

August 24, 2024

*(Welcome and Framing)*

My thanks to everyone who has made this moment possible, and my thanks to all of you who are here. I'm really honored to be with you even as I'm a bit intimidated.

I'm intimidated because it seems like I'm about to give a speech, which seems to indicate I have some knowledge you don't. While I might know some things, so do you. And I'm especially thinking of our incoming students. I am glad you're here, and I'm excited for the ways we might begin thinking together.

When I say thinking, I mean the actual work of thinking. It's messy and it's hard. It takes time. It doesn't always have a product or an outcome to prove its existence. It can't be franchised or captured. Thinking *is* process. And it requires support.

Because, did I mention? Thinking is hard.

My experience writing this talk for you today is an example. I struggled to know what to say to you. I wrote 4 different versions. They bored me. I was unsatisfied with the process of writing and with what I was saying. The talks were full of advice and certainty. I was busy telling you what to do because I didn't know what to do.

And so I started again. I started writing you an essay—not the five-paragraph kind that makes its argument with a performed kind of certainty, but the kind that comes from the French word *essai* meaning an attempt, a trial, a grappling with experience and ideas. An essay is thinking on the page.

The one I'll share with you today is a draft. Its ideas are in formation. I read it in honor of the intellectual risks I hope you'll take while you're here and to foreground for you how various and wild thinking can be when underway.

I'm thinking with a few folks in this essay, including Etel Adnan, an Arab-American poet and painter born in Lebanon, who lived in California and France, and who wrote many books, including *The Arab Apocalypse* and *Shifting the Silence*. The essay is also in conversation with June Jordan, a Black poet, essayist, activist who founded the "Poetry for the People!" program. Her books include *Some of Us Did Not Die* and *Moving Towards Home*. My family also accompanied me as I wrote and supported me. My thanks to Yolanda, Rob, Lindy and Wil.

Last thing: the essay is composed of a series of small meditations. Each meditation is a separate section with its own title. I'll pause before each one.

## **thinking with...**

*an essay by Kisha Lewellyn Schlegel, in honor of the class of 2028's ongoing beginning...*

### **thinking with school**

I didn't like it as a kid. But I went. I sat in the assigned desk. I ate lunch from the plastic tray. After recess, I was so hot that I dripped onto the page where I had written my name in blue ink. The dot over the *i* spread into a jellyfish, glowing and agile in an ocean that holds so much of life and from which all life comes. The image spread a message: pay attention sweaty girl and you will grow. *This* is how you learn.

### **thinking with trees**

When I was 10, my granddad, Truce, took me for walks up mountains. He was a preacher, and believed, deeply, in imagistic language. One could even say he had devoted his entire life to the belief that language could take us to the figurative mountaintop of God's love. This was his theory and his practice: Finding the words that might touch the ineffable.

On our walks, he challenged me to a game of metaphors. He asked me to describe what I saw by connecting two disparate categories of things. Maybe he gave me examples: The clouds are marshmallows; the moss like a pillow. I don't remember. I only remember wanting to be very good at the game. I wanted to win even though I didn't understand what the prize might be.

We walked a long time. Summer was almost over, but the heat resisted the ending. I was too tired and hot to do more than complain until, finally, we slowed down.

We stopped.

We caught our breath.

We sat under the shade of a tall tree, a loblolly pine, loblolly a name that rang out with its own poetry, melodic and strange, sticky and sweet, and so maybe it prompted my metaphor. Maybe I saw the round shape of its shade and said, *we sit in the lollipop shade*. I don't know. I remember thinking of a metaphor, but I don't remember what it was. Whatever I said, the answer I found matters less than the practice I was learning.

My granddad was teaching me to slow down. He was teaching me a practice of thinking with what was around me, of thinking with the land and the living messages and images it presented, a practice that has accompanied me and been my intellectual companion ever since. It's a method I have taken forward with me for my life. I don't mean for the rest of my life. I mean for my actual life. He taught me a theory and practice of thinking with...

### **thinking with Emily**

I'm supposedly grown now. I'm asked to talk to students I haven't met. I sit in my backyard and sit in the strangeness of our relation, how we are already in relation even though we are strangers, how we are always in relation without knowing each other at all.

Our not knowing is the air between us, mostly invisible. And moving.

Summer is almost over again. The light is already changing. The college campus trees are getting ready to turn. They're thinking about it. The sun's slant of light is their colleague, their truthful companion.

Emily Dickinson enters the backyard and says: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant."

And then I think, by the slant, the truth comes through.

### **thinking with cake**

In the French movie, *Taste of Things*, a young girl, maybe 10 years old, eats a dessert for the first time. She's a demure eater. She takes her first bite slowly. She chews once and is still. She slows down. You can almost see the delight merge with confusion—the head thinking with the heart: *Maybe it's cake? Ice cream? Ice cream inside of cake encased in meringue that has been... baked?*

Wonder distilled releases a question:

"What's it called?" she asks the chef who made it.

"A Baked Alaska."

"Why Alaska?" she asks.

"I don't know!" says the chef who goes on to ask, "What did you feel at your first bite of Baked Alaska?"

"I almost cried," says the girl.

"Why?"

"I don't know," says the girl.

"Have you ever cried when you ate something?"

The girl thinks and says, "No."

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't know," she says.

### **thinking with a friend**

Words were my cake one surprising afternoon and a question the surprise inside. I'd gone to a party where a friend handed me a book called *The Next American Essay*. Inside, a writer named Montaigne asks: "What do I know?"

What do I know? The question asks the head to think with heart.

I read and read, finding a form of prose that turned lived experience into literature. Here was the essay, a form of writing that would become a beloved companion, a shape to hold the spreading ink, the blob of ongoing unknowing.

### **thinking with feeling**

I did not know that I would be a professor or even a writer, even though I have always been a writer. For a long time, I hid what I knew in my vulnerable bones. I hid my desire to write. I wanted instead to do work that might do some good. I couldn't imagine that could be writing. I taught at outdoor schools. Administered a grant that cleaned up polluted land. But I was writing all along. In secret. Even if what I loved mattered to no one, even if what I said didn't matter at all, it mattered to me. It took a long time for me to take my own interests to heart. To respect that they were my heart.

It is hard work to respect your own heart! Sometimes, it really messes me up.

Like today. Today, it's hard to be a person. I am not torn. I am simultaneous with love and grief. I'm alright even though I smell smoke from another forest fire. I'm alright even though war is ongoing and echoing.

Through an open window I hear music. Beyonce's song, "Freedom," is playing at a convention that refuses to let Palestinian Americans speak.

"What we do here echoes around the world," Ruwa Romman writes in the speech she wasn't allowed to give. A Palestinian American and state Representative of Georgia, Romman stood outside and shared her speech anyway. She said: "What we do here echoes around the world."

### **thinking with Truce**

Listening is a kind of love, I think but... What arrow of language could destroy lethal force?

I'm thinking with metaphors again, and so I'm back in the company of questions and unknowing and back in the company of my granddad, long gone. A man named Truce, the only one of his brothers who didn't have to go to war because he was allowed to go to school.

### **thinking with June Jordan**

The tree moves its cool shade across the backyard and the clover and grass. The bees get cool. I read the yard a poem by June Jordan. As I read it to you now.

### **"These poems"**

These poems  
they are things that I do  
in the dark  
reaching for you  
whoever you are

and  
are you ready?

These words  
they are stones in the water  
running away

These skeletal lines  
they are desperate arms for my longing and love.

I am a stranger  
learning to worship the strangers  
around me

whoever you are  
whoever I may become.

### **thinking with you**

This talk isn't done yet, nothing is done, but with tenderness and hope these words are what I have to give you, you who I haven't yet met. You who are so various. I don't want to conflate anything about you. You are not the person next to you, and you do not need to be.

“Present yourself as you are,” Marisol de la Cadena says. She is an anthropologist working on a method of not knowing. She says: “Present yourself as you are. Demand the other do the same without insulting each other by pretending to know who they are.”

### **thinking with assemblage**

Now we are underway... and so we really begin.

To begin the school year, we get together to open the door to thinking. We assemble to make our assemblage of thinking.

In art, an assemblage is made by grouping objects. The seemingly unrelated becomes related through the space the artist makes.

Here we begin. In this assemblage.

During convocation, we're arranged this way: You, the incoming class, are seated next to each other. In front of you are your professors, a symbolic way to represent where you are going... into these years of committed learning. But as you go, remember who is also with you. Even though you can't see them as you look ahead, even though they may not be present in this room, the people who got you here are here, with you. They are just over your shoulder: every person who ever loved you, parents, siblings, cousins, family, chosen family, friends, elders, ancestors, trees, rivers, the very land that you come from, is right here along with your history and story,

your experiences, every bowl of pasta made by someone who cared for you, every drink of water made safe by someone you probably didn't know, every building that sheltered you and allowed you to step into this moment, all of the pets and birds, every creature, the plants, the sky, the rain, and the sea around us are part of this assemblage that is here, committed to thinking with you.

### **thinking with thinking with**

I'm still learning how to keep the verb think as an ongoing process, as the gerund, the -ing, think-ing.

Thinking looks like thinking with: an essay, fiction, poems, paintings. With people, the moment, the politics of the moment. With emotions and grief, with histories both mine and beyond, thinking with and without, with wars and a desire for their end, thinking with ceasefire, with arms embargo, with the ongoing end of the world that has already ended for too many people without power to live in peace. And now? Am I thinking with or inside of systems of destruction? Even as I am thinking with land, with love, thinking with thinking?

### **thinking with Etel Adnan**

Etel Adnan w/rites:

"I need to simplify my thinking: to come to the roots of the olive trees I have planted on my island, sit close to them, look at every leaf. Start early in the morning. Then close my eyes and let the morning sun touch my face. Go to the Mediterranean at the street corner, go into its water, its salt, its acid colors, its heat... stop thinking... just be, and for many hours in a row, merge with this vegetal and metallic kind of consciousness which is so overpowering."

### **thinking with**

A leaf just fell. So it's time for us to start thinking together. Time for class. Time to ready the syllabi, the plans for dreams that might happen.

I'll meet you there.