



## **2017 CORNELL COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS TORI BARNES-BRUS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY**

Thank you, Dean Dieker.

Hello Cornell class of 2017!!! Here you are! I am so very proud of you and the vast accomplishment you made in your years at Cornell! Congratulations!!!!

Happy Mother's Day to any family and friends in the audience who have engaged in the work of mothering these graduates who sit before us. Indeed, this is your day as much as it is theirs.

To the class of 2017, thank you all for inviting me to speak today. I am so very honored to be addressing you. As Dean Dieker said, I am a Cornell alum, so I, too, walked across this stage as a graduating Cornellian some years ago and I have been back at the College for 10 years as a faculty member, so this truly is special to me. Honestly, as I prepared this speech, I struggled with what I could offer you.... what can I tell you about "adult" life after Cornell when I actually returned to here to pursue my life's work. But then I realized, that I know, perhaps too intimately, some aspects of the Cornell education and experience that has prepared you for the next chapters of your lives. For example, I know, what many of those symbols on the tops of your mortarboards mean. I can recall the joys of road tripping - or sleeping for days - over block breaks; I know, as do you, the importance of those faculty members and staff that truly challenged you to push harder and learn more; I understand the "assigned" seating in the cafeteria, as well as Sunday services at Sutliff. I experienced the confidence-- and sometimes doubt- that I could do anything in 18 days. I, too, perfected the art of planned procrastination- you know, that process of putting off an assignment, because the daily demands of the block plan challenge you to find time between tomorrow's 100 pages of reading or hours of lab or your extra curricular activities, and the requisite Cornell-specific socializing. Finally, as a alum of this institution, I too, have an intricate understanding of the Cornell bubble---how easy it is to be so absorbed by-the goings-on on the Hilltop that you have no idea about, or energy for, the outside world.

During 8th block, I made it a habit of reminding the seniors in the class how many days they had left as college students before they would enter the so-called real world. I would announce things like "this is the last guest speaker you'll have as Cornell Student" or "this is the last 3rd Thursday you'll have" or--- and this one they liked, " this is the last final exam you'll take at Cornell." As the seniors in the class alternated between moans and cheers at these reminders that their college days were coming to an end, implicit in their reactions was the reality that adulthood was upon them... they, like you, are leaving this Cornell Bubble where you- the students- have been the focus of the entire institution--- faculty focused on teaching you- on challenging your minds; facilities staff ensured that you had appropriate housing and workspace; student life staff worked tirelessly to provide educational and entertaining activities. At



Cornell rules are clearly delineated, meals are provided, tasks are assigned. Indeed, students are the center of the Cornell universe, but soon-- literally minutes away--- graduates of 2017, you will fully embark on this thing we call “adulthood.” Indeed it’s time to “adult.” According to urban dictionary, “Adulthood” means “ to do grown up things and hold responsibilities such as, a 9-5 **job**, a mortgage/**rent**, a car payment, or anything else that makes **one** think of grown ups.” My students said things like making their appointments and preparing their own meals.

These students in my class, frustrated and anxious about my count down to their impending “adulthood” and thinking they had bested me, responded that “adulthood is a social construction.” One of the most fundamental premises of sociology is that reality is socially constructed.<sup>1</sup> It basically means that our culture, institutions, and social realities- things like gender, democracy, and even money were all created and recreated by individuals like you and me, through our interactions. Things like gender or even adulthood have meaning because we, as a society, give them certain meanings, and these meanings of things makes them real to us.

So today I want to talk with you a bit about this notion of adulthood and how your Cornell education has prepared you for this new reality, and perhaps how you can help construct a new vision of adulthood as well.

Many of you know that my preferred classroom style is one of discussion, rather than lecture where we work together to create a shared learning community. I suspect that some of the students who know me (and my aversion to lecturing) see my address today as a chance to turn the tables. You’ve put me in the hot-seat, it’s my turn to “think aloud” and make some claims. But I’m still going to call on you, the audience, for some help unpacking this notion of adulthood. So, graduates, how has Cornell College prepared you to “adult”? What has Cornell taught you about how to “adult” (Pull out White Board- Students shout out things similar to those before the arrow, I reply with the bold.)

How to respond to email → **communication**

To do list never ends → **Time management**

Crying--I can do more than I think I can → **confidence/self motivation**

That I don’t have to be right / How to think out loud / how to ask for help,  
even when it scary

→ **Critical thinking; problem-solving**

How to recognize one’s privilege / Realizing people aren’t perfect →

**Empathy**

Appreciation for diversity/Tolerance for different perspectives →

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<sup>1</sup> Kaufman, Peter.2014. Sociological Advice for Graduates. Kaufman takes basic sociological ideas and frames them for graduates.I pull on Kaufman’s general ideas to help guide this talk.  
<http://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2014/06/sociological-advice-for-graduates.html>

## Compassion

To participate even when I'm cynical)--> How to be engaged citizen/be involved→ **Importance of community/ Civically Engaged**  
That those with experience or maturity aren't always right; Question authority→ **Accountability and hold others accountable; Leadership**

(Communication, Time Management, Self-Motivation, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Compassion/Empathy, Leadership)

Graduates, you are impressively prepared for this adulthood we've been discussing.

But what is the context of adulthood in which you are embarking? To paraphrase Karl Marx, we make our "own history, but [we] do not make it as [we] please; [we] do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." You are currently constructing your own life, your adult self as a continuation of your personal history, a history shaped by your family, your peers, Cornell College, and the broader social world.

Your transition to adulthood is happening at time of great social transformation and economic unrest. Our country faces intense polarization- culturally... politically... economically. The population of the nation is becoming more diverse. The nature of work and the distribution of information is evolving rapidly with new developments in technology. We're confronted with facts, and alternative facts, at every turn. In the words of NYT Columnist Thomas Friedman, "*More is now on you.* And that means self-motivation to learn **and keep** learning becomes the most important life skill." Much of this social and economic change is exacerbated by fear, fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of difference. As adults, you will have to navigate this ever-changing terrain, confront your fears and keep learning.

For many, the world is an unquestioned natural reality, not one that is socially constructed; not one in which individuals influence the big picture happenings of society. Some are content to binge watch Netflix and say the world is just "the way it is," and there is nothing we can do about it. In failing to recognize the social construction of reality, we don't recognize our own roles in re-creating the status quo, we fail to acknowledge how our own interactions and behaviors contribute to an imperfect, often divided world. As Audre Lorde, feminist poet reminds us, "*It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.*" Recognizing the capacity for agency is only half the battle, challenging social norms, resisting peer pressure, questioning our parents' and teachers' influences, standing up for those who are different from us, these are not always easy tasks. Indeed, adulthood is hard, but we still have to do it!



You are leaving Cornell armed with the tools for adulting. You've learned to learn, you've learned compassion, empathy, critical thinking, motivation, leadership, and tolerance. You are uniquely prepared to interact in a social world fraught by cultural, economic, and political polarization, to embrace a nation with a diverse population, to abate your fears. Cornell Graduates, you CAN shape the world, just as you shaped Cornell and Cornell has shaped you. The question remains... how will you construct your own "adulthood"?

By taking the path of intentionality, rather than predictability, by confronting fears rather than surrendering to them, by understanding that each of us contributes to the creation of the world, we are empowered to collaborate, and actively work toward a more desirable social world and construct that adult self we truly wish to be.

As I close, I want to share the words of actress and activist Laverne Cox,. She says: "I want to encourage each and every one of us to interrogate how we might be an oppressor, and how we might be able to become liberators for ourselves and each other. —" She, too, reminds us to challenge the status quo.

What if this were our collective construction of adulting? Being liberators for ourselves and each other?

When my students suggested that "adulthood is a social construct," they meant to imply to that adulthood is what we make it, adulthood only has meaning because we as a society give it that meaning. So I replied to these enlightened students, yes, but that doesn't mean that the expectations and consequences of adulting aren't real.

Cornell College Class of 2017 Now the time has come for you to fully embrace "adulting." Go forth and challenge the social structure, avoid complacency, and exert your agency!

May you be liberators for yourselves and for others!!!

CONGRATULATIONS!!!