



The following is the Antioch University New England commencement address given by Curtis Ogden on May 3, 2009.

Three Movements of Change: Why We should all be Atwitter

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Thank you, President Caruso; members of the administration, faculty, students, family members, and friends. It's so good to be with you this morning. I'm deeply honored by the invitation to join you on this special day for this unique and wonderful institution, which stands for so much of what I believe in and am working for. If you look at the mission and values of Antioch New England, there is no doubt that ANE and the Interaction Institute for Social Change are very much cousins in an extended family of organizations working on behalf of a more just and sustainable society. And if all that wasn't enough to make this an auspicious meeting, it's hard to beat the company and character of the student body at Antioch - if there's one thing I've learned during my tenure here it is that you are top notch!

This past fall semester I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to team-teach the Organizational Change Models course here at Antioch with Bob Rue. Together we offered Change Models to a combined cohort of Green MBA, MS, and MED students and ended up having an extraordinary experience. Every class, it seemed, we started off by saying that we couldn't be addressing a more timely subject. The fall as you may recall was all about change, from the rumblings of the financial crisis, to the climax of a presidential campaign built on a platform of "the change we need," to the historic political change that actually happened, to reports about the progression of climate change, not to mention extraordinary developments in the local climate, most notably an ice storm the likes of which comes once every one hundred years. This is to say nothing of all of the personal challenges happening in people's lives. Amidst all of this, we were talking about change, how to see it, how to meet it, how to manage it, how to nudge and accept it. The world was a perfect laboratory, and it continues to be . . .

Since Bob and I handed in our grades for that course in January, the rates of change have hardly slowed down, nor the challenges diminished. We are surrounded by uncertainty and no doubt varying degrees of anxiety, and yet we would be mistaken not to see signs of opportunity. At the Interaction Institute, we have been saying that in some ways, we have been waiting for this moment. Make no mistake; this has been a difficult time for us and for the nonprofits, public sector agencies, school systems and grassroots communities we serve. *And . . .* we also firmly believe that this is our time. And by that I mean *our* time. And that means *your* time, Antioch graduates. Launching from this institution, you are carrying with you invaluable resources and preparation for a world that is waiting, that is undergoing important and historic shifts. Three movements of change I would like to offer for your consideration today: (1) the rise of

collaborative leadership, (2) growing awareness and leveraging of networks, and (3) a call for *deeper* engagement in the very kinds of work that you grads are and will be pursuing.

First Movement: Collaboration and Collaborative Leadership

Erich Jarvis is a name that may or may not be familiar to you. Jarvis is a neurobiologist at Duke University who is a specialist in bird songs and calls. He was raised in New York City, attended the School for the Performing Arts (where he was an accomplished dancer), and went on to study birds while a student at Hunter College and Rockefeller University. His ongoing research suggests that birds are more intelligent than we give them credit for, and Jarvis hopes that his focus on the complexity behind bird songs and will lead to therapies for human beings with speech problems.

Now there are scientists who have objected to Jarvis' and others' assertions about avian intelligence, in part because the terminology used to describe a bird's brain had long emphasized its primitiveness. Just consider the phrase "bird brain" - it does not exactly conjure up images of Miles Davis or Mother Teresa. This is precisely what Jarvis set out to change a few years ago. He took it upon himself to pull together colleagues from around the country and across disciplines to *collaboratively* rename parts of the avian brain. . . .

Now this was no small project. The convening was fraught with bumps and clashing egos. Undeterred and no doubt well-served by his choreographic skills, Jarvis held his ground, by turns stepped back, listened, gave input here and there, mediated, and in the end facilitated a complex process that resulted in shared agreement and a jointly published paper on new names for the avian brain. This work not only contributed to the emerging understanding of bird intelligence and heightened esteem for our fine feathered friends; it has paved the way for more research that may help us to better understand ourselves. All of this from his bold and risky move (risky to his career, many initially said) to step outside of the often solitary and competitive practices of research, to help people create something no one could accomplish alone.

Jarvis claims that this collaborative approach came naturally to him, even if it does *not* for most scientists. That said, he notes and I quote, "In science breakthroughs often happen when different fields are combined. The discovery of DNA happened because physicists brought their technology and ideas to biology. They brought an old question to a new field." Jarvis goes on to say, "The same thing happens culturally. You have people from different . . . backgrounds coming together, and they bring their . . . thinking in ways that haven't been combined before."¹

On this last point, Jarvis speaks from personal experience as a black man growing up in New York City who has crossed many boundaries in his lifetime and who has put together a multicultural, multi-gendered, international lab at Duke. He is the paramount example of what we at the Interaction Institute refer to as a *facilitative leader*, and what we believe *and hope* is the face of leadership going forward. Facilitative leadership starts with the notion that we must fundamentally change our perception and thinking about leaders and leadership. Our increasingly dynamic, diverse, and complex world simply has less use for a heroic top-down approach. This just does not work when we are focusing on many of the kinds of challenges you have not doubt been discussing in your courses - from adaptive management of ecosystems, to the transformation of companies and business culture, to education reform, to innovation in family

and marriage therapy for the 21st century. What these require is more people and more diverse perspectives coming together to solve problems and leverage new thinking.

There are signs across all sectors that what we need going forward is much more savvy collaboration. For years, it seemed our primary role at the Interaction Institute was to be missionaries, and our goal to be convincing people, converting them to the gospel of collaboration. In the last few years this has changed dramatically. It's no longer a question of "Should we collaborate?" but "How?" Into the space created by this question we see increasing numbers of change agents from a variety of organizational and community positions boldly stepping. From staff of a foundation in Boston that are bringing local nonprofit leaders together to see themselves not as competitors for funds, but as partners all seeking a common goal. To members of nonprofits in northern New England who are convening agencies and businesses to boost rural tourism and local economic development. To a collection of under-resourced civil rights and social justice activists who are gathering colleagues nationally to stop the unjust incarceration of children and predominantly children of color.

Few of these change agents received training to do what they are doing. They are operating on instinct, in some cases with support from the likes of the Interaction Institute, and ultimately with the conviction that they *must* unleash collective intelligence and commitment to face these challenges. They recognize that the old ways of working have not been working. And they sense an opening. . . . The opportunity in front of each of them is the opportunity in front of each of you. It is the invitation to "lead between," to find and carve out those spaces where you can add value by bridging boundaries between fields and geography, bringing people and ideas together, and in so doing create something that the world didn't even know it was missing. . . . The time is right. And so the question, Antioch grads, is "Are you ready?" Are you ready to lead between? . . .

Second Movement: Networks

The rise of collaboration and collaborative leadership is intimately connected with another phenomenon - the explosion of networks. Collaboration seems to be both driving and being driven by new tools and social media that enable us to reach out to and connect with more people in more places, and also to see our reality in new ways. At this point I am going to refrain from giving you my own personal list of the top ten reasons that I love Twitter and instead take you to Lawrence, Massachusetts and offer the example of Lawrence CommunityWorks.

Lawrence CommunityWorks, or LCW, is a nonprofit community development corporation that strives to revitalize this old industrial center, which ten years ago was the poorest city in the state. Bill Traynor is the president of LCW and at base, the vision he shares with co-founders Ann Rodriguez, Tamar Kotelchuk, and Jess Andors, is not one of creating jobs or building homes, but fostering connections between people in the community. LCW's offices are found in a converted and sprawling mill building that is divided into many small spaces that are filled with all kinds of activity. At one time, you might have a group meeting to talk about attracting development to the city. In another room, you'll find a computer class. Next door an English-as-a-Second-Language class. In another part of the building students are doing SAT prep. In a nearby building community suppers are held a few times each month. It is a bustling scene, with continual traffic and people constantly bumping into one another . . . which is precisely the point.

All activities at LCW open up possibilities to meet others and engage in conversations that might not otherwise occur. In other words, these activities are doors into a network, a network that Traynor and his staff hope, the more robust and connected it is, will make real change in the city. LCW is in some sense taking a very non-traditional and occasionally uncomfortable approach by stepping back from defining an agenda and instead letting things emerge organically. By doing this, they are joining a movement that is shifting traditional structures and approaches to enable the *self-organizing* creativity and energy of individuals and small groups to take hold around a variety and growing list of issues.

Another example . . . Some of you may know the story of Alexandra Scott. Alexandra was diagnosed as an infant with neuroblastoma, a type of childhood cancer, and who at the age of 4 decided to set up a lemonade stand on her lawn in Connecticut to raise money to help “her doctors” find a cure. Alex and her older brother set up the first "Alex's Lemonade Stand" in the summer of 2000. For the next four years, despite her declining health, Alex held that stand to raise money for research. Following her example as told on television and the website that Alex’s parents set up, other children around the country began holding their own lemonade stands and sending the proceeds to Alex’s cause. In August of 2004, Alex died at the age of 8. At that time over 1000 lemonade stands had been held across the country, and a year later, they had raised over \$5 million for cancer research.² This story, beyond being about an extraordinary little girl, is about the power of a network. The Annie’s Lemonade Stand Foundation has used social media and created vibrant spaces on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter where children with cancer and their families, donors and other interested people can meet, find support, inspiration, and perhaps one day a cure.

Of course networks are not new, but what some of these new media, along with network theory and various analytical tools, are providing is both a reminder of and way of working with our interconnected reality. Much like Lawrence CommunityWorks, Twitter (a combination micro-blogging and mass text messaging tool you can access via computer or cell phone) provides a space to bump into new people and new ideas, unleash creative energy, and build movement. As these tools help us to develop a better eye for and ability to leverage our connections, we notice that many of our old ways of working are supported by structures that were created for another time. Hierarchy and bureaucracy, for example, are relics of the industrial era and meant to help harness our energy to achieve “scalable efficiency.” If this new era is about anything going to scale, it’s going to be our ability to learn with and from one another. For this, “net work” and networks are critical vehicles.

So who are and who will be the other change agents moving us in the direction of learning, organizing and working in new ways? *I’m looking at them!* As business strategist and consultant John Seeley Brown suggests, it will be talented individuals such as you all, not institutions or institutionalized leadership, who pull us into the 21st century.³ You graduates are charged with helping your organizations, your customers, your clients, students, colleagues, and bosses live in a world of near constant change *and* seemingly endless opportunity. You have the chance to be architects of new and empowering spaces that help people be and bring their very best. *Are you ready for that, Antioch grads?* Think about it . . . What will you build? Who from your cohort and others in this room will be a part of your movement? Who else will you ask to

join? How can you weave a complex and vibrant network that liberates people to make the changes we so desperately need in this world? . . .

Third Movement: Deep Holistic Engagement

As exciting and powerful as these first two movements may be, there is another I want to point out. At the Interaction Institute, we are finding that the promise of collaboration and networks rests on something much deeper than a willingness to reach out, use new tools, and create spaces for new things to happen. We are not alone in our conviction that without something more fundamental guiding us, we might simply Twitter our time away and end up in the same place that our old practices were taking us. What *is* exciting is that collaboration and networks naturally incline us towards sharing, rather than hoarding information and other resources, towards trust over fear, towards community over isolation. The question is - What is it that helps us to hold our ground when times are really tough, as they are now, and people are people, as we always will be, showing up in beautiful ways and in ways that threaten to drive us apart?

This is a question that I put indirectly to a remarkable gentleman I met just a couple weeks ago, Julio Reinoso, who is a community activist in Bridgeport, Connecticut focused on literacy. For years, Julio has been working tirelessly in his community to get books in the hands of children and engage parents in reading to their kids. His work has been filled with frustration, dealing with ambivalent young people and adults, working with limited resources, and often receiving no recognition for his efforts even when they are successful. In spite of all of this, you cannot miss Julio's enthusiasm for this work. Despite all of the past and continued frustrations and frictions, he is doing what he loves and, perhaps more importantly, filling it with love. Through an intoxicating smile and thickly accented English he says in response to my poorly masked and awed expression, "This is for the children. Not your children, Curtis. Not mine. *Our* children. This is not about you, it's not about me, it's about us."

What Julio's story suggests, along with others', is that at the end of the day the only force sufficient to keep us on track in our shared work is a deeply *felt* sense of connection. As Michael Edwards, a researcher on global civil society, said in a talk last fall in Maine entitled *Love and Networks*, "Unless we experience a transformation of the heart we are unlikely to be able to practice deep collaboration and sustain it over the long haul." Later this spring Edwards is being joined by activists and philanthropists from around the country in North Carolina at a gathering that is testament to the growing belief that unless we see ourselves in one another, we will be hard-pressed to live up to our stated moral values, and our responsibilities as good stewards of the planet. What research and experience in neuroscience and social science⁴ show is that this kind of seeing is not a purely intellectual or academic pursuit. Rather it is a mindful, heart-full, full-bodied endeavor. It calls on *each* of us to bring *all* of us, to bring our full selves to the work of social change. This is not just about responding to need in the world, it's about bringing ourselves fully to life! If we lead like that, who wouldn't want to join us? And so the question is, Antioch grads, are you ready? Are you ready and are you willing to bring it all, mind, body, and spirit to the work ahead? I can assure you that we need more *of* you, more of your full-bodied brilliance. It will take nothing less. . . .

These are confusing and exciting times, no doubt. But if you asked me what is most true in this moment, I would say it is that we are blessed. That you graduates are blessed; to be members of

this community, to have had the successes and experiences that gained you entry here and the smarts and resolve to meet its requirements, to have had the chance to learn from one another and this dedicated faculty, to share the values that Antioch upholds and to be grounded in a commitment to making the world a better place. As I said at the beginning of all of this, *it is your time, Antioch grads*. If I can add anything to your momentum, anything at all, it is the suggestion and encouragement, no matter where you go from here, to lead between, to reach out and across boundaries, to keep and cultivate connections, to experiment, to create spaces where new things can happen, and . . . in keeping with the spirit of spring, to dig in, dig deeply into yourselves and all that you have to offer, dig deeply enough so that the roots of your good work can take hold that we may all enjoy a bountiful harvest.

Thank you.

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3214/03-jarv-nf.html>

² <http://www.alexlemonade.org/about>

³ <http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/bigshift/2009/03/tomorrows-talent-networks.html>

⁴ See by Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* and Michael Edwards and Stephen Post, *The Love That Does Justice, Spiritual Activism in Dialogue with Social Science*