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## The Joy of Knowing and Being Known: Commencement Address 2023

Mark Christians

*Dordt University*, [mark.christians@dordt.edu](mailto:mark.christians@dordt.edu)

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# The Joy of Knowing and Being Known: Commencement Address 2023

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by Mark Christians

Members of the Board of Trustees, the administration, faculty, staff, families, and the 2023 graduates of Dordt University: what an honor to be here this morning to share this commencement address with you. I have participated in 33 Dordt commencements, now 34, and I have heard some impactful and memorable commencement addresses in recent years from folks like Tara Boer, Justin Bailey, Walker Cosgrove, and Dave Mulder—and we are still quoting Dave’s talk, with his reminder of “we get to do this” at Dordt.

I see this service of commencement as a *celebration of knowing*. We celebrate what you have

come to know as you have studied, grown, and been formed. And we celebrate and recognize that you are known—and will forever be known—as a Dordt graduate and alumna of the class of 2023. You are here to receive your diploma and celebrate this day with family and friends. As your professors, we also celebrate with you and are excited to see how God will use you as you leave Dordt University. We, as faculty, celebrate how we have played a small part in shaping, guiding, and adding to your knowledge—knowledge that comes from God, our creator and redeemer; knowledge that is lived out in every area of your life before the face of God; knowledge that leads to service.

I would like to explore this idea of *knowing* with you for a few minutes. About six years ago, I introduced the Hebrew word *Yada* (which means *to know*) to my History of Psychology and Worldview students on the final day of class—to challenge them to think about what they have learned and how it will have an impact on their daily walk with the Lord, and what difference it will make that they have a deeper understanding of the history of psychology, which also has deep historical connections to philosophy and theology.

What I love about this simple Hebrew word *Yada* is that it has approximately 20 different meanings, including *to know*, *to learn to know*, *to perceive and see*, *to discern*, *to know by experience*, *to be acquainted with*, *to know a person sexually*, *to have knowledge*, *to be wise*, *to be revealed*, or *to be instructed*. The word *Yaw-dah* is used over 900

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Dr. Mark Christians is Chair of the Psychology Department and serves as Faculty Chair of the Academic Senate at Dordt University.

times in the Bible, and here are two examples. In Psalm 46:10 we read, “Be still and know (*yada*) that I am God.” Jeremiah 16:21 says, “Therefore I will teach (*yada*) them—this time I will teach (*yada*) them my power and might. Then they will know (*yada*) that my name is the LORD.” In the time we have together this morning, I will focus on three meanings of *Yaw-dah* and connect them to your Dordt education and your transition to life after Dordt.

### **The first and most common meaning of *Yada* is to know.**

A common social greeting besides “Hello” is “Hey, what do you know?” Greeters are not actually asking us to recall and recite all the factual knowledge we have recently acquired. But this question is relevant to you as a graduate of Dordt University. What do you know? Think of how your body of knowledge has increased since you began your education at Dordt. What do you know now that you didn’t know before? You have learned many technical things in your majors and disciplines of study—too many for me to note here. You have also learned how to survive Iowa winters, if this was a new climate for you. And early in your Dordt career, we all came to know about COVID testing, social distancing, and mask mitigation.

We expect students to learn new things each semester, but this also applies to professors. I learned something new from my Lifespan Development students this semester. I learned that one type of sloth does **NOT** have a tail. I use a sloth as an example in teaching Piaget’s learning theory and how we develop *schemas*, or mental representations, for everything—for objects, people, food, events, and even animals. For example, two-year-olds will look at anything with four legs and a tail and exclaim, “Puppy”—even if they are looking at a cow. All four-legged animals with a tail begin as one schema, and then other schemas are added to the child’s knowledge. I thought for many years that a sloth had a tail, which is true for a three-toed sloth, but a two-toed sloth does NOT have a tail—which demonstrates a key life lesson that is relevant on your commencement day. The life lesson is this: be open to have your mind changed with new information. We may feel certain that what we know is correct,

but you will face many experiences that will nudge you to rethink what you know. May we all have the wisdom to say, “I was wrong, and thank you for helping me see this new truth.”

We come to know through many avenues—our experiences, readings, conversations, prayer, and even failures and disappointments. Our ultimate knowledge as a Christian is this: *Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again*. Until Christ returns, we are called to use what we know to honor and glorify Him. This certainly **is** the point of your Dordt education. In his book *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, philosopher and author James K.A. Smith says, “Christian higher education should be about formation, not information. It is not just depositing stuff into eager young minds, but also forming them as disciples. Intellects are formed and informed by love for the world they are called to serve.” We are here today to celebrate your formation as disciples, ready to use your knowledge and carry out your calling.

### **Let’s move to a second meaning of *Yada*: to perceive and see.**

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, my academic discipline of psychology has been studying the interaction of the mind and body and how it forms our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. This is of interest to me since there was a time in the early history of psychology when *perception* was the primary means by which we understood the human mind and experience—seen in the work of both Wilhelm Wundt and Edward Titchener in the late 1800s. A few decades later, Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, helped us understand how infants learn about the world and themselves through their senses and motor development. We continue to learn, remember, and perceive with our senses as we age, as illustrated by these examples.

We only need to hear a few notes from our favorite song to recognize it and begin singing it. Or at age 10, we hear our mother’s voice on the porch—“It’s time for dinner”—and we sprint home, hoping that our siblings didn’t eat our portion of the meal. For those who grew up in Sioux Center, you used to hear the 6 p.m. whistle, and that was the community call to dinner.

Think of your favorite smell: the smell of a baby after a bath, the lotion, the towel; or the smell of my grandma's homemade cinnamon rolls on a Saturday afternoon. One smell can trigger many other memories—both pleasant and unpleasant.

We use our vision to see the majesty of the Grand Canyon, or a morning fog that hovers over a corn field, or the northern lights just a few weeks ago. Or we can see and notice a loved one whose

fundamental to the Genesis story. After God created everything, He gave Adam the task of naming all the creatures. In Genesis 2:19-20 we read, "Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name." Did you notice that God did not veto any of Adam's naming

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memory is declining and no longer remembers our name.

Our sense of taste is very powerful and helps us determine our favorite foods and those flavors we hope to never experience again. Our taste is especially present in our worship as we eat the bread and drink the juice at the Lord's Supper, when we know that Christ died for us—for me and for you.

We touch another person as we embrace in a hug, and we feel comforted and at peace. We touch the green grass and give thanks to God for the promise of spring. We touch the cadaver in the lab, recognizing the gift to learn through this unique experience.

How have you come to know through your perception and senses while at Dordt? I imagine you have used them constantly in the classroom, the laboratory, your apartment, and on the stage, court, field, and many times here in the BJ Haan.

### **The third meaning of *Yada* is to be known.**

It all started with God the Creator. God knew us before we were conceived, and He knows us by name. God created Adam in Genesis 2, but could not find a suitable helper for Adam, so he created Eve. God knew that Adam needed to know and be known by another human. God created us to be social creatures—to be in relationship with Him, with one another, and with the rest of the created order. As God's created image-bearers, we are known by many names in Scripture—as salt, light, royal priests, holy, chosen, loved, and disciples.

The idea of being known and having a name is

of the creatures? This is amazing to me—that God would value Adam's agency and trust him so much that He did not change any of the names. Can you imagine the cosmos where none of the living creatures had names? What if we did not have names? How would we be able to know, recognize, and understand who or what we are referring to without a name.

When I think of being known, Hebrews 11 and what the heroes of faith were known for come to mind. We know that Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and how Abraham became the father of many nations; we know the wisdom of Noah, the strength of Samson, and the eloquence of David. But some of the people listed in Hebrews 11 might seem unexpected. Some readers might be puzzled to see Rahab the prostitute as a hero of the faith. She hid the Israelite spies and showed her faith as she protected them. Jephthah is another name that makes us wonder how he made the list. In Judges 11 we are told that Jephthah was disowned by his family, chased out of his home, and became a leader of the Israelite army. All the Hebrews 11 heroes were sinful humans who put their faith and trust in God, and He used their obedience to further His kingdom.

Being known is a comfort to us. We are known by name and in particular our given name. Our name is a key part of our identity. I answer to "Mark," "Dad," "son," "brother," "Professor," "PA guy," and my favorite title, "Grandpa" or "Papa." All these names and titles are accurate—but I have one that is not. A person in the community thinks

my name is Brian and greets me with that name. I don't have the heart to correct him since we don't cross paths very often.

Some of you are known by your given name, a nickname, your personality, or even your reputation. Besides your name, what are you known for? In your time at Dordt, you have been known as the honor student, the all-conference athlete, the tuba player, the club leader, the lead in the play, the soprano, or the ones who drive the cowboy limo. We can also be known for things that are not necessarily celebrated—the one who got a Level III, the one who plagiarized, the one who is anxious, or in my case as a freshman at Dordt, the one who got fired from their first work-study job. I slept through my alarm twice and didn't show up to vacuum the library at 6:30 in the morning. Two strikes and I was out. This event illustrated to me that I was not mature enough to manage the basic responsibilities of a work-study job—the most basic being “just show up.”

I was reminded of this simple form of leadership from Pastor Mark Arant, at Veritas Church near Iowa City, who preached a sermon a few years ago that stuck with me. It was titled “Lessons from My Dad.” He reflected on how his father served in ministry for many years and would often need people in the congregation to volunteer for various things. He once asked a person in the congregation to lead a Prayer Group. And the person said, “No, I'm not very good at praying in public.” Rather than accepting the “No” and asking the next person, his dad asked this curious question: “Can you just show up and do a poor job?” Then the person said, “Yeah, I could do that.” Pastor Mark's father did not expect *amazing*; he simply wanted faithful, mediocre, and humble servants to *just show up* and serve others. Mr. Arant told his children, “As a family, we are on the cutting edge of mediocrity as leaders.” This is the greatest inspirational quote

I have ever heard. Maybe we could add this to the Defender Way? Graduates of Dordt University, when you are asked to be a servant leader, do not overthink it; be known for just showing up.

When you transition to the workplace, graduate school, new communities, or new churches, your previous identity of being “known as...” will mostly be absent. In essence, you will be starting over with your identity. When my wife, Lisa, and I graduated from Dordt, we moved to Flagstaff, Arizona, to begin graduate school. We knew no one, and no one knew us. The first Sunday we were there, we attended a small church with about ten families, and by the time we left the building that day, we were asked to sing in the choir and teach Sunday School, and we were invited out for lunch. It didn't take us long to become known, but it required us to say “yes” to these small invitations and opportunities.

In closing, graduates, I want to remind you that no matter how you have been known here at Dordt or how you will be known in your next place of belonging, most importantly you are known by Him. To the parents, do you remember what Dr. Hoekstra's final words to you were during the freshman commissioning service? He said, “You can't stay; you all need to go home.” And I have the privilege of saying this to the graduates: “now it's time for you to leave this place too.” To the master's graduates, you will return to your communities and vocational callings. As you leave this place and head into the known and unknown, you are held and loved by the one who has known you since you were knit together in your mother's womb. As you leave Dordt University, may you continue your journey of Yada—of knowing, perceiving, and being known, living every moment before the face of our Father and serving in His kingdom—until Christ returns.

Thank you.