

# A Big, Beautiful World That Needs You

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Good afternoon. *Guten Tag. Bonjour. Dobré odpoledne. Dobar dan.* I greet you in some of the languages I have studied, a sliver of the world's 6,000-8,000 languages. Today is a day of celebration. . . of all you have already accomplished and of all you have yet to accomplish, not only at Juniata but also as you disperse into the wider world for study abroad, further education, work, family life, and citizenship. Thanks to your curiosity and commitment and to the love and support of your family, friends, faculty, and other mentors, you have been building your adult selves. You are talented and ready for "a fulfilling life of service and ethical leadership in the global community."<sup>1</sup>

Congratulations!

In this peaceful space, between what you have accomplished and what remains to be achieved, imagine your favorite place. Is it quiet or loud? Ornate or simple? Hot or cold? Is the view cozy and snug or wide and expansive? The world abounds with places that combine such qualities in varying ways and with fascinating people. . . across the world and around the corner. Invite them in. As a child, I knew the allure of the world. In college, I became a Russian major, and when my now-husband proposed, he presented me with a choice: did I want an engagement ring or to put that money toward study abroad in Russia? In the blink of an eye, I answered, "Russia." That trip was just our first.

Since then, I have been fortunate to engage with people quite different from me, with distinct personalities, talents, perspectives, and approaches to problem solving. I've met people with diverse backgrounds from across the United States and around the world who have introduced me to new ways of thinking and speaking. I can, for example, now sing "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" in Japanese: *atama, kata, hiza, ashi* (頭、肩、膝、足).

We make sense of the world through language, and it reflects and makes available the world's diversity. Unfortunately, though there are thousands of languages, 40% of the world's population speaks natively only ten of them.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, sixty percent of the world's population speaks more than one language.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, however, while at least 350 languages are spoken at home, we remain stubbornly monolingual: only 20.4% of "English-proficient adults. . . report speaking another language 'well' or 'very well.'"<sup>4</sup> Sociolinguists have noted, too, the "serious and detrimental repercussions of

speaking certain varieties of English and some foreign accents in the USA.”<sup>5</sup> Lily Wong Fillmore, linguist from the University of California, Berkeley, declared, “Americans are impatient with people who do not speak English. . . . We are not comfortable around people who speak languages we do not understand.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than fearing and discouraging the use of other dialects and languages, we should be encouraging them. Like species, many languages are endangered, and when languages are lost, whole worlds go with them.<sup>7</sup>

Even though language use marks our identity, showing both who we are and who we are not, we do not have to limit ourselves to just one language variety. Some people worry about accepting such difference into their lives, but there is great intellectual and conceptual value in learning another language. Doing so also brings social, economic, and personal benefits: opening new people and parts of the world to us, increasing mutual respect and understanding, expanding job opportunities, and even delaying the symptoms of dementia.<sup>8</sup> As my colleague Amy Frazier-Yoder put it, “The languages, like other humanities courses, help students move beyond self-reflection to understanding of others, crucial to informed decision making and de-centered, nuanced understandings of the global world.”<sup>9</sup>

Now take a moment to remember your home: where you live, with whom, and what you do there. Whether we love our homes or find them difficult, they are part of who we are. Our values, attitudes, and assumptions are shaped there, and this familiarity can be reassuring. Because of this, leaving home can be tough, whether your new world is across town or in another country.

Some of you are here today because you have won a scholarship to study abroad. Living abroad is rewarding, wonderful, and hard. This new place will look, sound, smell, taste, and feel different. Handling all that newness without the comfort of routine and expectations-met can be exhausting. Studying abroad will shake up your preconceived notions, cause you to question and reassess, and bolster your courage and confidence. It will teach you about who you are and who others are. If you let the world in, its diversity can be captivating, perplexing, and enriching.

Recognize that there is no disloyalty to home if you explore and question. In fact, a liberal education and engaged citizenship ask you to do so. Whether you have the desire to travel widely or don’t want to leave home, you need not be limited in your worldview. As Madeleine Green, senior fellow at the International Association of Universities, has posited, “[I]f colleges and universities [could] produce graduates with the knowledge and the disposition to be global citizens, the world would certainly be a better place.”<sup>10</sup> Happily, there are no limits to the number of people you can appreciate. Including new people with ideas you do not share and experiencing places where life is conducted differently from what you are used to only complements your life. Doing so does not crowd out your existing love for family, friends, home, or country. Like love, being open to the world is additive and addictive; it is not “either/or”

but “both/and.” Being open sharpens your knowledge of yourself and awareness of others, and this different thinking can be the catalyst for change for the better.

While there is joy in meeting those who challenge your assumptions and present you with alternatives you hadn’t previously considered, not all such interactions are easy. I once had a difficult conversation about whether atheists could be moral people with someone whose religious and cultural backgrounds differed from mine. We navigated the discussion carefully, respecting each other’s feelings and listening to the arguments. In the end, while we still did not agree, we better understood each other and our cultures, and our relationship had deepened. Of course, not all conversations across difference go that well, but the attempts are worthwhile.

We need to bridge our differences because here at home and around the world we confront extraordinary challenges like climate change and the terrible ugliness and injustices in what humans do to one another or ignore about others’ lives. Still, I hope you agree that we do, indeed, share a big, beautiful world. That big, beautiful world, though, urgently needs you. I urge you to adopt the value of engaging with community for your lifetime: to learn from others and share your talents to contribute to the public good. Fortunately, a liberal education prepares you for this. Gina Barreca, professor of English at the University of Connecticut, has asserted, “The importance of a good education, especially one heavy in the humanities, is about being able to survey, understand, and either strengthen or dismantle the apparatus that underlies our civilization, culture and society.”<sup>11</sup>

Our public space, as the pandemic has reminded us, is the entire world. Kristin Lord, International Research and Exchanges Board president, declared here at Juniata: “Engaging the world will challenge your mind and uplift your soul, but it can also break your heart. For every act of ingenuity or humanity, there is cruelty and intolerance; after every breakthrough, setbacks.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than be led into despair and inaction, though, Emily Welty, director of Peace and Justice Studies at Pace University, reminds us to take heart: we should each choose what matters most to us and contribute our energies to making that part of the world better.<sup>13</sup>

Building community and working for a more just, safer world for all is fraught with difficulty. Still, seek ways that you can engage with others on a shared project or issue. Struggling and laughing together toward a common goal builds respectful communities. Maybe you have dissimilar beliefs about fundamental values but share an interest in soccer, for example. Collaborating in the community soccer league will build connections. These allow us to understand what assumptions we may have about others that are partially or wholly false or, if not that, at least prevent us from dehumanizing and caricaturizing one another.

Helping others not only contributes to knitting your community together, it helps you. As Benjamin Franklin opined, “When you’re good to others, you’re best to yourself.”<sup>14</sup> Current Juniata

student Emma Hernandez recently underscored this idea, saying, “[W]orking in tandem with people who are committed and passionate about an idea is a truly wonderful feeling.”<sup>15</sup> With others, nurture your skills and curiosity and take microbiologist Bonnie Bassler’s advice to surround yourself with people who are good at what you are not; she has found that “the people surrounding me and the worthiness of the causes we pursue keep me from backing down.”<sup>16</sup>

Now imagine the world you want to live in. What is your vision, and how will you help us get there? Will you create beauty? Get out the vote? Improve healthcare? Inform, inspire, challenge, or empower others? Heal the Earth? Our big, beautiful, intricate, challenged world needs YOU. . . all of us, actually, and I hope we leave here committed to finding ways to contribute each and every day to making our own communities and the wider world ever more beautiful, welcoming, interesting, and safe for all. No matter your strengths and passions, YOU—in your professional, civic, and personal lives—can help bridge the divides and support the public good.<sup>17</sup> What you do for others matters, sometimes much more than you will ever know. Congratulations on your accomplishments. *Cnacuĉo. Dziękuję.* Thank you.

## NOTES

1. Juniata College, “Mission,” Juniata College, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.juniata.edu/about/mission.php>.
2. Statistics and Data, “The Most Spoken Languages in the World 1900/2021,” Statistics and Data, 2022, <https://statisticsanddata.org/data/the-most-spoken-languages-in-the-world-1900-2021/>.
3. “Multilingual People,” iLanguages.org, 2018, <https://ilanguages.org/bilingual.php>.
4. US Census Bureau, “Census Bureau Reports at Least 350 Languages Spoken in U.S. Homes,” Public Information Office, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, November 3, 2015, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/archives/2015-pr/cb15-185.html>; American Academy of Arts & Sciences, “Humanities Indicators: Multilingualism,” American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2022, <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/public-life/multilingualism>. For additional discussion of and data on the dearth of foreign language proficiency in the United States, see US Census Bureau, “Why We Ask Questions About. . . Languages Spoken at Home,” Public Information Office, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, last revised June 2, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/language/>; “American Community Survey DP02 Selected Social Characteristics of the United States,” Public Information Office, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?tid=ACSDP5Y2020.DP02>; and Dennis Looney and Natalia Lusin, “Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016: Final Report,” Modern Language Association of America, June 2019, pp. 1 and 31, <https://www.mla.org/content/download/110154/2406932/2016-Enrollments-Final-Report.pdf>.

5. Rosina Lippi-Green, "Language Ideology and Language Prejudice," in Edward Finegan and John R. Rickford, eds., *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 295.
6. Lily Wong Fillmore, "Language in Education," in Edward Finegan and John R. Rickford, eds., *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 349-50.
7. Many linguists have written about the losses that occur with language death, among them David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For a quick overview of four important results of language loss, see Kat Eschner, "Four Things That Happen When a Language Dies," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/four-things-happen-when-language-dies-and-one-thing-you-can-do-help-180962188/>.
8. "Benefits of Language Learning," ACTFL, <https://www.actfl.org/resources/guiding-principles-language-learning/benefits-language-learning>; Daniela Perani and Jubin Abutalebi, "Bilingualism, Dementia, Cognitive, and Neural Reserve," *Current Opinion in Neurology* 28 (2015), pp. 618-625.
9. Amy Frazier-Yoder, email message to author, April 6, 2022.
10. Madeleine F. Green, "Global Citizenship: What Are We Talking about and Why Does It Matter?" *Trends & Insights for International Education Leaders*, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, January 2012, [https://globalhighered.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/ti\\_global\\_citizen.pdf](https://globalhighered.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/ti_global_citizen.pdf).
11. Gina Barreca, "English Majors Prepared to Do Anything," *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, CT), February 8, 2017, <https://www.courant.com/opinion/op-ed/hc-op-barreca-in-defense-of-english-majors-0210-20170208-column.html>.
12. Kristin Lord, "Global Engagement: The Right Path," 139<sup>th</sup> Juniata College Commencement Address, *Juniata Voices* 17 (2017): 200, <https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/past-version/media/volume-17/vol17-Lord1.pdf>.
13. Emily Welty, "We Are Unstoppable: Another World Is Possible," *Juniata Voices* 19 (2019): 50, [https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/past-version/media/volume-19/Welty\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons\\_vol\\_19\\_pgs\\_43\\_51.pdf](https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/past-version/media/volume-19/Welty_Nuclear_Weapons_vol_19_pgs_43_51.pdf). Her idea included here is a synthesis of the content of her talk and the discussion following it.
14. Benjamin Franklin, "Benjamin Franklin's Famous Quotes," The Franklin Institute, 2022, <https://www.fi.edu/benjamin-franklin/famous-quotes>.
15. Emma Hernandez, email message to author, April 12, 2022.
16. Bonnie Bassler, "Commencement 2010: Bonnie Bassler," Swarthmore College, 2022, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/past-commencements/bonnie-bassler>. The first piece of Bassler's advice noted here was given after her official commencement speech concluded.

17. An in-depth discussion of these three parts of our lives and how they are enhanced by a liberal arts education can be found in Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).