

Liz Lerman for transcription

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kead@bennington.edu

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00:00 Speaker 1: It is my distinct pleasure to introduce the 2018 commencement speaker Liz

Lerman.

[applause]

00:11 Liz Lerman: Thank you. Thank you very much. That was a lot to hear. You all have already heard so much. What an amazing and beautiful talk Lauren. Thank you.

[applause]

00:34 LL: In some ways, I'd almost say we should leave it there.

[laughter]

00:39 LL: We do share a few things though, a very [00:42] route of both getting here and, I'm sorry to say, after I left Stokes House.

[laughter]

00:56 LL: Cancer and its impact and how it changes things for us. And perhaps those three things she said at the end: Persistence, keep working and radicalism, I hope you'll see how some of that is wended through what I want to talk about. So thank you. I wanted to say congratulations to not just the graduates, but to the families, the grandparents, the faculty, the staff, the people who have served the food, the people who keep the grounds beautiful. The people who keep this place running.

[applause]

01:35 LL: Amazing. Amazing. Amazing. Part of what I wanna talk about tonight overall, is how we are not alone, and yet in some way we are. And graduation is kind of about that. We are all here gathered and yet by the end of tomorrow, out, out we'll go. I recently moved to the American southwest, and among my closest colleagues now are indigenous and Latin ex-artists from whom I am learning so much. They keep telling me that time is circular. I keep trying to figure out how that works.

[laughter]

02:24 LL: I'm Jewish, and time has been like that. And yet right now, maybe right this minute, I have a sense of how time spirals back. Coming here at 17, coming back now, riding up that amazing road, coming over route 9 today. While I was here I was visiting a person in Boston who I married for a couple of years.

[laughter]

03:02 LL: I often think back, well, I was thinking about that, driving over the mountain, but I often think that that was the best mistake I ever made. And I made many. There was something about that period of life for women, no matter how open and thoughtful and smart we were, that somehow we were wound up to get married. And the fact that I did it and got out of it so fast.

[laughter]

03:32 LL: Was a kind of liberation and a way of understanding evolution, right? You slough the things off that aren't working and then you move on and find the structures. That's a lot of what I want to talk about with you. I'm so glad you think it's funny. I do too.

[laughter]

03:57 LL: I thought it was beautiful that Mariko mentioned Wendy Perron. Wendy and I were in school together here and she is still among my most cherished friends. Right now we're working on co-curating a Jewish dance and Jewish body International Conference that's coming together and it is so fraught. We're co-curating a night that will address Palestinian dance forms and the origins of Israeli folk dance. What really went on in the camps with people's bodies and how did dance play a role in that? Why is it that so many dancers of my generation had communist fathers? What was that? So I wanna say that there is nobody I would rather wrestle with these issues with than someone I've known for 50 years. Someone who... Well, I didn't get to sit like this with her, but with whom I have managed to sustain an amazing relationship.

05:02 LL: So my first wish for you graduates is that somehow in this tent tonight, you have a sense that the people that you are with and have gone through so much as we heard in Lauren's talk, some of them will remain with you, and they'll be with you through all of the... And not all of them 'cause actually Wendy went off to be in Fisher's company and I started my own, and we didn't see each other for 10 years. So you might miss each other, but then you'll find each other again. I thought a lot about what to call this. Like I just said, I wish for you. I was thinking, what are these graduation speeches? Am I supposed to give you advice? I don't think so. Blessings? I don't know what to call this, messages? And I landed on this idea of a wish, because it feels... Not so burdensome. I don't wanna add to your burdens. It feels also like something sort of almost like a neutrino. It can move through you if you decide you want it or not. And maybe if you say it fast, it's just like a breath.

[laughter]

06:21 LL: And it's very possible that that's all we need to be doing, is seeing this connection that we have. So I am going to spend a little time now offering some wishes. And in a way, it's maybe a good pairing to Lauren's talk because this beautiful story you heard of how you got here and what happened to you as you were here, mine is a little bit more about, "So now what?" You have probably... You know about design thinking. It's a really big idea that's been in existence for about 50 years. I'm proposing that we have something called choreographic thinking. And the reason I think that is because the world is in motion. Every single thing is moving. Our institutions are changing, our ethics are changing, the way we treat each other is changing, it is all in motion. How our institutions are fairing. What are they doing, how are they holding their shape or not? And I'm advocating that the knowledge that choreographers, and not just choreographers, artistic practices have, is of use to everybody.

07:34 LL: Think about that teacher whose gone in those preschool classes, motion is all that exists in that room. I just met this morning with a physicist who works on oceans. He's entirely trying to figure out what's happening, the motion of the oceans. And if we think about history and how it

moves through us. Not that we can change our past, but change how we think about our past so that it doesn't hold us by the throat. These are all issues of movement and motion. And that's what I would like to bring to you. Okay. When I was in my late 20s, my mother got cancer. She went really fast. I had just figured out a whole bunch of stuff. I thought I was so independent, and then she died and everything, everything collapsed. So I decided, as Mariko so nicely said about my dancing, that I was gonna make a dance about what happened to my family because I absolutely could not comprehend it. And I decided I needed to have a bunch of old people in the dance because I wanted to welcome her to wherever she had gone. So I went to find old people, but this was in 1975. And in 1975 in America, first you have to picture this is pre-jogging. There's nothing like physical activity in the street. It's just not like that and old people are all hidden.

[laughter]

09:17 LL: So I did, I did find a place about two miles from my house in Washington DC called the Roosevelt Hotel for Senior Citizens. I won't go into the whole thing, but I'll just say that I went there, proposed teaching a class because I'm a community organizer, I'm the daughter of a community organizer, and I knew that if I taught a dance class and got people interested, after a while I could say to them, "Wanna be in this dance?" And maybe they would. But the lady thought it was crazy. She agreed to pay me \$5 a week and said I could do whatever I wanted on Thursday nights.

[laughter]

09:48 LL: And so I wandered into this place. I can't go into many, many of the stories from the Roosevelt Hotel, but what I want to say to you is that I was trained at that time as a Cunningham progenitor. I believed in post modernism. I walked into this place and I was met with 80 of the most broken and crazy and amazing bodies in front of me. And when we started dancing, my entire world changed. My ideas of beauty changed. My idea of technique changed. My idea of virtuosity changed. I thought virtuosity, well it's like what any of you would think it was. Just amazing, amazing dancers moving through the space or something like that. But when I saw these people... We worked on jumping for a long time, and they were sitting and they could just jump out of their chair.

10:41 LL: It was as virtuosic as anything you can imagine, at least it was to me. So this is my second wish for you. I made the piece about my mother's death and we preformed it and I thought I was finished. And they said to me, "what's next?" Because now that they were dancing and now that they were involved, now that they were living the dream in a way [chuckle], they weren't gonna stop. And I stayed there nine more years. So my wish is that you find these laboratories. It's a kind of a lab. It isn't... Someone didn't say that's a laboratory, they didn't say the Roosevelt Hotel's a laboratory. No one told me that. But why was it a lab? Because look, I could make so many mistakes. I didn't know what I was doing. I had to learn so much. And it was a lab because I learned way more than my initial inquiry, what was I gonna do about my mother's death? No, it turned out that I was learning about collaboration, I was learning about equity, I was learning about prejudice and problems.

12:00 LL: So for example, in that class, I tried to work so that everybody in the class would eventually... Everybody could dance for as long as possible and that it would be okay if you sat

down. But there was always a part in the class where we tried to get everybody out of their chairs and we'd stand in this big circle and hold hands. One day, this really bossy woman was standing next... So the Roosevelt Hotel is 400 people, mostly older adults, working class. Not rich enough to be in other kinds of homes, not poor enough to be at the city home. It also held all the people who we would at that... I won't use the language of that day. We would call now people with mental and physical disabilities, or we might even call all abilities. So one of the people who had the most of these disabilities was standing next to this really bossy woman, and the bossy woman said, "I'm not gonna hold her hand." I happened to love Frieda, the... I didn't like the bossy woman, but I liked Frieda. Now, what would you do? It's kind of like a mini-Roseanne story.

[chuckle]

13:05 LL: It is. And this is why these small, tiny details need care and attention because it helps us figure out what are we going to do in this period that we're living in right now. So what I did was I went over to them and I said to the two of them, "I'll help you hold your hands." And I brought their hands together. And then I said, "Okay, now you can take them apart again. Okay, let's try that again. Okay, good. Take them apart." I mean, it was a dance technique class, was it not?

[chuckle]

13:39 LL: Practice, practice, practice. And what the bossy lady didn't know was that if she didn't hold hands, I would've kicked her out of the class. She didn't know that. I didn't have to do that, but what I'm advocating for is, where do we get to practice? Where? Where do we get... Well, maybe in the dorms late at night. These big conversations, yes you're practicing ideas and practicing ideas, but where do we work this stuff out? That's what I mean by laboratory and that is what I hope for you. I wanna say one more thing about the Roosevelt Hotel because when I was doing all of this so long ago, you couldn't take a class in this. You could become a dance therapist but that was a different thing. There was not really... There were a bunch of experimental artists who I was on a circuit with. We considered our work in communities. We called that the new Avant-garde. I mean, nobody else did but we did.

[laughter]

14:34 LL: But there weren't rules, there weren't protocols. We were making them up. So in about the third week I was there, I came in and there's a woman in the back of the room and she has a big heavy coat on and it's hot in the room, and I said to her, "Why don't you take your coat off?" And she starts to take her coat off and the nurse who's right next to her says, "No, no, no. She never takes her coat off." So she put the coat back on. Interesting moment. The nurse knew immediately what a mistake she had made because we had an opportunity there to actually change someone's pattern. I know it's not changing the world but in a way for that woman, it would be changing the world to not have to wear a heavy coat all day long in that hot building. What I want to talk about is the reason I said that is because I was an outsider. I didn't know her pattern. I didn't realize she always wore a coat. So when we think about the rules of engaging in community, sometimes people say, "You know, you can't come without being invited." There is no senior center in the late 70s and 80s that would have invited in somebody like me. But once I was there, once we are in these communities, what are the kinds of protocols and rules and constructions we begin to discover? And for me, one of them was actually being able to love the people enough to interrupt that pattern.

16:10 LL: Okay, so I want you to have a lab. That's my wish. At the Roosevelt, and this is now going to tie with something that Lauren talked about quite a bit, and I've been hearing since I came here. I was beginning to tour with a dance company and we were touring places like The Kennedy Center at the same time that I was working in the senior center. And so people said this, "Liz, the work you do at the Kennedy Center, that is up here. And the work you do in the nursing homes and that stuff, okay I guess, if you wanna do it, that's down here. I guess you want to, but actually this is the real art." Or people would do this. They'd just swap and they'd say, "No, no, no. The stuff you're doing in the community, that is the real stuff. Why are you still performing in theaters? They're old, they're white, they're male, they're European. Give it up." For me, this is an impoverished choice. Why would I wanna choose between those worlds? Why would you wanna choose in some of the ways you've been asked to choose? So this is what I did. Can you see it in here as it gets dark? I just move my hands to the horizontal, right? It's really easy to do with my hands.

[laughter]

[applause]

17:35 LL: And actually, if you take the ends and bring them together, it's more like a circle and you'll see that there's often connections from way down here to way here. Or though, sometimes it's actually really interesting to move along this horizontal. Once I figured this out, I began to see that we made these hierarchies about everything.

18:00 LL: Nurture, rigor, individual, collective. I can go on and on. How many times a day do you feel you are forced in that? When it's... If you just do this, flip it sideways, amazing things can happen. I'd like to tell you more about that. It's in a book you can read called *Hiking the Horizontal*, but it's really a powerful way to think about how you might move forward with your labs. Mariko mentioned the dance exchange. This is probably one of the major labs that I held. 35 years of running a company. I just want to say, just like marriage, and sloughing it off and saying there's another way to do this, there is always another way to run an organization. There is absolutely no reason why our organizations have to abide by some of those constructions that exist that let people behave the way they do. So in my case, I decided I was gonna have a humane institution. And humane institution for me was one in which everybody gets to grow, not just the person in charge. It's really hard to manage something like that, but it's really, really interesting, and that was the Dance Exchange. While there and within it, and now I want to describe a couple foreign laboratories and I'll go quickly because you know, it is hot in here. Are you doing okay? Are you alright? You're okay? Okay. Yeah, I can't see where everybody is. The dusk settles in...

19:39 S1: You might wonder how all of this happened. Well, word goes out. Like Lauren said, there's a buzz. Something happens. Word got out about the stuff going on at the Roosevelt. So I was asked to be artisan resident at Children's Hospital in Washington DC. I hope you'll stay with me through this part of the talk because it will surprise you. Yes, it's about healthcare. Yes, it's about the long border between art and healing. Yes, it's about those things. But it is more importantly about standards, excellence and aesthetic. I know this is... [chuckle] Just stay with me.

20:18 S1: At that time, if I wanted to be measured as a great choreographer, you know what my standard would be? Would to make movement that no one had ever seen ever, and put that on the

stage. Which is great for me, not so great for audiences. Every minute, it's all new and different, you have to kinda prepare people for that, it's a big pressure. And by the way, at Children's Hospital, I did see a lot of movement I never saw anywhere else.

20:42 S1: The kids are all caught up, wound up, they're in this thing. We did amazing things. But the hospital did not want me to be that kind of great choreographer. They had a different commission for me. They wanted the kids to be able to feel that their bodies were their own for 30 minutes. They wanted the families to see that their children actually could be loving and beautiful and amazing, and not just an incredible fearful burden. They wanted us to sustain a relationship between the nurses and the students for as long as we could. They wanted just to have some joy. That's a really different set of commissions than to be the most interesting inventive choreographer. So what do I do, right? I wanna be a great artist. I wanna fulfill my profession. And this is where now I come to a little bit of a dilemma. The limit is not in dance. The limit was in the way the profession saw dance. Did you hear me? The limit was the way the profession was defining it, not in dance itself. Dance is traditionally, historically, all about healing.

22:00 S1: And I'm not the first person to have old people dancing, they've been dancing for millennia. So I found myself as an artist in a situation in which I was being commissioned to do things I would never have considered possible, because of being in the hospital. And then I would go back and work with the company in the afternoon and try the same stuff out. So there was this amazing permeability between the two things. So now when I do this, I wanna talk about aesthetic equity. In this story it's coming from the idea for the hospital. But if we take it further and we think about what do we mean by our cultural aesthetics in the United States right now? What would it mean to have aesthetic equity?

22:50 S1: One of my colleagues at Arizona State, Bryan Brayboy, is an indigenous philosopher, and he defines aesthetics like this. He says, "Aesthetics is what a people think is good, beautiful and true." He's a Lumbee Indian, and his home is in North Carolina region. What a people think is good, beautiful and true. Children's Hospital was a people. It had an aesthetic. And that aesthetic was not the same as the downtown New York aesthetic. They're two different things. The downtown New York aesthetic is a people also, but it doesn't have to impose itself on the whole world, which it has attempted to do.

[chuckle]

23:31 S1: So when we think about creating radical acts, persistent, radical acts, I'm telling you, one of them is to create aesthetic equity and to figure out how to do that because we don't have it, we don't have it anywhere. So we can work on that, and that's one of my... I guess a wish for you is that challenge of that.

23:57 S1: I've been focusing quite a bit on the community based practice, I wanna tell you about one that happened here in Vermont. And then I wanna talk a little bit about the stage work, because I want you to understand that this is all balanced and [24:09] . So we did a project... Do you guys know where St. Albans, Vermont is? It's out, somewhere way... Near Burlington 'cause we used to fly into Burlington and then drive there. We were brought into St. Albans for four years. We came in twice a year. It was a project I was doing called the Hallelujah Project. We worked in about 15 communities around the country. We were asking people what were they in praise of, because

we wanted to bring out the assets of different communities and not just work on what the deficits were, and because people have so many amazing things to tell you about that.

24:46 S1: So we were in St. Albans, and we were trying to figure out what was the story gonna be. St. Albans is like two blocks long, but every time we came they would throw a party for us, it was so fun. The whole town would come out. So at our first party, I was surrounded by a group of four older women, and one of them said to me, "Well, we gotta go." I said, "Okay, it's really nice to meet you," and she said again, "No, we're leaving." Now I have come to learn that when people repeat themselves I should listen. So I said, "Okay, where are you going?" And then she said, "We're going to play cards. We play together every Monday night for 40 years." They didn't even miss when one the husbands died. A group of women playing cards every Monday for 40 years.

25:35 S1: Now, Vermont at that time was undergoing the first of the civil union world, the battles that were surrounding that. Burlington was having its first sanctuary churches. There was a lot of change happening in Vermont. So we made a piece called "In Praise of Constancy In The Midst Of Change." The four women played cards on stage, the whole piece. It's an amazing game they played, and then there were all kinds of other dances that took place while they played cards. One of them was a set of duets set to the "Song of Songs" which if you know that from the Bible is an incredibly sensual set of poems about love and sex, actually. We made that for gay couples and also straight couples if they wanted to come, but it was primarily for the gay community to come out and be together that way, and it was beautiful.

26:31 S1: And then one of the men came over and sat down at the table, the card table with the ladies. And then he turned to his partner who was in the audience and he said, "Will you marry me?" Right there. There were 2000 people in the theater, 'cause we had brought this into Burlington. What you do think that means? What happens when you're in a place where there is so much strife and stress about this, and you have these four older women engaging and holding this young man? By the way, they didn't believe in civil unions, not all of them, they didn't. But they could handle the ambiguity. Why could they handle the ambiguity? Because we were working as artists. Because we weren't coddling people. Because we were saying, "Yeah, we're gonna really do this. This is what art does." That was one of my favorite, favorite nights. And I wish for you a capacity to handle ambiguity, and to make and help communities see themselves as they want to see themselves or as they might be able to see themselves. I have to move along.

27:43 S1: About 15 years ago, I began to work with scientists, I have many, many stories to say about that. But I wanna move to the... I did a piece about genetics which toured, and we were at the university of Michigan, and the head of the Physics department came up to me and he said, "We want one." I said, "No, I'm sorry. I'm done with science." And he said, "No, no, no, no, we want one." He said, "By the way, do you know it's [28:03] figuring out how the world began?" And I said back to him, "Well, that's very interesting, but what are you going to do about the other origin stories?" What are we going to do about the deep feelings that people have about how the world begins, when science comes and tells us something we may not want to hear? So we went and did that piece.

28:26 S1: But what I wanna say, and I'm sure there are some physicists in the room, and some physics students in the room, and I'm going to really mess this up. But one of the things that we connected to is something that you all know, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, and when artists

get involved with the Heisenberg uncertainly principle, physicists just always roll their eyes, "No." Because it's not a metaphor to them, and to us, well...

[laughter]

28:52 S1: But in this idea is something quite profound about change and this is why I want to say it to you. And it's a corollary to choreographic thinking and to the horizontal. What happens in that is the ideas that if you measure the shape of something, if you see the shape, you will miss its momentum, but if you go for the momentum you cannot see its shape. Is that interesting? You can have the shape, but you'll miss the momentum. If you have the urgency of the momentum, you can't see and find the shape. I think this is one of our issues around changing our institutions. I think many of our institutions are stuck in a shape and they can't break it apart to get back into the momentum of the times that we are in, because the shapes are interlocking. They're traditional, they last a long time.

29:54 S1: I'm advocating from a choreographic perspective, and I wanna say this to you as a little wish, can you please be nimble? We heard it from Lauren, we heard it from Mariko. We need to be shape shifters, and part of that shape shifting is the ability to actually make a shape and also go into our momentum. I would add just as a sidebar, I think our president actually only is in momentum, and that's why we're in whiplash. He doesn't know. Seriously, he doesn't stop enough to do anything about it. It's an example, weirdly, because mostly I've been advocating our capacity to move into momentum, but I think it's just something to think about. So will you stay with me on the idea that you would look for shape and momentum? And now I'm going to bring us to the end.

30:41 S1: I can't be here with you tomorrow because I'm in rehearsal, and rehearsal for me, I can't miss it. I'm working in Boston with a woman named Martha Minow, who's the former Dean of the Law School. I'm working on a piece called Wicked Bodies. It's the story of what about the persistence of witches over time in and every culture? I'm interested in what happens to the knowledge that women hold. Why is it that some knowledge is celebrated, some is erased, and some is criminalized? I'm going to work with Martha tomorrow, who has worked for the last 25 years on forgiveness. So we're going to spend three to four days seeing if we can figure out who is the witch of forgiveness. Martha spent time at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She has spent... She's written a lot about this. Here's what she thinks forgiveness is right now. She thinks it's the capacity to give up justifiable resentment. Is that interesting? The capacity to give up justifiable resentment.

31:55 S1: So I have a little story. One of my favorite teachers here, an amazing, amazing teacher, left the school under duress. She was distanced, she distanced. The good part was she came and danced with me for many years, for which I'm grateful, and she's going to be in this piece, she's in her 80s now. But when Mariko called me, I wasn't sure whether I could accept coming because I know that this person is still struggling with her relationship with the school that she taught in for 30 years. So I called Martha up and I said, "They've asked me to come. I need your blessing." She gave it to me. She said, "Please go." Giving up, I think, her justifiable resentment in that moment.

32:46 S1: I have a last thing. I promise you it's the end. I was in Hawaii working with an amazing Hula company. Hula companies... Kumu Hula, they start them like this and they go up until they're in their 80s and 90s. And we were in this Kumu Hula rehearsed in abandoned coast guard station.

The United States government left the station. It's now filled with Hula dancers, isn't that magnificent?

[laughter]

33:17 S1: This is one of those ideas about... We were interested in gesture, how gesture in Hula also can... It was like gesture and post-modern dance, and I was really excited. I was teaching, it was really going well, everybody was excited. And then I noticed that they all started to lose their focus and look away. And so I did this, look back here behind me, and it was a school of whales. Not just the backs, sometimes you see pictures of schools of whales and it's just like this. No, it was all that amazing, amazing energy. So this is my last wish for you, graduates. I want you to have whales.

[laughter]

34:04 S1: I mean, really, I want them to last your lifetime, really. You know we share an ancestor with them. If you go back far enough, the whales and human beings have the same ancestor. It doesn't look like a whale or us, but we share it. And if you go forward, of course, you find all the more and more individuality. But I also want you to have these whales because I want you to realize that there are whales lurking around every corner, that as you step out into the world and it is full, a big, huge world that you will be leaders. You will stand up and you have found your voice. You are going to do radical, radical, radical things. That you also realize that we share it, we share this world. And that you may have to pull back. You may have to get smaller. You may have to turn around and realize you're not the story. And with that, I wish you a beautiful, beautiful next period in life.

[applause]

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