

Amazing email from a Berkely professor to his students on the occasion when he didn't cancel class.

This is long, but worth reading.

I've including some introductory comments from the online article where I found this.

## Cal lecturer's email to students goes viral: "Why I am not canceling class tomorrow"

By Ben Christopher

"I email my students all the time—that isn't unusual," Alexander Coward tells us. "What is very unusual is for one of those emails to go viral."

The UC Berkeley's math lecturer's surprise is understandable. Among the torrent of listicles, kitty gifs, and Youtube clips depicting moderate-to-severe injury that seize the imagination of the Internet daily, an email from a professor to his 800 students about the scheduling details of his class is hardly the stuff that memes are made of.

And yet Coward's email—in which he used the opportunity of a University of California workers' strike action to speak at length of the virtues of a college education—seems to have tapped a particular nerve.

Since firing off the 2,000-plus word email on Tuesday night, the professor has been flooded with emails—from students in his math class, yes, but also from their friends and from their friends. He's heard from students at other universities, in other states, and in other countries. He's heard from their parents too. The overall tone, he says, has been gushingly grateful. Many have thanked him for reminding them of the value of their education. A few have vowed to quit part-time jobs or to otherwise redouble their focus toward their studies. Meanwhile, on Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, the email is rippling outward.

Coward says he has mixed feelings about all the attention. He wrote the email in response to the sense of anxiety he says he was detecting among many of his students in response to the ongoing labor action, but he didn't intend it as a missive against the striking workers themselves.

"I don't want to get embroiled in the conflict about how workers are being treated," he says. "I haven't made myself an expert about that. But I do consider myself an expert in education."

The full text of Alexander Coward's email is below:

Dear All,

As some of you may have heard, there is some strike activity taking place on campus tomorrow.

I want to let you know that I will not be striking, which means that I will be, so-to-speak, crossing a picket line. Moreover, I know that two of your GSIs have decided to strike, but because I happen to be free in the afternoon when they teach, and because I enjoy teaching smaller classes from time to time and I haven't had a chance to in a while, I'll be covering those sections. If you were planning to see me at office hours tomorrow afternoon, then feel free to come to one of the sections I'll be covering. I will be in Stephens 230c from 2:10 to 4pm, Cory Hall 285 from 4:10pm to 5pm, and Evans Hall 6 from 5:10pm-6pm.

The reason for me taking this decision is extremely simple: We have 7 class days left until the end of the course. Despite the fact that we've made good time and are likely to finish the syllabus with a few lectures in hand for review, class hours are valuable and your education is too important to just cancel a class if we don't have to. Whatever the alleged injustices are that are being protested about tomorrow, it is clear that you are not responsible for those things, whatever they are, and I do not think you should be denied an education because of someone else's fight that you are not responsible for. I say this with no disrespect whatsoever to the two GSIs who have decided to strike. Societies where people stand up for what they believe in are generally better than societies where people do not, sometimes dramatically so. Further, I cannot discount the possibility that I may be in the wrong on this and they may be right. I have certainly been on the wrong side of political judgements before and I'm sure I will be again. However from a practical point of view I've made my decision and you should all turn up to class and discussion tomorrow as normal.

Beyond practical matters, I think it's also worth reflecting a little on the broader relationship between politics and your education, and I think I have some important things to share on this topic that may be helpful to you.

I do this with some trepidation. Normally I try to avoid talking about politics with my students and also my professional colleagues because people have a wide variety of views, sometimes held with great conviction and feeling. If I was to get into a political disagreement with one of you or one of my colleagues, it might get in the way of or distract us from the central mission we have of working together to give you a great education.

However sometimes political events reach into our lives without our invitation or control, and we have no choice but to engage with each other about politics. Many times in history it has done so with far more violence and disruption than a strike, and it is wise to be psychologically prepared for this fact.

If I've learned one thing about politics since I was your age, it is this: Politics, like most things in life worth thinking about, including mathematics, is very big, very complicated, and very interconnected. I've lived and worked in four countries on four continents, all with societies set up differently both politically and socially. I've discovered that there is no unique or obviously best way of setting up society. For every decision and judgement you reach, there are people who benefit and people who lose out. It's the same with the way I teach my classes. I know that for every decision I make about how to teach you there are some of you who benefit and there are others who would do better if I did things differently. There is no way of getting around that. Every judgement you make in life is a question of balancing different interests and ideals. Reasonable good people can disagree on political questions like whether to strike or not, and they can disagree about far more contentious topics also.

All this may sound like speaking in platitudes. However it is a point worth making to all of you because you are so young. One of the nice things about being young is that your thinking can be very clear and your mind not so cluttered up with memories and experiences. This clarity can give you a lot of conviction, but it can also lead you astray because you might not yet appreciate just how complicated the world is. As you get older you tend to accumulate life experiences to learn from, and this is the source of wisdom, but the trouble is that the lessons we glean from life do not all point in the same direction. Sometimes it is hard to tease the correct learning from the experiences life throws at us.

So what are we to do with the fact that when we are young we lack a lot of the perspective we need to make definitive judgements about what is right, but that as we get older our judgements

tend to be informed by our experiences, and these experiences guide us in contradictory ways, both between different people and within the same person?

I don't know.

However one thing I do know is that you are not going to be able to avoid making these kinds of judgements, just as I cannot avoid making a judgment about whether to strike or not. Like it or not, I have to make a political choice, and I have to talk to you about it. For me, the choice not to strike is quite easy, but for you the kinds of judgements and choices you are going to face in your lives are going to be far from easy; they are going to be of a complexity and importance that will rival that faced by any previous generation. To an extent that you may not yet appreciate, the world is changing incredibly quickly. In just a decade, since I was your age, the internet and telecommunications has truly transformed the way we live, not just in rich countries but around the world. When I was an undergraduate, if I wanted to check my email I went to a little room in the basement to use a computer, and if I wanted to learn something I went to a library. The kinds of breakthroughs we are seeing in biotechnology remind me of the way people were talking about electricity in 1900. Of course I don't know - nobody knows - but my guess is that biotechnology in the 21st century could be similarly transformative to the way the full power of electricity only hit prime-time in the 20th century. The recent controversy about the NSA has shown that the role of information technology on society can be, or at least might become, double edged. There is climate change, another controversial and difficult topic, the exact impact of which we do not yet know. These are just a few of the challenges we can see, and we should remember that history has a habit of throwing curve balls at each generation that nobody saw coming. And among all this tumult, our search for common human peace and happiness on some level becomes more difficult, though no less important. A previous generation dodged the bullet of nuclear armageddon when things looked bleak, but for your generation the bullets are coming thicker and faster than ever before. The potential all of you in your generation are going to have for both good and harm is tremendous.

I suspect many of you have heard sentiments along these lines before. However I also suspect that many of you will think something in response along the lines of 'I know all that, but these things are for someone else to figure out, not me.'

That is a mistake.

One of the things you can lose track of when you attend a top tier university like Berkeley is just how exceptional and amazing you really are. I'm blown away every time I talk to you. The way you ask penetrating questions, the way you improved so much between midterm 1 and 2, the way you challenge me to be a better teacher, it just knocks my socks off. You really are amazing. I've taught students all over the world, and I've never seen a group of students so talented. I'm not just talking about some of you. I'm talking about all of you. It's a privilege to be your professor. Sadly, however, I know many of you don't feel that way. The difficulty you all face is that as you look around at all your fellow students, it's easy to have your eye drawn by people doing better than you. Or rather, I should say people who look like they're doing better than you. In reality the true extent of how much people are learning can be difficult to measure. Sometimes failures and adversity are better preparations for long term success than effortless progress.

Why am I telling you all this?

I'm telling you this because you all need to know that there is not some great pool of amazing people in some other place who are going to shape the way our species navigates the coming decades. The simple fact is that, like it or not, technology is going to change the way we live in

the future, and you're going to have to solve some very hard problems, as well as figure out how best to use new technology for good, while at the same time facing human dangers that have haunted humanity throughout history.

Part of the work of your generation is going to be technological, using scientific ideas to serve the interests of society, and part of the work is going to be fundamentally human, tied inexorably with qualities of the human condition - human emotion - that dominate the whole of history. These things are not separate, but are inexorably linked, and you are in a better place to understand that connection than me.

I can't tell you what your particular role should be in the new realities of the 21st century. It's up to you to decide if you want to make the focus of your life technological, focused on new innovations to drive society forward, or essentially human, focused on the age-old struggles of trying to get along, work together, and find happiness, or some combination of the two.

However I can tell you this:

Whatever you decide to do with your life, it's going to be really, really complicated.

Science and technology is complicated. History and politics is complicated. People are complicated. Figuring out how to be happy, and do simple things like take care of our kids and maintain friendships and relationships, is complicated.

In order for you to navigate the increasing complexity of the 21st century you need a world-class education, and thankfully you have an opportunity to get one. I don't just mean the education you get in class, but I mean the education you get in everything you do, every book you read, every conversation you have, every thought you think.

You need to optimize your life for learning.

You need to live and breath your education.

You need to be *\*obsessed\** with your education.

Do not fall into the trap of thinking that because you are surrounded by so many dazzlingly smart fellow students that means you're no good. Nothing could be further from the truth.

And do not fall into the trap of thinking that you focusing on your education is a selfish thing. It's not a selfish thing. It's the most noble thing you could do.

Society is investing in you so that you can help solve the many challenges we are going to face in the coming decades, from profound technological challenges to helping people with the age old search for human happiness and meaning.

That is why I am not canceling class tomorrow. Your education is really really important, not just to you, but in a far broader and wider reaching way than I think any of you have yet to fully appreciate.

See you tomorrow,

Alexander

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