

MACALESTER

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Wise Words for Turbulent Times

Alumni share perspectives
on how to move forward.





WISE WORDS *for* Turbulent Times

While it's true that 2020 was uniquely challenging, the country has been through difficult times before. Macalester alumni who have lived through personal and societal upheaval share the lessons that have helped them weather even the most tumultuous storms.

The past year brought a global pandemic, an economic crisis, and a contentious election, and magnified the perpetual national issues of income inequality and systemic racism. **We bear each toll in different ways, and we carry anxiety, sorrow, and fear at levels that few might have predicted as 2020 began.** It's no surprise that many of us are struggling to get through the next five minutes, much less grapple with what lies ahead.

Yet as a nation we've experienced difficult periods before—and just as we'll learn from this era and apply it to the future, there are plenty of lessons to be had from hard times of the past. That's why we asked several graduates from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s—alumni who've lived through wars, the civil rights movement, economic booms and busts, and so much more—to offer readers lessons from their own past experiences.

The alumni we spoke with have some advice: don't be afraid, show up where you're needed, get involved in your community, persevere. They all agree—you have to take action.

"As my mother used to say," says Kris Amundson '71, "you can't wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time."

Sometimes, the best approach to getting through a difficult period is to focus on the next step in front of you, while still keeping one eye on the long view.

Steve Johnson '67 describes his return from the Vietnam War as "a Rip Van Winkle experience." When he arrived at Macalester in 1963, there were separate dorms and dining halls for men and women, as well as nightly curfews for women students. By the time he graduated, there were co-ed dorms and less restrictive policies. But nothing prepared him for the country he came home to in 1970, after serving for two years in Vietnam.

"I came out to an entirely different world of long

hair, short skirts, and a powerful anti-war movement," he says. "Service in the Army removed me from an immediate sense of what was going on in the country. It was a very isolating experience."

His classmate, John Hunsinger '67, had a similar experience when he returned from Vietnam. He remembers disembarking in Seattle following a one-year duty tour and, for the first time, seeing protesters on the streets.

"I just had an extreme empty feeling," he says. "That I'm not a wanted person."

Both Johnson and Hunsinger navigated the shifting ground by putting one foot in front of the other, and making do with the hands they were dealt.

They have the same stoicism in 2020, which Johnson describes as "eerily similar" to 1968, with the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., armed suppression of opposition at the Democratic convention followed by a combative election, an increasingly militant civil rights movement, and the war affecting many households.

"I think a lot of people felt things were coming apart for good," he says. "The two years have the same feel about them. The uncertainty and anxiety are palpable everywhere."

Johnson now wonders if it's cyclical: that every once in a while, a series of upheavals will shake up our way of life. The calm periods that follow might be masking unresolved issues.

"The quietude covers up different issues that are bubbling up," he says. "It's like a volcano. It takes a long time for the lava to break through the crust."

Hunsinger also applies a historical perspective to this moment. We have to remember, he says, that humans have survived the flu pandemic of 1918, world wars, plagues in Europe, and more—and we will come out on the other side of this, too.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

While every Mac alum we spoke to said it's important to take action, they also agreed that you can't help others if you don't help yourself.

For John Hunsinger, physical activity keeps him from feeling overwhelmed. He's getting through the pandemic by riding at least 120 miles a week on his bicycle. John West, meanwhile, is an artist and focuses on sacred dance. "It provides me an opportunity to translate my experiences with the world through meditation and contemplation," West says.

Beverly Hallquist Goodman '59 encourages people to nurture their talents and stay true to their sense of self. She was one of only 10 women in her medical school class of 150, but becoming a doctor was a long-standing goal. She navigated discrimination in medical school and went on to have a successful career as a child psychiatrist and medical educator by staying focused and working hard. Being a mentor and supporting younger women in medicine has also been vitally important.

"If you're creative, exercise your creative skills. If you're talented in STEM, do science and research work," she says. "Be goal-oriented. Develop your ideas. Determine where you could make those contributions which would be exciting to you."

Kris '59 and Connie Ronnow '59 admit the isolation brought by the pandemic has been difficult, and they've experienced loss in their retirement community. In addition, Kris was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease 15 years ago, and struggles with feeling limited. However, their faith and a sense of gratitude keep them grounded, and connections to family give them hope for better days ahead.

"We're working on our optimism capacity," Kris says. "We think back to numerous leisurely conversations we've had with our granddaughter and grandson at our Green Lake home. We find that talking with younger people invigorates us and makes us enthused about what's possible for tomorrow."



"Like in combat, if you keep a clear head and don't let fear overcome you, your probability of success, of survival, is increased," he says.

In 1964, when John West '68 was a freshman at Macalester, he attended a rally for presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. West, who is Black, didn't support the candidate, but he was curious about Goldwater's views.

"In my own sort of academic, idealistic way, I thought, I need to know who this person is," he says. "This kind of crazy Republican who wants to be very anti-Black and anti-civil rights—I need to go hear it for myself.

"I went in alone and it dawned upon me that people were looking at me rather strangely, that I was the only person that looked like me in that space. And it dawned

"Talking with younger people invigorates us and makes us enthused about what's possible for tomorrow."

upon me that this might not have been my smartest idea.”

Several decades later, in the weeks leading up to the 2020 election, West was reminded of the experience during a conversation with his niece. She had recently been driving down the highway in Colorado when she ended up in the middle of a Trump demonstration. West’s niece is Latina and wasn’t sure about her safety in the midst of the rally, and turned to her uncle to help her process the experience.

West told his niece not to be afraid, and instead to call on her ancestors who lived through hard times and survived—just as she will.

“I said to her, ‘try to swallow your fear as much as possible,’” West says. “Don’t try to egg anybody on. Maintain a sense that this is life as usual for you, and move on. We can’t allow ourselves to be governed by fear, or to stop the quality and promise of our living.”

West also says you can’t let your survival tactics come at the expense of your sense of self. For instance, West says he—and many people of color—grew up learning to code-switch, or speak in one language with people who don’t look like him, and another with people who do. While he says code-switching can be “significant for the sake of surviving,” it’s easy to lose sight of who you are. You have to find your voice and advocate for yourself—without apology. “My children have been direct beneficiaries of my self-discovery,” he says.

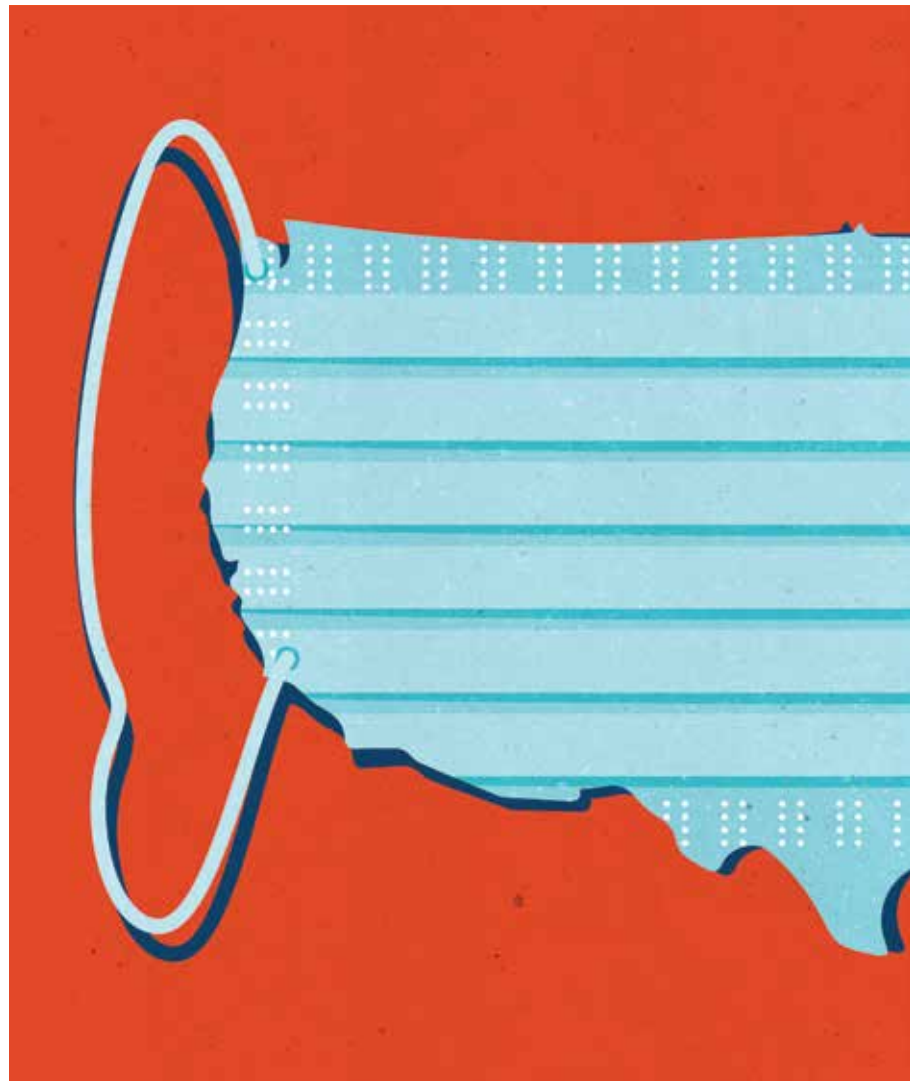
West found his own voice in a psychology class at Macalester. In a paper about individual differences, he tried to subtly convey the different life experiences of Black people. His professor wrote on the paper—which West still has—“Call it what it is, John. It’s racism.”

“He provided me with my voice to actualize and to recognize that it was a good thing to call it what it was, and to deal with it,” says West, who went on to become an educator, a school administrator, a head of school, and a conduit of knowledge for hundreds of students, especially for students of color. “I’ve never forgotten that.”

Kris Amundson '71 says her political career started when she volunteered in her daughter’s kindergarten class. That year, Fairfax County Public Schools announced they would be renovating every school of a certain age, except for the one her daughter attended. She worked to have her daughter’s school added to the bond referendum—and got an inside look at the process of local politics.

“I uttered the always dangerous words, ‘somebody ought to do something about this,’” Amundson says. “I looked at the people who were making those decisions on the school board and thought, ‘I could do that.’”

At the time, school board members were appointed, and Amundson’s involvement earned her a seat. Then,



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when the laws changed, she was elected. After about a decade on the board, her daughter left for college and Amundson decided to move on. Soon after, in 1999, the Democratic Party came knocking, encouraging her to run for an open seat in the Virginia General Assembly.

That’s where she experienced one of the most harrowing days of her political career: Sept. 11, 2001.

That day drove home the very lesson she’d learned when her daughter was in kindergarten: show up. Amundson served the 44th district, which covered a part of Fairfax County located a few miles from the Pentagon. The attackers had flown a plane into part of the Pentagon, killing an unknown number of people who worked there—people who lived in her district.

“We didn’t know for days who had died,” she says. “We had to wait and see.”

One of those missing people was her daughter’s soccer coach. On Saturday, Amundson had just left the farmer’s market when she learned for certain that he had died. Immediately, she went to his house and rang the doorbell.

“I hadn’t bought flowers,” she says. “I had carrots and potatoes in my bag. I had nothing I could bring. But I went anyway. His wife came to the door and said, ‘I knew you’d come.’”



Amundson says watching everyone step up during those dark days ultimately gave her hope.

"When 9/11 happened, it felt like the whole structure of our world fractured," she says. "But people showed up and said, 'Here I am. Put me to work.' When you see that behavior, it's a sign of optimism, that we're better than it might appear at first glance."

Focusing on a cause greater than yourself is always a good strategy for coping in difficult times. But people need not wait for a tragedy to contribute. Amundson recommends people today find a way to get involved with local issues. Yes, we need to worry about protecting the Amazonian rainforest, she says, but we can also save the two acres of wetlands in our neighborhood. Yes, we need to fix our educational system, but we can also tutor one child. Small changes give you energy for the global work.

The calamities of 2020 have been particularly daunting for new Mac graduates and other young people just starting their careers and political lives. Their more seasoned counterparts offer suggestions: get involved in your local community, and stick with it.

In light of the record turnout in the 2020 elec-

tion, Amundson encouraged first-time voters to have patience and to remember, whether you voted for your representatives or not, they are accountable to you.

"Especially in your early votes, you vote with optimism. You want to see all of these great things," Amundson says. "But it probably isn't going to happen before the midterms. You have to stay involved. [Your representatives] need to hear from you. They need to know there are people in their district who care deeply about whatever issues move you politically."

Eleanor Joyce Darden Thompson '71 remembers when, in 1970, the U.S. voting age was dropped to 18, and how many young people turned out to vote. It was an early step in her lifelong interest in politics, which led her from studying political science at Mac to earning a law degree at Howard University. She went on to become the first woman Assistant U.S. Attorney in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

After retiring, she found a different path in politics. She worked for several political campaigns—even moving to Missouri to support Barack Obama's presidential campaign in a more competitive state—and ran for state legislative office. During the 2020 election, she served as an election inspector.

Today's young voters, she says, have the same enthusiasm she remembers from 1970, but they don't turn out to the polls in the same numbers—something she's hoping to change. Community groups and churches often call on her to speak to young members about the importance of voting, which Darden Thompson does by shifting the focus from national to local.

She challenges them to walk through every action they take during a day, no matter how minute. Did they hit a pothole? Did they go to the park? Did they brake for a stoplight or stop sign? Were the trashcans overflowing?

"I tell them, 'Everything was a decision somebody made, who was sitting in an elected office,'" she says. "While the president is an important thing, all of these local offices are more important because they affect your life."

And when it feels like progress is slow, look for the forward momentum. Many Macalester alumni agree: They're disappointed to see the same struggles arise again and again, but they think this generation might get it right. Just don't be afraid to ask for help along the way.

"Build your circle of people you can call at two in the morning," Amundson says. "You cannot get through hard times by yourself. We are simply not wired that way. Wherever you find that strength and support, you have to nurture it and treasure it." [M](#)

Kim Catley is a writer based in Richmond, Va. Talking to Mac alumni for this story was a bright spot in 2020, and gave her a new perspective on the moment.

What lessons from your own past experiences guide you today? What historical moments are you thinking of as 2021 begins?

Tell us:
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