

You Are All Wizards Now:
Commencement Remarks

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Clark University
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Congratulations graduates!

All your hard work, reading, writing, researching, zooming! LEARNING and DOING, has paid off and you are now here receiving the degrees that you have been working so hard to obtain. This has not been the easiest time to make progress toward advanced degrees (or any kind of degree for that matter) and my hat is off to you in respect of your diligence, perseverance and effort despite the challenges of working under COVID. Celebrations—within the constraints of COVID!—are in order.

As it happens, I too am graduating—in a manner of speaking—as this will be my final Clark commencement as Clark’s Provost. We are all in transition. And this has gotten me thinking about time, change and leadership.

Transition is by definition a matter of change through time. Leadership is about working to manage or direct, to nudge transitions. And advanced degrees—the degrees we award each of you here today—are about leadership. Earning an advanced degree is earning recognition that you have prepared to be a leader in your field of study.

We dress up for commencement. We wear these funny costumes—“academic regalia”—that call on the history of our work back to the middle ages with monks working to resurrect, preserve and share the wisdom of the ancients. I think most of the current conventions of our costumes—the blue of my sleeves signifying my degree in philosophy—are of more recent origin. But for all the history to these costumes, I think we continue to dress up in this way for a more powerful metaphorical reason.

These costumes—our academic regalia—are telling us that once a person graduates with an advanced degree that person is now a wizard. You are all wizards here. And **is** this not confirmed by the way these costumes look? Clark may not be *Hogwarts* School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but Clark is certainly a school of wizardry.

The key supporting evidence to this—that Clark is a school of wizardry and that you all are wizards—is that wizards are people who can create something from nothing. Where did all the knowledge that you have studied on your way to being a certified—a degree holding—wizard come from. It came from the actions and cogitations and efforts of people who came earlier. These people created this knowledge, these better systems, processes, programs, art works, etc. Yes, they engaged with what was available to them, but from that they created, by the “mere” actions of their thinking, doing and being, they created. Something new appeared where there was nothing, or at best partial knowledge, or worse ignorance

parading as knowledge. This is real wizardry. Perhaps if we were to call “double blind research design” a certain kind of “wizard’s spell” it would sound sexier or more catching. But that is what it is: a way to learn something new, and ultimately a way to do new and important things in the world, think vaccines!

Doctoral dissertations, master’s theses: Why do we require these for advanced degrees? We require them because they are the demonstration that those that write them can create. They are the proof. I am sure that each of you at some point in the last year thought something like, “I wish I could wave a magic wand and get this thing done!” Writing dissertations and theses is hard work. It does not feel like magic. But it is real magic: creating something new that hadn’t been there before. And now each of you knows that you can do it. You can create. You are wizards.

Arthur C. Clarke, well-known author of *2001: A Space Odyssey* among many other books, is frequently quoted saying, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” So, I am not the first to draw a connection between the work of people with advanced degrees and wizardry. But I think Arthur C. Clarke does not sufficiently appreciate the full spectrum of what higher education is about. It is not just advanced technology. Every field of endeavor, from the humanities to the arts to the social sciences and sciences, has grown in response to wizard practitioners. We know more. We can do more. We understand more about our humanity and our world.

Now that you all have these special powers it is time to reflect on what you can—what you should—do with them. This is the matter of transition: time and change, and wizards have the power to be leaders: To manage, to direct, to nudge change in the right direction. For while our wizardly powers are breathtaking—think of immense changes of the last 100 years, or 20 years—the world also resists change. Human systems, human ways of thinking and doing, get stuck, stuck out of laziness, stuck out of winners protecting the status quo, stuck out of the momentum of just continuing to do things the same way. It takes very significant power to get things unstuck. To challenge convention and change our world. This is your job as newly minted wizards.

Create the new concepts, the new knowledge, the new technologies the new processes, the new policies, needed to shift what is possible, to open up to us new and better possible ways of thinking and being in the world. Wizards don’t just accept the context—although they do have to work from the context the world gives them—they question it, challenge it, open up new conceptual, technical, social and moral spaces.

So, yes, today is a day of celebration, and I repeat my congratulations to each and every one of you. But today also is a transition to a position of increased responsibility. Those with wizardly powers have greater responsibility to improve the world. That is why education is a public good. So please take your robes—your academic regalia—and the wizardly powers they represent and do good in the world.