaning of your accumulation of achievements at Wesleyan has already started to shift in your consciousness a bit. Deer-like, you

stand in the middle of the road, wholly uncertain about what all of this means. For you, your people, our shared future. If not actual money, we are chasing other forms of capital—human, cultural, intellectual—that we hope we can exchange for a life of meaningful service to other beings in some strange “justice marketplace”.

I’m here to tell you that this is okay, too. Like the tag line in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*: Don’t Panic. Please, don’t freak out. Like I’ve told some of you in my classes: don’t freak out, reach out!

We need you at your best self when the crisis comes. Take heed. Our people have been here before. This moment is not new. Don’t believe the hype. Don’t believe your own hype. Keep you feet firmly stretched out in the cool grass.

What I ask you to re-consider today is the relationship between your identity and your achievements. I urge you to sever the tie between who you are becoming and what you have and will achieve in this world. You and your achievements are only linked through the coming together of grace and social structure.

I’m still learning that through much pain, that we are whole and beautiful when we are successful and we are whole and beautiful when we fail. Don’t fear failure—chase it. I, for one, am waiting for my next failure, and trying not to develop expectations about the successes that await me around the bend.



So, I’m trying to hear what Kendrick Lamar says: Sit down. Be humble.

For this paper you’re about to receive tomorrow signifies grace, not worth. It marks your happenstance station, not your value as a child of the universe. This achievement is not yours to possess like a sack of marbles or an inherited set of fine China. It does not belong to you and does not define you. Don’t get it twisted. This is a moment of grace right here in front of us. I hope that you can see that.

Just think of all those selfless people who toiled on your behalf—the great litany of family, friends, cooks, bus drivers, custodians, coaches, teachers, and servants who gave their very bodies in order for you to be in this moment, all fancied up, with your feathers and failures sticking out of your cap.

You see, we are embroidered into rich tapestries of loving grace and mutual sacrifice. I am just beginning to frame all of this in my own heart. This interdependence is written on my body as it exists in relation to yours and to the Earth and to our ancestors and each others' children.

I think this moment offers us an ordinary chance to respond to an invitation to offer grace to the world. Let me say this again differently. This time is NOT just about you honoring all of the people who extended you grace. This is about you realizing that you have grace to give, but not the kind that comes out of a bottle of Hot Sauce. I'm talking about empathy, kindness, peace, love, tolerance, and understanding. Fighting for other peoples' second chances, not always your own. So, with that, maybe I'll see you on Isle 4.

Peace to you, dear friends, and thank you for inviting me to offer my reflections this evening.