

Remarks Given by Nancy Dess, Ph. D.
in Acceptance of the Graham L. Sterling Memorial Award
at Occidental College's 2008 Convocation

Context matters. How science gets done, what science is and means, and the way scientists live their lives all depend on context.

This morning I'd like to share how Oxy's liberal-arts context has mattered to me as a scientist. The world that scientists and other scholars seek to understand is not carved up the way academic divisions and departments are. Being a scientist in a liberal arts context has allowed me to work within those somewhat arbitrary structures without being hindered by them. This context has not only allowed me to take risks and think broadly; I have been rewarded for it.

*"Go cross-country; follow the problem, not the discipline.'
If you do that, you will encounter science, and it will be your friend."*

I have had the freedom to step back, rethink and challenge conventional and often unimaginative ways of defining, doing, or critiquing science. At its core, science is about questioning dogma and what is already "known" – it just

sometimes is hard to do it in the institutions people build. It is easier to do at Oxy, and I am extremely privileged to have had that opportunity.

I am a scientist, psychologist, person, woman, teacher, student, citizen, friend, mammal, and on. We are all many things. In this liberal arts context, I have learned that my identities are at once distinct and fluid, in tension and simpatico. I've become a better scientist, psychologist, person, woman, teacher, student, citizen, friend, and mammal.

Like other humans, I am a social primate, so I have done nothing by myself. I can't hope to mention everyone to whom I am indebted, partly due to time constraints and how boring it would be for everyone, and partly because I am indebted to individuals and groups, alive and dead, that I never met. But, with apologies to those I omit, I have to thank a few people.

Thank you to my colleagues on the Advisory Council for recognizing my work with this honor, when so many faculty are deserving. Thank you to my parents and brothers, and to my incredible graduate advisor, Bruce Overmier. Thank you to the wonderful, extremely smart, and generous people in the Psychology Department who were my mentors when I arrived, fairly clueless, at their door:

- Denny VanderWeele
- Anne Schell
- Lynn Mehl and
- Jacki Rodríguez, an amazing friend and inspiration

Thank you to faculty colleagues with whom I have team-taught or co-chaired, who have taught me so much:

- Denny VanderWeele
- Jacki Rodríguez
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- Susan Grayson, who blended her psychoanalytic, post-modern, and literary perspectives with my own with grace

Thank you to all the terrific students I have had in class and in the lab – their energy and curiosity has allowed me to become both a better teacher and a more productive researcher. Thank you to Chris Craney, April Mazzeo, and Karla Hernandez of the Undergraduate Research Center for generating and administering resources that have made so much of my and my students work possible. Thank you to Nancy Grubb, Joyce Fairbee, Ed Cornell, Percy Johnson, Pat Flick and so many other administrative and support staff who make ALL of our work possible. And thank you to Dale Chapman, who is my best research collaborator and who keeps me sane.

“You may get lost, but if you are well prepared, you eventually will arrive at known place from a new angle, or maybe at a place nobody has ever been.”

A word for students, who are continuing their journeys in a new place. You’ll get somewhere. Where will you go, and how?

Some theme parks have a boat ride, in which little boats cruise down water-filled concrete canals, in a loop and back. Fun for little kids – but there are no choice points and they end up pretty much where they started. Then there is hiking in the wilderness. You can take a compass, GPS, a topo map, a cook stove, bug spray, and a tent for when you get tired. There are well worn trails to popular places and lightly trod trails to less well known ones. You can follow them for awhile, or go cross-country. You may get lost, but if you are well prepared, you eventually will arrive at known place from a new angle, or maybe at a place nobody has ever been.

I’m sure it is obvious which type of journey Oxy students would choose. The trick is to make sure you don’t turn in to the line for the boat ride when you mean to head for the wilderness boundary. It isn’t always as obvious as it seems. The divisions and departments at Oxy should be trails and tools, not destinations.

I want to quote from Oxy Professor Emeritus, Betchen Barber, who was quoting her father: “Go cross-country; follow the problem not the discipline.” If you do that, you will encounter science, and it will be your friend.

And finally, remember that you are a social primate – Don’t go alone, and make sure the intellectual community you build is diverse, filled with integrity, and humane.