

FIFTIETH REUNION CLASS

The Tremors of Our Times: A Letter from a Member of the Class of 1973

Dear graduates of the Northwestern University Class of 2023,

We share more than a love of the 'Cats.

A half century apart, your class and mine have the shared experience of living in tumultuous times that have tested our democracy and defined our values. There was surely no better place to experience these days, to explore their context, and to weigh their repercussions than in the classrooms and residence halls and libraries (and nearby beer joints) at Northwestern University.

Consider our parallels: The Class of 1973 arrived on campus for our first year in the wake of the chaotic 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and as the trial of the Chicago Seven was about to begin. During the four years that followed, we saw escalating protests against the Vietnam War, on our campus and others, and a widening breach between generations. When we graduated, the Senate Watergate Committee had just finished hearings that would help lead to a presidential impeachment investigation.

The Class of 2023 arrived on campus as the nation's fierce political polarization was becoming sharper than it had been since the Civil War. You lived through, and studied through, the worst pandemic in a century. By your graduation, you had seen two presidential impeachments and unprecedented efforts to overturn a US presidential election.

In our day, we sometimes wondered whether the republic could survive. Some of you may have had similar thoughts.

What we understand more clearly now is that its survival is not guaranteed. It is the result of people of every partisan stripe and demographic group who choose democracy, civility, and the rule of law over division, demagoguery, and the mob. It's a choice, not a given. It's your choice, and mine.

Life is a clarifying enterprise. The continuing debate over the direction of our country, its role in the world, and our obligations to one another commands our attention wherever we stand on the political spectrum and whatever degree you're being awarded this week. We have disagreements about the proper path forward, some of them profound, but we share common ground in our belief in the importance of freedom, tolerance, accountability, compassion, integrity. Truth.

Education is a clarifying enterprise, too.

When I moved into Shepard Hall as a first-year student, it was the first time I had spent a night outside my home state of Kansas. My roommate, Janet Wanderman '73 ('12 P), hailed from New York. We might as well have come from different planets. But we became friends, one piece of the process at Northwestern that challenged my assumptions and expanded my horizons. Fifty years later, I've reported from nearly every state, dozens of foreign countries, and six continents. I've covered 11 presidential campaigns and interviewed 10 presidents. After fulfilling my Northwestern science requirement with a course called The History of Science, which didn't include doing any actual science, I sat down to ask questions of Stephen Hawking and Edward Teller.

All that wouldn't have happened without the launchpad Northwestern turned out to be.

What I've learned since my own graduation day is the reality that earthquakes will reshape our landscape in ways we can't predict, making old solutions inadequate. We have started a reckoning on race in America, not yet completed. We've only begun to grapple with how to respond to the warming of our planet. We're seeing the advent of artificial intelligence that is poised to upend how things work in ways we can't yet fathom.

I've also seen the breathtaking power of individuals who have purpose. Things that once seemed impossible—in medicine and music, in technology and commerce, in communications and the arts—have become routine parts of our daily lives.

Here are two apparently conflicting lessons to take to heart. One is that life is short—so accept a dare, pursue a dream, leap into a terrifying challenge, not because you're sure you can succeed but because you aren't at all confident that you will. The other is that life is long—so nurture friendships, give a hand to a stranger, preserve the Earth. Take a breath.

Both things can be true. Both things are.

Now it's your turn to celebrate your graduation, to thank your parents and professors, to boldly go into a new world of possibility. Congratulations and best wishes to each of you on the remarkable journey you are about to begin.

Together, let's send our best wishes to the Northwestern Class of 2073, not yet born, for the world they will see and the challenges they will face. Just think of the amazing letter you'll be able to write them 50 years down the road.

*Susan Page '73
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