Dear Graduate Students,

About every two weeks or so, I host an online half-day writing retreat for grad students. To start, I ask each person to share what they hope to accomplish in this three hour period. After everyone states their intention, we leave open the Zoom but mute ourselves. Some turn off the camera, some don’t. Then, at the end of the retreat, we all turn our cameras and mics back on and I ask each person to say how things went. Well, today was not one of the better days; most of the students just didn’t have a lot of energy or focus and I think only one student felt that he had really advanced things. One said that she just wanted this to be over but didn’t express much hope that “this”—the pandemic, her dissertation—would ever end.

For others who might be feeling this way, the last thing anyone wants to hear is some pablum like, All will be well! You can do it! Count your blessings! Etc etc.

But I have to try to say something to keep you going that won’t make you nauseous.

I mean, here we are at the end of July. It’s hot and sticky and the new school year is just around the corner and we don’t know what the fall will really look like and the positive cases are rising and we are thinking how to make Lehigh and ourselves anti-racist and every step outside of our homes requires a risk analysis.

I was sharing some of these thoughts with my friend and colleague Kate Bullard from the Research Office who told me about Mariame Kaba, a prison abolitionist and community organizer, who believes that “hope is a discipline,” that “hope is something that can be practiced as a habit. If we believe that we are leaders of our own transformation and change, we practice that every day to build the future that works for all of us.”
And, then, by chance, I was walking my dog yesterday and listening to one of my favorite podcasts, “Stay Tuned with Preet,” where host Preet Bharara was interviewing Senator Cory Booker who in a very direct and clear eyed way discussed the many racial injustices in this country but included this statement, “I think that hope is the act of conviction that despair will never have the last word. I think real hope is bloodied, is battered, is bruised, I think real hope has to be calloused over and scarred because hope is daring, and hope takes risks and I think that hope is muscle, it is fiber, it is sinew, it is tough. So I will always be hopeful, I will always choose hope, even if there’s no reason to because that very choice can ignite possibilities, and I will never let despair in this country have that last word.”

At any rate, primed by these two very pragmatic and robust definitions of hope, I started to look around for other ruminations on hope and found this one from the Harvard Business Review that I liked, “Hope recognizes the reality that failure happens, success is not assured, the laws of physics don’t change and prudence is needed to discern when to persevere — and when to pivot. Hope doesn’t demarcate a linear path, but it does guide us through twists and turns. Hope views the glass as half full, not half empty. Hope supports realistic optimism, a necessary component of success….Optimists are powerful for solving wicked problems, the ones pessimists say can’t be solved.”

For those of you who follow the GLO social media posts, you may have noticed that we are featuring the Say it in Six entries from the contest we held early in the year. If you recall, we asked you to express what you are studying and why using only six words and one image. As I see a new post everyday in July, I’m reminded that each of one of you entered this pursuit of a graduate degree as an act of hope: in the future, in yourselves, for your families, for those struggling in this world. Gosh, do we need all of this work you're doing. These aren’t the easiest of days, but I hope you'll find a way to keep moving forward.

Kathleen

Sources:
Hope_is_a_discipline_covid19 (Mariame Kaba)
Awakening-to-american-truths-with-cory-booker (Cory Booker)
Hope-is-a-strategy-well-sort-o (Deborah Mills-Scofield)
Part 1. “I don’t care how you cook the SWEET POTATOES!”

I’m embarrassed to say that that was me. My poor spouse had asked a simple question at the end of a long day, a long week, and a long couple of months living and working under these bizarre and stressful circumstances. I really couldn’t make one more decision, even a simple one. I was done.

Not long after that outburst, I took a week away from zoom and email. I made a list of joyful things (bike rides, picnics, kayaking), chores, and other life maintenance tasks that I wanted and needed to do that week.

I made sure the joyful things were scheduled first, something I don’t usually do. We’re supposed to do all of our tasks and then reward ourselves with the treats, right?

But I found these thoughts going through my mind:

“Fill your own cup first.”
“Put on your own oxygen mask first.”

I’m 57 years old and I think this is the first time in my life I actually understood these two very common directives. If you’re gasping for breath, you will have neither the energy nor the clear mind to help someone near you. If your cup is dry, there is nothing to spill over to quench the thirst of anyone else. Taking care of yourself is actually not selfish. In fact, it makes compassion for others and work of all sorts possible. We hear this advice all the time and I advise students of this all the time. I’m not sure why I had to hit bottom to believe it for myself.

And this leads me to Part 2. Conversations around the murder of George Floyd and the protests.

I’ve had conversations with some of you this week where we shared our anguish and outrage with each other. You told me that you’re tired and stressed from almost three months of teaching, learning, and researching
remotely, and now this abomination. You’ve said, more or less, that your work doesn’t feel meaningful in light of all that’s needed to challenge systemic racism and repair this country.

It’s overwhelming. Yet, I hope you understand that the world needs your intellectual contributions: completed degrees reflecting your expertise allow you to enter spaces of influence where you will have the opportunity to examine entrenched systems and hopefully effect positive change.

A couple of years ago, I had the chance to get extensive diversity, equity, and inclusion training at Lehigh through an organization called VISIONS. One of the many things I learned was that oppression happens at a number of “levels.” There is work to do at the individual level (I examine myself); at the interpersonal level (my relationships); at the group level (both formal and informal), at the cultural level (norms), and the institutional level (policies). I found this model helpful in untangling the complexities of diversity issues which then allowed me to get a purchase on where I might be able to enter, connect, and contribute.

The trainers from VISIONS also asked us to notice where we have naturally occurring energy. None of us can do everything, but was there something that fired us up. Could we start there?

I’m starting with organizing and hosting a reading group on race and graduate education. (If you’re interested, I’ll get you the information.) By diving into the research on this topic, we hope to further understand the systems which enable or obstruct the success of our students of color in hopes of guiding us toward meaningful action.

I’m not sure how to end this message other than to say that as you press on this summer, I’ll ask that you brush away either/or thinking and, instead, welcome both/and thinking.

Can you rest and work and engage and enjoy?

I hope so.

Kathleen

P.S. In case you missed these important communications:
LTS: Diversity and Inclusion Committee: Antiracist Resources
Graduate Student Senate Executive Board Letter to Graduate Students
Graduate Student Senate Committee on Diversity and Inclusion Letter to President Simon
Message Week#8
Dear Grads,

For reasons I haven’t figured out yet, I wanted to share with you a picture of my yoga dog. I keep this on top of a bookshelf in my living room right in the center. Yoga and dogs--two of my favorite things combined into one object. I love this little sculpture.

The other day I took him outside because I thought he (and he feels like a “he”) would enjoy the sunshine and fresh greenery. (As I write this, I sound a little wacky! Wow, I only just realized it.) When I took him down, I noticed a crack that hadn’t been there before and I do suspect that someone dropped him.

Still, despite the cracks, he’s holding together. Maybe it’s because of his canine nature of bonding with his pack whether or not they share the same physical space. Maybe it’s because he’s taking time to gently stretch and strengthen his body. Maybe it’s because he’s remembering to breathe deeply. He certainly is glowing in that warm sunshine and the look on his face makes me think he’s forgiven whoever dropped him.

Regardless, I hope he gives you a bit of comfort. You made it through a very difficult semester and I hope you have a chance to find contentment, even for a moment.

My best wishes,

Kathleen

Message for Week #7

Dear Graduate Students,

When my younger son was in ninth grade, he developed a strange mono-like illness that just lingered and lingered. At first, I was concerned because he got sick right before the swim team tryouts and I thought he might miss the season. But then, after missing a month of school, I started worrying that he might
have to repeat ninth grade. A few weeks after that, when he still showed no improvement, I was terrified he’d never be well again. Who cares about the swim team! Who cares about ninth grade!

I found myself thinking about that time recently. It was amazing how quickly my perspective changed on what was really important and how differently I, as his mom, responded to the losses. Whereas I was so disappointed that this new high schooler would miss out on joining this team of good kids, where he’d get lots of exercise and develop all those important team-building skills, I soon thought, “oh, there’s time for all that later.” Whereas I was already getting anxious about him building a strong academic record so he’d get into a high-quality college, I thought, “Whatever. He’s a good student with supportive, middle-class parents and will have a lot of opportunities in his future.” All that mattered was that he had a future; all that mattered was that he got healthy.

There are aspects to our pandemic period that are like this, I think. Things are getting stripped down to fundamentals. What is most important in our lives? What can be recovered or restarted later? How will we deal with the disappointments and losses that we are all experiencing. (And I am very appreciative of the comforts and stability that I have. I’m grateful and yet have realized I have to let myself feel these losses, too.) How are we reconnecting to the values we hold most dear? Can we extend our own self-imposed deadlines? Can we find a little more acceptance for ourselves and others in our lives who are experiencing these changes, too?

Personally, this perspective-shifting is happening whether I like it or not. I find I have to be more flexible in my thinking and I have to be more patient. It’s taxing and takes a lot of energy. Frankly, I need more rest in order to roll with these new realities and perceptions.

I’m wondering how things are shifting for you? Are you recasting your priorities? Are you giving yourself the time and space and rest to manage the changes?

I hope so.

Please let me know how you are doing and if there are things we can do to support you. (And, by the way, my son is fine.)

All the best,
Kathleen

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Week #4 - April 13, 2020

Dear Graduate Students,

Mid-April. We’ve been staying home for a month today. It’s hard to believe. Yet, the earth keeps turning, and spring is springing, and the world is greening, and Graduate Life is growing, too. I’m delighted to tell you that we’ve hired--for the first time ever--a director of graduate writing support. Her name is Yvonne Lee and she will start in July. She will build a program targeted specifically to the writing and communication needs of graduate students. Her presence on our campus is an auspicious sign not just of a future where we return to normalcy, but of a future that is better. Yvonne will be our special guest at Tuesdays@10 tomorrow. Here’s the link (which you can also find on the Grad Life website calendar). Please drop by to say hi, to welcome her, and ask questions.

At this point, I turn this message over to her!
Hello Lehigh Graduate Students!

My name is Yvonne Lee, and in July I will be joining you as the very first Director of Graduate Writing Support. Before we get there, though, I wanted to introduce myself and let you know a little bit about me. I have just completed my PhD in Rhetoric & Composition at Kent State University, and my dissertation was actually on graduate student writing support. How very fortunate! 😊 My background is in writing studies and writing centers, so I come to you with 13 years of experience and education on helping students find their inner writer.

One of the reasons I focused my doctoral research on graduate writers was that I was working as an Assistant Director in my campus writing center, and I noticed a gap in our services. We were working with graduate writers if they sought us out, but we weren’t offering programs or providing services that were targeted to their needs. So, I made it my mission to start building outreach programs aimed specifically at helping them. As I worked and researched, I discovered this was a gap found in schools across the nation, and as a graduate student myself, I figured I was in a prime position to join the movement to change that. So, I devoted the last two years to researching, writing about, and developing programs centered on the needs and experiences of graduate writers.

Luckily for you, the folks in the Graduate Life Office recognized a need for centralized writing support for Lehigh’s graduate student population, and they sent out the call for someone to help lead that charge. That’s what I’m here to do! The entire purpose of my job is to help you succeed as a graduate writer. I’ve been invited to be the special guest at Tuesdays@10 tomorrow, April 14th. I’d love to meet you! Kathleen has asked me to talk about how I stay focused on writing projects especially under stressful conditions like now. Then, I’d love to hear your questions and suggestions for how I can help when I get to campus in July. If you can’t make it on Tuesday, I would love to hear from you via email at yrl219@lehigh.edu or face-to-face – when it’s safe to do that again, of course. 😊 I am super excited to work with each of you through all of your writing challenges and successes!

See you soon!
Yvonne

Please do join us tomorrow if you can!
Stay safe, stay well, and get in touch anytime.
All the best,
Kathleen

Week #3 - April 7, 2020

Dear Graduate Students,

Coulds and shoulds, coulds and shoulds.
That’s what I’ve been thinking about this past week. *
Like you, I’m trying to figure out how to concentrate on work; care for family and friends; and stay informed on the situation at Lehigh, locally, nationally, and internationally.

And I realize that none of this would be possible if I’m not healthy myself. I’m happy to report that the stress-baking has diminished and I’ve added a couple of exercise classes to my week (which have helped a lot!). I also cut the trips to the grocery store and am no longer walking on populated trails.

But, I’ve caught myself succumbing to should thinking: I should plan online Easter for my family; I should watch that webinar; I should do that online tour of MOMA; I should plan a gathering with my college girlfriends…..etc, etc.

We are now past the initial shock of moving the university online and needing to shelter in place. Many of us got energy from the adrenaline we needed to navigate the changes. But I’m noticing in myself and others, as we settle into new routines, that the energy is waning.

I find that I have to reframe those “shoulds” to “coulds.” All of the things I mentioned could be good, could be enjoyable, but I have to remember that I don’t have to do all of them and I don’t have to do them all at once. If I don’t reframe, then my energy will continue to wane. If I conceive of these things as coulds, then maybe my energy will grow or at least stay steady.

I guess my message this week is to ask you to think about your own shoulds and coulds. What will drain you? What will energize you? How will you pace yourself?

Stay healthy, stay safe, and if you want to (no shoulds here!), join us for this week’s activities.

My best wishes,
Kathleen

*Also, we all are dealing with our have-to’s, too, but I’m putting those aside for the moment.

Tuesdays@10 featuring Samba Dieng from OISS for Q and A.
Women’s Exchange with check-ins and Kitchen Zumba with DJ Melody on Thursday at noon.
Five-minute Dance Party at Friday at 11:30
Peer-led Stress-Relief group Noon on Fridays - Sign up here for Zoom Link
Scavenger Hunt Saturdays with Annaliese - For info email arc319@lehigh.edu
Winnie Gu, comic artist @thirdculturechinese Monday, April 13 at noon

Week #2 - March 30, 2020

Dear Graduate Students,

So, in the last two weeks, I’ve

- Cut my own bangs,
- Learned how to share a document on Zoom,
• Made chocolate chip cookies, two batches of scones, a pumpkin custard, a carrot cake, and chocolate mousse (great easy recipe—I can share.)
• Figured out that having a light directly over me when video conferencing makes my under eye circles look awful,
• Drove to Brooklyn with an hour’s notice to bring home my 20-something son and his fiancee, to my great relief,
• Taught my 84 year old dad that he should hold the phone in front of his face, not up to his ear, when FaceTiming.
• Not exercised other than dog walks and it’s making me fidgety and edgy.

How about you? How are you doing? What should those of us in Grad Life know that we might not know?

Can you give us ideas of how you might like to connect? We’ve all been in front of our screens a lot, yet talking to each other is helpful.

Here are some things Beth, Amy, and I have set up:

• Virtual Tuesdays at 10: get your coffee and a snack and join us for a chat or to express concerns and ask questions.
• Women’s Exchange is now every Thursday at noon. Let us know if you’re interested and we’ll send you a link. We’ll check in with each other and have some focused activity.
• GSS General Assembly Meetings are still happening. Next Thursday, April 2 at 3pm, Beth Dolan, Deputy Provost for Graduate Education will join us for questions and updates.
• For your convenience, we have added our virtual events and the virtual events of other offices to the front page of our website under our calendar. I’ve also put in any zoom links as they are sent to me for these events.

Here are some things we are thinking about trying:

Resurrecting “What’s Brewing?” Several years ago, we held a “salon” to discuss fascinating questions from an interdisciplinary perspective. Why the title? You brew coffee, beer, trouble and ideas, so we would offer beer and coffee and snacks and meet at Packer House for great conversation. You’d have to supply your own refreshments, but these salons were really fun.

Holding a "Say it in Six" Gallery (although not sure of the form yet).

Working with Natania Lipp and Sara Beachy, our Counseling Psychology students, to offer some scheduled stress-relieving activities.

Creating a repository where you can share your experiences, your observations and photos so that we can document this historic time.

We want to hear from you. Please complete the form linked here so we know what we should prioritize.

I hope you get outside for some fresh air and I hope you stay well—mind, body, and spirit.

My very best wishes to you,

Kathleen

Week# 1 - March 23, 2020

Dear Graduate Students,
During this unsettling time, I want to let you know that the Graduate Life Office will strive to keep you informed and support you as best we can.

We will update our website regularly and also convey information and updates through the Weekly Buzz and our other social media sites. Please reach out if you have questions about your own individual situation and also let us know if there are questions circulating among your friends and colleagues that we can help answer. Please remember that if you can work from home, please do so. At the moment, the University is not closed and you do have access to labs and libraries, but, rest assured, you are not required to be here. We encourage direct, timely, and honest communication with advisers and PIs about all arrangements.

We have created a FAQ page which we hope will address some of your concerns. For additional information as well as an archived list of the various emails that have been sent to you, please visit Covid-19 Graduate Page. The situation is evolving rapidly and we'll update the information as quickly as we can.

Sadly, all Graduate Life activities for the remainder of the semester are canceled. We will not be able to hold our Appreciation Week events. We are still soliciting nominations for awards and we hope you will nominate your peers. At a later date, when things clarify and return to normal, we will find a way to properly recognize our award winners.

And, we are closing Packer House for both organized events and drop-ins for the remainder of the semester. As of Monday, March 16th, all card access will be restricted. If you need to meet with Amy or me, please contact us to make an appointment. Email us at kaha@lehigh.edu or gradlife@lehigh.edu or call the office at 610-758-4722.

Once we have made the transition to virtual operations, Amy and I are hoping to find some ways to stay connected with you online, and for you to stay connected with each other. We plan to offer film and/or book discussion groups, Women’s Exchange, and other activities possibly by using tools such as Discord and Zoom. We even hope to have an online Say it in Six gallery opening for all of our participants. Needless to say, we’d love your creative ideas for how we can bolster each other and create online social togetherness while we’re required to practice social distancing!

We are concerned for you and we care about you. Let us know if we can help.

Best wishes,
Kathleen Hutnik
Amy McCrae