

From I and Me to Us and We

Alex Jones

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Alex Jones, Class of 2020, is the 2018 winner of the Bailey Oratorical Competition.

Have you ever been called a dreamer? y-ouch!
That hurts, because it might make you feel inadequate and, at the same time, blatantly disregards the importance of dreams.

I, too, have been labeled as a dreamer. When I was younger, I was often criticized for my overly idealistic, overly optimistic view of the world. Many people who know me would argue that I haven't quite grown out of that . . . and I don't plan on it. I've built my life and worldview around these ideals.

See, without big dreams, all of us that are gathered here today would be sitting around, hanging out in the dark with nothing new to talk about. The leaders of our time would be random people, sharing in the darkness of the status quo, which from my perspective, would be pretty frightening.

Dreams are important. In essence, the act of dreaming speaks to a visionary capacity that has shaped our world for the better, and sometimes, for worse.

My dream for our future calls for a paradigm shift in the institutions of our world, that instead of self-interest, compassion be the foundation upon which our society is built. This may sound simple, but it suggests a number of complex implications.

We will work through them tonight, from the macro-level downwards. Together we will examine how international political leadership could show compassion, then discuss the role compassion could play in the way our businesses function, and finally end with you and me and compassion within our Juniata College community. I share this dream because I believe in a compassion-centered approach which, at any level, can change the world in a way that allows everyone to reach their fullest potential.

COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

My understanding of compassionate leadership begins with a study abroad experience last summer in Vienna, Austria. I made friends from all over the world, so we shared a lot of culture together. They introduced me to baklava and döner and all these new things, and I took them to the only Dunkin' Donuts in Austria.

We became very close, but when it finally came time to talk politics, I was nervous. Because of

the diversity within my group, I wasn't sure how it would go. Surprisingly, they responded differently than I would have expected. They sighed . . . like they were in mourning.

This reaction was a commentary on their perception of our nation's leadership. They explained that our regime's presence on the international plain is one of "explicit self-interest," and that the issues of the world played second-fiddle to seeking advantages to exploit over others.

For a group of 20-somethings, I thought this view to be incredibly insightful. That our greatest flaw in our leadership is that it lacks compassion.

I currently work for a nonprofit youth leadership development program, and when I evaluated our model of leadership through the lens of my friends from abroad, I noticed something pretty astounding.

We organize our model of leadership using an acronym called LEADERV, and the first letter L represents the capability of a leader to be loving towards others. This suggests a paradigm shift in which leaders are emotionally invested in others. That the best leaders lead compassionately.

Academia refers to this theory as servant leadership, defined by philosopher Robert K. Greenleaf as leadership that is seen to be a service to others rather than a skill owned by a few special individuals. This approach to leadership has the power to positively alter our presence on the world stage and inspire international cooperation. We have competitive advantage, we have comparative advantage, sure; but this mindset would grant us compassionate advantage in how we deal with others, which benefits every party involved.

COMPASSIONATE BUSINESS

Now that we understand what compassionate leadership looks like, how would a compassion-centered approach function within our organizations? The language can get a little technical, so I'd like to invite you to imagine something.

Imagine you are living in an apartment with a few roommates, and for the most part, things are going pretty well: the rent is being paid, the wi-fi works, but you notice one of your roommates isn't quite holding up their end. They constantly leave their dirty dishes on countertops, they don't take out the trash, they leave their shoes in front of the doorway so every time you walk in you wipe out on them . . .

This is the current viewpoint of many people in regard to business organizations in our society. That they are guided by self-interest, without regard to the mess they leave behind.

Now imagine that lousy roommate finally beginning to help out around the apartment. In addition to that, they are always willing to help others with their chores when they may need it. They may even give you their Netflix password!

This behavior characterizes a paradigm shift in the role organizations should play in our society, taking a compassion-centered approach. Such an approach to business, which is the focus of my studies

here at Juniata, is called social enterprise, defined by the University of Edinburgh as business that works towards social or environmental goals in addition to financial ones.

For example, Vaseline, which sells its product in the United States, distributes its product for free in developing countries where people suffer from skin ailments. Nonprofit initiatives, sustainability research, ethical human resource policy . . . this is all the stuff of social enterprise.

Soon enough, my fellow Juniatians, we will be taking up roles within organizations, or even starting our own! With this thought in mind, there is so much potential for our generation of organizational leadership to make a difference through social enterprise work.

COMPASSIONATE CITIZENSHIP

We have discussed the implications of a compassion-centered approach in our leadership and in our businesses, so now I'd like to talk about compassion in our Juniata College community.

Compassionate citizenship goes beyond kindness. It's not just "being nice," but considering the experiences and struggles others may face, and expressing empathy when these circumstances become present.

I am not perfect at this compassion thing. I do my best to live up to its ideals every day. We all may have faced trials where empathy could have made a difference in our situations.

So, how can we embody compassionate citizenship? I looked back to last year's Bailey Oratorical for some wisdom from our very own Xavier Cachon and Nitya Chagti. Xavier asked us to focus on our interrelated similarity rather than the labels that separate us. Nitya asked us to approach others with a genuine curiosity for their experiences. These ideas, as different as they are, are both rooted in compassion.

We are all in this thing called life together—chasing different goals, sure—but by showing this compassion in the ways defined by Xavier and Nitya, we can help each other in the achievement of our dreams.

CONCLUSION

Have you ever been called a dreamer? Nice!

Tonight, you have listened to Juniata's dreamers discuss the fruits of their craft. Ideas like theirs and inspiring leaders like them should make us proud to have carried this label—dreamer.

Together we evaluated how a compassionate approach to our leadership, businesses, and citizenship can change the world and allow everyone to reach their fullest potential. This compassion-centered paradigm shift illustrates the fulfillment of my dream for our future, a world built on compassion instead of self-interest.

Every time I dream this dream, I see us coming together in pursuit of our shared future.