

Lesley University Commencement
May 21, 2022

Navajo greeting. Good morning, I am Shelly Lowe, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I am honored to be here today to celebrate this momentous and joyous occasion with all of you. My own daughter graduated from Lesley in 2019 and I know what a special place this is. My heartfelt congratulations to you all on everything you've accomplished. And my congratulations and gratitude to the parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, significant others, faculty, staff and everyone else who has helped get you to this day.

Today I want to speak to you about living with the humanities and the stories and lessons that define who we are.

For many of us, when we hear the term "the humanities," the phrase can sometimes seem lofty, highbrow, intimidating, or perhaps too academic to have much real-life consequence. From a scholarly standpoint, the humanities is the collective catch-all term we use to refer to fields such as history, literature, languages, philosophy, art history, religion, jurisprudence, ethics, and many, many

other disciplines that, unlike the sciences and social sciences, derive knowledge from non-empirical approaches. Whether or not you majored in a humanities degree, you almost certainly took a humanities-based course as part of your general education requirements.¹

But what you may not realize is how much the humanities have impacted you. The humanities are part of everything we do. They are, quite literally, what make us human. The stories, teachings, and experiences—individual and collective—that inform how we live, how we interact with others and the natural world, and the decisions we make including why we make a certain decision over another. They are the ideas that illuminate our understanding of our place in the world, and the ideals that shape the values that guide us. Even when we do not take the time to consider the particular encounters we have with culture, philosophy, history, tradition, language, religion, art, law, or literature that allow us to interpret the daily events of our lives and our world, every moment of our existence is grounded in the humanities.

¹ <http://lesley.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2022-2023/Undergraduate-Academic-Catalog/Undergraduate-Programs-and-Courses/Academic-Programs/General-Education-at-Lesley-University>

Whenever I am asked to define the humanities, I think of the poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here,” by the recent U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo of the Mvskoke Creek Nation. She writes:

“The world begins at a kitchen table...

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human.

We make men at it, we make women.”

This is who we are. We absorb these instructions from our earliest days—often most memorably from those conversations around the kitchen table—and we continue to grow and refine them, and act upon them, with each new experience.

I grew up in a small rural Navajo community in Northeast Arizona, and I carry with me the history, traditions, and values I learned at the kitchen table from my parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and many extended family members. Recently, it dawned on me that I’ve always known and been informed by the humanities, because in its simplest explanation, humanities is our creation story. As a Navajo this creation story consists of an emergence from four other worlds, the placement of our four sacred mountains, the creation of First Man and First Woman, the teachings of the Holy People, and the relationship of every

Dine person to Changing Woman and to each other. These humanities lessons were embedded in the Navajo language and culture surrounding me. I was taught them in school and outside of school and these important lessons were continually strengthened through repetition in song and prayer and community gatherings. Even though I now live in Cambridge and work in Washington D.C., I continue to build and draw upon these cultural foundations in my interactions with students and neighbors, in daily encounters with the city and its many institutions, and in the personal traditions and histories I have formed around the kitchen table with my own children and grandchildren. Each of these encounters involve an exchange of knowledge, an opportunity to share my stories with others, and in turn receive stories and wisdom from the people and places around me.

I want each of you to be aware of and treasure the creation stories and the kitchen table lessons that you carry with you, to share them generously with the world, and to seek out the stories of your neighbors, your institutions, and your country. Because each is unique and has an important lesson. And the cultural knowledge that you have acquired over your lifetimes will anchor you and help

you forge your own path in life, rather than seeking to conform to somebody else's.

Last year I was challenged to broaden my own thinking about my personal path in life when I was asked if I would interview for the position of Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (or NEH). I'm going to be honest with you all. I genuinely didn't feel or think I was good enough to fill the position. I had served on the advisory council for the agency under two male leaders, and I knew there had been a female Chair in the past, but there had never been a non-White female heading the agency. I was intimidated and the thought of me in the top position didn't fit the "normal" picture I had in my head of what a federal agency head looked like. I didn't attend an Ivy League university, or go to a prep school, or grow up in an affluent urban area with top rated schools. I'm a product of public schools and I didn't know half of the authors and scholars my fellow NEH council members spoke about or that we read about when we reviewed applications for funding.

I'm still working out the fact that I had conformed myself to someone else's vision of the appropriate path I should be taking and the type of person who should

Chair the NEH, and I was buying into the idea that these types of jobs were for a certain kind of person (aka white, elite, rich, with a New England, east or west coast or city upbringing). I had convinced myself this kind of position was not right for me and I felt that if I went forward with an interview for the job, everyone would know I was not the right person to be leading the agency. Or even worse, I might get the job and be horrible at it.

It took quite a bit of convincing from a few close friends before I agreed to my initial interview. Throughout the entire process, I still struggled to see myself as Chair of the NEH, the person in charge of an independent federal grantmaking agency charged with supporting and promoting excellence in the humanities. The person who approves nearly 700 direct grants each year—to individual researchers and organizations large and small—from local libraries, community centers, and historic sites, to museums, archives, and universities—and who makes decision on awards to support a wide array of local public programs and cultural organizations.

As I continued to move forward in the vetting and interviewing process, I constantly questioned my ability to effectively do the job. But I also celebrated

with joy and pride when Deb Halaand of the Laguna Pueblo was confirmed and sworn in as Secretary of the Interior, the first ever Native American to head the Department of the Interior. Auntie Deb, as many of the Native students I worked with fondly called her, reminded me that my own cultural knowledge and understandings are powerful lessons that I could and should rely upon if I were to become Chair of the NEH. I realized humanities is what I do, what I have been doing, and that all I needed to do was remember the humanities teachings that inform who I am and use those teachings to do the job if I was confirmed for the position. I saw Auntie Deb doing it and that gave me the courage to keep moving forward in the process.

Now of course, I am the head of NEH, a federal agency founded in 1965 by an act of Congress that states: "Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." I want to pause for a moment to reflect on those words, and the explicit connection they make between the humanities, democracy, and citizenship. The legislators who called for the creation of NEH recognized that the humanities are fundamental and necessary to a thriving country and society. And they drew a direct line between how deeply we engage with our histories, experiences, and knowledge and the health of our democracy.

As you move forward and out into the professional world, my hope for you is that you will draw upon the cultural lessons first passed down to you at the kitchen table, and put them to use as informed and engaged citizens.

Citizenship is not just registering to vote, or attending a town council or school board meeting, or holding a sign at a protest, or protesting decisions made by Lesley administration, or participating in local or national politics, or entering a position of public service—though I deeply hope that you all will do some if not all of those things. As NEH's founding legislation points out, it is also about being informed, and sharing our knowledge and stories with others. It is about looking deeply at ours and others' histories and experiences. It is about working to cultivate wisdom that will help us envision the future we want for ourselves and our country. Our democracy depends on us doing these things, with deliberation, at every opportunity.

I often tell students that the humanities take courage, because the pursuit of humanistic knowledge requires us to look for the causes and effects of often very painful and difficult histories and topics. But in return the humanities also give us

strength and courage, because they give us the insight to assess our current situation and experiences, and the humanities give us valuable knowledge of other pasts and experiences to draw upon in facing our challenges.

You are graduating into a world with many urgent challenges to address: systemic inequality, the effects on our environment due to a changing climate, and threats to democracy worldwide. Which is why I feel that the humanities have never been more vital to our world and society than they are today. To tackle these difficult and complicated issues, we need the wisdom of humanities to help us understand the roots of these problems; who they affect, and how; and the vision to develop new and creative solutions.

Over the last two or four years, or more, you have had your share of homework assignments, papers, and tests to complete. But there is one last assignment I want to give you. As you leave Lesley University and go out to conquer your dreams, I want you to tap into the lessons of the kitchen table and invite others to sit at yours. Take time to share your story, and learn to listen closely to the story of others. I still meet people to this day who tell me they didn't know Native Americans still exist in this country. This tells me we've done a very bad job of

telling real and diverse stories of this country, and we've haven't been asking for these diverse stories. I'm asking each of you to start asking each other: "What is your history?, and how does that interact with the history as I understand it of my own place, people, community, and country?" If we can all do that, I promise, those discussions will change you, and you, in turn, can change the world.

Thank you.

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