

The Nation.

# We Can Only Do This Together

by NAOMI KLEIN



*This speech was delivered on June 6, 2015, in Bar Harbor, Maine, as the College of the Atlantic commencement address.*

**F**IRST OF ALL, A HUGE CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL THE GRADUATES—AND TO THE PARENTS WHO raised you, and the teachers who guided you. It's a true privilege to be included in this special day. Mine is not going to be your average commencement address, for the simple reason that College of the Atlantic is not your average college. I mean, what kind of college lets students vote on their commencement speaker—as if this is their day or something? What's next? Women choosing whom they are going to marry?

Usually, commencement addresses try to equip graduates with a moral compass for their post-university life. You hear stories that end with clear lessons like: "Money can't buy happiness." "Be kind." "Don't be afraid to fail."

But my sense is that very few of you are flailing around trying to sort out right from wrong. Quite remarkably, you knew you wanted to go not just to an excellent college, but to an excellent socially and ecologically engaged college. A school surrounded by tremendous biological diversity and suffused with tremendous human diversity, with a student population that spans the globe. You also knew that strong community mattered more than almost anything. That's more self-awareness and self-direction than most people have when they leave graduate school—and somehow you had it when you were still in high school.

Which is why I am going to skip the homilies and get down to business: the historical moment into which you graduate—with climate change, wealth concentration, and racialized violence all reaching breaking points.

How do we help most? How do we best serve this broken world? And we know that time is short, especially when it comes to climate change. We all hear the clock ticking loudly in the background.

But that doesn't mean that climate change trumps everything else. It means we need to create integrated solutions—ones that radically bring down emissions, while closing the inequality gap and making life tangibly better for the majority.

This is no pipe dream. We have living examples from which to learn. Germany's energy transition has created 400,000 jobs in just over a decade, and not just cleaned up energy but made it fairer—so that energy systems are owned and controlled by hundreds and hundreds of cities, towns, and cooperatives. The mayor of New York just announced a climate plan that would bring 800,000 people out of poverty by 2025, by investing massively in transit and affordable housing and raising the minimum wage.

The holistic leap we need is within our grasp. And know that there is no better preparation for that grand project than your deeply interdisciplinary education in human ecology. You were made for this moment. No, that's not quite right: You somehow knew to make yourselves for this moment.

But much rests on the choices we make in the next few years. "Don't be afraid to fail" may be a standard commencement-address life lesson. Yet it doesn't work for those of us who are part of the climate-justice movement, where being afraid of failure is perfectly rational.

Because, let's face it: The generations before you used up more than your share of atmospheric space. We used up your share of big failures too. The ultimate intergenerational injustice. That doesn't mean that we all can't still make mistakes. We can and we will. But Alicia Garza, one of the amazing founders of Black Lives Matter, talks about how we have to "make new mistakes."

Sit with that one for a minute. Let's stop making the same old mistakes. Here are a few, but I trust that you will silently add your own. Projecting messianic fantasies onto politicians. Thinking the market will fix it. Building a movement made up entirely of upper-middle-class white people and then wondering why people of color don't want to join "our movement." Tearing each other to bloody shreds because it's easier to do that than go after the forces most responsible for this mess. These are social-change clichés, and they are getting really boring.

We don't have the right to demand perfection from each other. But we do have the right to expect progress. To demand evolution. So let's make some new mistakes. Let's make new mistakes as we break through our silos and build the kind of beautifully diverse and justice-hungry movement that actually has a chance of winning—winning against the powerful interests that want us to keep failing.

With this in mind, I want talk about an old mistake that I see reemerging. It has to do with the idea that since attempts at big systemic change have failed, all we can do is act small. Some of you will relate. Some of you won't. But I suspect all of you will have to deal with this tension in your future work.

A story: When I was 26, I went to Indonesia and the Philippines to do research for my first book, *No Logo*. I had a simple goal: to meet the workers making the



**Naomi Klein** delivering the College of the Atlantic commencement address.

*Naomi Klein is a Nation columnist and the author of This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate.*

clothes and electronics that my friends and I purchased. And I did. I spent evenings on concrete floors in squalid dorm rooms where teenage girls—sweet and giggly—spent their scarce nonworking hours. Eight or even 10 to a room. They told me stories about not being able to leave their machines to pee. About bosses who hit. About not having enough money to buy dried fish to go with their rice.

They knew they were being badly exploited—that the garments they were making were being sold for more than they would make in a month. One 17-year-old said to me: “We make computers, but we don’t know how to use them.”

So one thing I found slightly jarring was that some of these same workers wore clothing festooned with knockoff trademarks of the very multinationals that were responsible for these conditions: Disney characters or Nike check marks. At one point, I asked a local labor organizer about this. Wasn’t it strange—a contradiction?

It took a very long time for him to understand the question. When he finally did, he looked at me like I was nuts. You see, for him and his colleagues, individual consumption wasn’t considered to be in the realm of politics at all. Power rested not in what you did as one person, but what you did as many people, as one part of a large, organized, and focused movement. For him, this meant organizing workers to go on strike for better conditions, and eventually it meant winning the right to unionize. What you ate for lunch or happened to be wearing was of absolutely no concern whatsoever.

This was striking to me, because it was the mirror opposite of my culture back home in Canada. Where I came from, you expressed your political beliefs—firstly and very often lastly—through personal lifestyle choices. By loudly proclaiming your vegetarianism. By shopping fair trade and local and boycotting big, evil brands.

These very different understandings of social change came up again and again a couple of years later, once my book came out. I would give talks about the need for international protections for the right to unionize. About the need to change our global trading system so it didn’t encourage a race to the bottom. And yet at the end of those talks, the first question from the audience was: “What kind of sneakers are OK to buy?” “What brands are ethical?” “Where do you buy your clothes?” “What can I do, as an individual, to change the world?”

Fifteen years after I published *No Logo*, I still find myself facing very similar questions. These days, I give talks about how the same economic model that superpowered multinationals to seek out cheap labor in Indonesia and China also supercharged global greenhouse-gas emissions. And, invariably, the hand goes up: “Tell me what I can do as an individual.” Or maybe “as a business owner.”

The hard truth is that the answer to the question “What can I, as an individual, do to stop climate change?” is: nothing. You can’t do anything. In fact, the very idea that we—as atomized individuals, even lots of atomized individuals—could play a significant part in

**Here  
in wealthy  
countries,  
we are  
told how  
powerful  
we are as  
individuals  
all the  
time.**



**Zoe Buckley Lennox**, an Australian science student, stands in solidarity with Seattle protests against Arctic drilling. In April, Lennox occupied a Shell oil rig in the Pacific.

stabilizing the planet’s climate system, or changing the global economy, is objectively nuts. We can only meet this tremendous challenge together. As part of a massive and organized global movement.

The irony is that people with relatively little power tend to understand this far better than those with a great deal more power. The workers I met in Indonesia and the Philippines knew all too well that governments and corporations did not value their voice or even their lives as individuals. And because of this, they were driven to act not only together, but to act on a rather large political canvas. To try to change the policies in factories that employ thousands of workers, or in export zones that employ tens of thousands. Or the labor laws in an entire country of millions. Their sense of individual powerlessness pushed them to be politically ambitious, to demand structural changes.

In contrast, here in wealthy countries, we are told how powerful we are as individuals all the time. As consumers. Even individual activists. And the result is that, despite our power and privilege, we often end up acting on canvases that are unnecessarily small—the canvas of our own lifestyle, or maybe our neighborhood or town. Meanwhile, we abandon the structural changes—the policy and legal work—to others.

This is not to belittle local activism. Local is critical. Local organizing is winning big fights against fracking and tar-sands pipelines. Local is showing us what the post-carbon economy looks and feels like.

And small examples inspire bigger examples. College of the Atlantic was one of the first schools to divest from fossil fuels. And you made the decision, I am told, in a week. It took that kind of leadership from small schools that knew their values to push more, shall we say, insecure institutions to follow suit. Like Stanford University. Like Oxford University. Like the British royal family. Like the Rockefeller family. So local matters, but local is not enough.

I got a vivid reminder of this when I visited Red Hook, Brooklyn, in the immediate aftermath of Superstorm Sandy. Red Hook was one of the hardest-hit neighborhoods and is home to an amazing community farm—a place that teaches kids from nearby housing projects how to grow healthy food, provides composting for a huge number of residents, hosts a weekly farmers’ market, and runs a terrific CSA [community-supported agriculture] program. In short, it was doing everything right: reducing food miles, staying away from petroleum inputs, sequestering carbon in the soil, reducing landfill by composting, fighting inequality and food insecurity.

But when the storm came, none of that mattered. The entire harvest was lost, and the fear was the storm water would make the soil toxic. They could buy new soil and start over. But the farmers I met there knew that unless other people were out there fighting to lower emissions on a systemic and global level, then

this kind of loss would occur again and again.

It's not that one sphere is more important than the other. It's that we have to do both: the local and the global. The resistance and the alternatives. The "no" to what we cannot survive and "yeses" that we need to thrive.

**B**EFORE I LEAVE YOU, I WANT TO STRESS ONE OTHER thing. And please listen, because it's important. It is true that we have to do it all. That we have to change everything. But you personally do not have to do everything. This is not all on you.

One of the real dangers of being brilliant, sensitive young people who hear the climate clock ticking loudly is the danger of taking on too much. Which is another manifestation of that inflated sense of our own importance.

It can seem that every single life decision—whether to work at a national NGO or a local permaculture project or a green start-up; whether to work with animals or with people; whether to be a scientist or an artist; whether to go to grad school or have kids—carries the weight of the world.

I was struck by this impossible burden some of you are placing on yourselves when I was contacted recently by a 21-year-old Australian science student named Zoe Buckley Lennox. At the time she reached me, she was camped out on top of Shell's Arctic drilling rig in the middle of the Pacific. She was one of six Greenpeace activists who had scaled the giant rig to try to slow its passage and draw attention to the insanity of drilling for oil in the Arctic. They lived up there in the howling winds for a week.

While they were still up there, I arranged to call Zoe on the Greenpeace satellite phone—just to personally thank her for her courage. Do you know what she did? She asked me: "How do you know you are doing the right thing? I mean, there is divestment. There is lobbying. There's the Paris climate conference."

And I was touched by her seriousness, but I also wanted to weep. Here she was, doing one of the more incredible things imaginable—freezing her butt off trying to physically stop Arctic drilling with her body. And up there in her seven layers of clothing and climbing gear, she was still beating herself up, wondering whether she should be doing something else.

What I told her is what I will tell you. What you are doing is amazing. And what you do next will be amazing too. Because you are not alone. You are part of a movement. And that movement is organizing for Paris and getting their schools to divest and trying to block Arctic drilling in Congress and the courts. And on the open water. All at the same time.

And, yes, we need to grow faster and do more. But the weight of the world is not on any one person's shoulders—not yours. Not Zoe's. Not mine. It rests in the strength of the project of transformation that millions are already a part of.

That means we are free to follow our passions. To do the kind of work that will sustain us for the long run. It even means we can take breaks—in fact, we have a duty to take them. And to make sure our friends do too.

Which is why I am going to skip yet another commencement-address tradition—the one that somberly tells graduates that they have finally become adults. Because my strong sense is that most of you have been adults since your early teens.

So what I really want to say to you is something else entirely. Make sure to give yourself time to be a kid.

And make sure to truly enjoy this tremendous accomplishment. Congratulations. ■

## Titles for Our Times



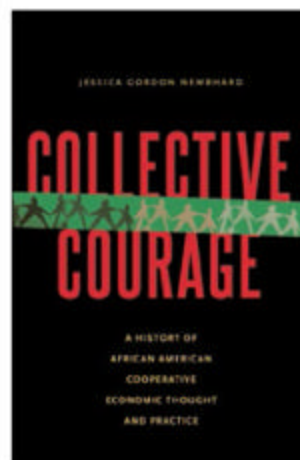
"Thomas Benson has rediscovered and shared a treasure of poster art, along with some history, brilliantly told."

—Tom Hayden



"In *The Politics of Resentment*, Jeremy Engels helps readers understand how resentment has arisen as a political force and how scholars and citizens may respond."

—Robert Asen,  
University of Wisconsin–Madison



"Jessica Gordon Nembhard's book couldn't be more timely. If cooperative economic arrangements have any future we must first learn their vital past."

—Adam Haslett, *In These Times*

penn state press

820 N. University Drive, USB 1, Suite C | University Park, PA 16802 | info@psupress.org

WWW.PSUPRESS.ORG | 1-800-326-9180