

# “What Words Will You Leave to Guide Them?”

Commencement Address & Quoem by Lynn Conway

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University Professor Emerita Lynn Conway delivers the commencement address at the 2018 Winter Commencement at Crisler Center Sunday.  
Alec Cohen/Daily

President Schlissel, Provost Philbert, Regents and Faculty Members . . . what a joy it is to join you on this very special occasion!

I'm deeply moved by the honor you've given me . . . and thrilled, in turn, to help you honor the many students receiving degrees here today.

And to all you amazing students: This is **YOUR DAY** to celebrate, enjoy, and build treasured-memories with friends, families and loved ones . . .

But before the celebrations begin, let's take a few minutes . . . and together visualize the seas you'll soon be sailing. Especially since you're embarking in an era of accelerating social change, where our evolving technologies connect and empower us in previously-unimagined ways.

In the “**Social Age**” ahead, waves of **spontaneous shared-team-consciousnesses** will rapidly arise, evolve and interact. While contributing inside (and across mosaics of) such-teams, you'll encounter increasingly-diverse, often conflicting, ways of being . . . giving ever-deeper meaning to the old maxim “*Consistency is for Small Minds*”.

By focusing on building your social-capital as learners, contributors, innovators, **leaders** and **explorers** . . . instead of merely seeking money, possessions, formal positions and the trappings of power . . . you'll expand your social-agility, and your life-long opportunities to team-up with cool people, go exploring, have exciting adventures, and leave tracks behind.

And by embracing . . . rather than fearing accelerating social change . . . you'll experience a most-wondrous effect: “*You'll live far further into the unfolding techno-social-future than you ever dared dream!*”

[http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/Memoirs/Talks/UM\\_2018/What\\_Words\\_Will\\_You\\_Leave\\_to\\_Guide\\_Them.pdf](http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/Memoirs/Talks/UM_2018/What_Words_Will_You_Leave_to_Guide_Them.pdf)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D78JVnip5v0&feature=youtu.be&t=4300>

<http://www.lynconway.com> [conway\\_at\\_umich.edu](http://conway_at_umich.edu)

Now, that's all well and good . . . But you ask: How can WE stay out on the fronts of those waves . . . especially when seeing others slip back over their crests . . . and fall into the backwaters behind? From the perspective of 80 years of age . . . I realize that "my guides" have been sets of "special words" left by earlier pathfinders . . . people [whose life-stories](#) have deeply touched me . . . and whose words resonated ever-more-clearly *as I aged*. I'd like to share some with you. For example:

[Winston Churchill](#) gives us a compass for our life-journeys when he says,  
*"The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see."*

And as [Steve Jobs](#) observes,  
*"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life."*

[Grace Hopper](#) reminds us, as we're about to set sail, that  
*"A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for."*

And as 'The Great One' [Wayne Gretzky](#) says,  
*"You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take!"*

Then too, as social philosopher [Eric Hoffer](#) reflects:  
*"In a world of change, the learners shall inherit the earth, while the learned shall find themselves perfectly suited for a world that no longer exists!"*

So, do be careful! Don't just build 'expertise' to rest on as time passes. As [B. B. King](#) keenly observed: *"The beautiful thing about learning is nobody can take it away from you!"*

Thus oriented, pay heed to Intel's Co-Founder [Bob Noyce](#) and:  
*"Go off and do something wonderful."*

During dangerous voyages, be stoically realistic, yet passionately persistent, for as historian and activist [Bertha Calloway](#) reminds us:  
*"We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails."*

In extrema, as gonzo journalist [Hunter S. Thompson](#) coolly observes,  
*"When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro!"*

That can get pretty-wild, but you can come to love it. As [Kurt Vonnegut](#) says,  
*"I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center."*

Sometimes, you can even step across the edge, my own perspective being:  
*"If you want to change the future, start living as if you're already there!"*

In her poem “A Summer’s Day”, Mary Oliver poses perhaps the ultimate question:

*“Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” . . .*

During your explorations . . . *always mentor AND learn from* the young ones who come after you . . . eager to learn the ropes and join your crews . . . for your fates are bound-up-together, in the same ships, atop a deep ocean.

Finally, thinking further ahead to when YOU are 80, what words will YOU leave to guide the young, and their children and grandchildren . . . as they nervously gear-up to *surf the wondrous-waves of life’s unfolding experiences?* . . . What words?

Then I remember ‘*The Words*’ . . . words left to us by the legendary French *aviator* and *writer*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry:

*“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”*

The chance to share these words with you, on YOUR very special day, means more to me than you can possibly imagine . . . and I wish you all good fortune in the adventures ahead!

***GO BLUE!***

