

Mar 26th, 7:00 PM

Opening Remarks

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Repository Citation

Lewis AD. (2020). Opening Remarks. New England Graphic Medicine Conference. <https://doi.org/10.13028/63q7-sy26>. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/negm/2020/program/3>

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2020 New England Graphic Medicine Conference
March 26-28, 2020

Opening Remarks

A. David Lewis

Thank you for staying home to be here tonight – and thank you for *staying home*.

I find it pandering and obvious when a speaker addresses a crowd, particularly a sizeable one, and says “Welcome, friends.” Some part of my mind replies, *Oh, we’re friends all of the sudden, Speaker Person? We’re buddies, huh?* But as I prepared these opening remarks in the strangest of environments – sitting comfortably at home in my recliner while my children watched *Boss Baby*, instead of on an airplane or in a conference hotel room the night before – that’s precisely what I intend to write: Welcome, friends. *Friends.*

That’s what we have to be right now: friends. We have to be charitably minded, armed with benefit of the doubt, and touched with good humor. We have to, in short, be the most human, the most humane, we’ve likely ever had to be, because we are in a place that most of us, in our blessed lifetimes, have never had to operate. We are together in a worldwide crisis, unexpected by most, feared by some, and foreseen by too few. The fact that we are still meeting over the next few days for this virtual summit is less a testimony to our resiliency – in fact, we’re likely here because we *can* be, because we are fortunate enough to afford this time and have the technology to do so – and it’s more a sign of the unifying and innovating we’re prepared to in the days ahead for healthcare, for medicine, for mental health, and for our fellow human.

Friends, yes, friends, welcome to the New England Graphic Medicine Virtual Summit.

I am the organizer, A. David Lewis, and I need to do that thing I usually loathe at other conferences, but it is almost certainly deserved here – thanking the parties who not only supported the conference when it was a quirky proposal I put forward for my Boston campus but who also made sure it still happened even in the midst of this pandemic. Let’s recognize the NNLM NER, not only the founders of this conference and its inaugural event last year but also the generous backers of this BigMarker webconferencing platform, of the live captioning being made available, and of the graphic notetaking that will be taking place throughout the summit. Their own Sarah Levin-Lederer will be serving as co-host for some of the concurrent panels, and I am grateful for her and all their work. Sarah, are you there?

[Sarah speaks]

Next, there is the MCPHS University Library, home to the brand-new Graphic Medicine Collection and partners in obtaining the grant money for it through the Popular Culture Association. Can I ask if their Dean Rich Kaplan might like to say some words?

[Rich speaks]

Thank you, Dean Kaplan.

Additionally, I would like to thank the School of Healthcare Business, my home department, both for their financial support towards the keynote speaker tomorrow but also their enthusiasm for the subject of Graphic Medicine in education, for patients, industrially and clinically. Would Dean Michael Spooner care to speak with us, briefly?

[Michael speaks]

Thank you, Dean Spooner.

Let me also acknowledge the patronage of MCPHS's Center for Health Humanities, the home base for all of the conference planning, and MCPHS University itself. We have my longtime colleague Carol-Ann Farkas here, co-director of CHH, whom I'd like to welcome to the mic.

[Carol-Ann speaks]

Thank you, Carol-Ann.

While I am delighted to share the next two days of programming largely coming from artists, scholars, and medical professionals across the New England region, it would be doing Graphic Medicine in general a huge disservice to suggest that it is exclusively a local phenomenon. In addition to some panels featuring nationwide and even international concerns, I want to take this moment to salute being done by GraphicMedicine.com, Spanish-speaking Medicina Grafica, and the whole international Graphic Medicine association. They have been pioneering this topic well before many of us were on the scene, and they maintain a beautifully open space for more to join us. To that end, the legendary MK Czerwicz encouraged me to note that the Graphic Medicine International Conference organizers will soon be launching a free weekly virtual meet-up called "Drawing Together."

They will provide a zoom link, a topic, and a group facilitator; everyone, new or returning, in the Graphic Medicine community is welcome to join them to chat, draw, support one another, and share. Watch graphicmedicine.org and social media for more information on how to participate.

The only other people I'll thank are you, the attendees, for taking this time today and over the next two days. Oh, you're so awesome...But let's not belabor the point any further, shall we? I suspect some of you might either be in your pajamas right now or never switched out of them today. That's okay – we're an accepting bunch.

Over tomorrow and Saturday, you will see presentations, experience workshops, and hear from experts on an array of Graphic Medicine concerns and accomplishments. Friday will open with a workshop from local artists Beth Barnett and Liz Bolduc Sux on the creative process and the issue of mental health. And while we are disappointed that Lucy Knisley can't join us – we wish her and her family well – it is wonderful to welcome Brian Fies, author of *Mom's Cancer* and *A Fire Story* (recently nominated for an EGL Award) to our virtual stage as the keynote speaker. This is a man who knows about crisis, how it can translate to comics, and what such stories can do for people. It is not to be missed.

We'll conclude Friday with a discussion of the pandemic itself, starting with Alice Jagers addressing the comics works that are already being marshalled in response to death tolls, lockdowns, and political strife, and then shifting to Darren Taichman and the efforts to date that have been made possible because of the *Annals of Graphic Medicine*. We have allowed ample time for discussion between all the attendees as well, as we all navigate this crisis and what our respective skills may make possible.

Saturday begins with two concurrent sessions: A book tour-cum-workshop from Laura Lee Gulledge debuting her latest book *The Dark Matter of Mona Starr* and a self-aware panel from Matthew Noe, Cathy Leamy, Maria Photinakis, and Lara K. Ronan on the challenges and even the shortcomings facing Graphic Medicine. Similarly, the next time block will offer two options: exciting, new directions from Christopher McGunnigle, Ian Sampson, and Phin-Chia Feng (joining us via recorded video) and its current, valuable intersections from Phoebe Cohen, Issy Manley, Natalie Wardlaw, and Sage Pership from the Center for Cartoon Studies. Fortunately, since all of these panels and workshops will be recorded, you won't miss anything; they will all be available after the conclusion of the virtual summit for viewing.

Finally, artist J.D. Lunt runs the anchor leg of the program with his workshop taking a deep dive into his own work on the AIDS crisis, followed by my own brief return to conclude the proceedings. The next 48 hours are packed with thought and opportunity...

...but let's also fill these sessions, please, with *kindness*. As I said, I wrote this as I watched my kids, ages 9 and 5, sit comfortably on our old couch and stream animated movies from Netflix. They just found out less than an hour earlier that they would not be returning to school for at least a month, if at all this Spring. I put the finishing touches on it while they rode on their scooters for a brief jaunt outside in a large parking lot that would usually be packed. If this world has become odd and daunting to us, it has become absolutely bizarre to them – and my children, I admit, are among the fortunate ones, with a home, a family network, the certainty of food, and good health. There are adults and children who are not, who will not, fare so well.

And so, in that spirit, let's acknowledge that all of us are feeling some degree of struggle, from financial to familial to political to psychological and emotional. We are not working in ideal circumstances, with polished research or simply reliable internet. Therefore, in that we have the privilege to be here and take part in this conference, let's also show kindness to each other in this atypical setting, unfamiliar format, and chancy household technology.

In conclusion...honestly, there's a word throughout these opening remarks that keeps ringing in my ear: We're holding this event, we're sharing this work, we're pushing ahead with our lives "even in the midst of this *pandemic*." Could you have imagined? Maybe some of you – maybe the best informed or the most worldly. But, for a lifelong suburbanite, it is no longer a distant historical fact, a faraway dilemma, or a fictional future. We are here in a pandemic, *together*, and how we function – even the fact that we function at all – will be telling as the story of this time is written. In some sense, I hope my children's world returns to normal soon so that they can see their friends, enjoy their parks, visit the library, attend school, and grab a bite out before catching a movie. On the other hand, I hope things *don't* return strictly to normal; I hope we learn something from this time, I hope new protocols and greater preparedness are put in place, I hope the fragility of our medical system and of capitalism is seriously

scrutinized, and I hope that the vulnerable are not left in such peril so casually and so often. It may be foolish but, to quote Red Redding, *I hope*.

Supposedly, good conclusions also often include a call to action, so here it is: Use this time to heal, and then *go* and heal. Graphic Medicine will likely never have the biological efficacy of a steroid, a scalpel, or a stitch, but it can do what those materials cannot: namely function as an informational, instructional, expressive, restorative, organizational, or narrative resource that covers the aspects of healthcare and wellness that pharmaceuticals and procedures cannot. It has a purpose, it has a value. Graphic Medicine is needed.

Therefore, use this time, even during the presentations and workshops, to connect, to stimulate, and to reawaken. And then let's get down to putting all this art and energy to work.

We can do it, friends.

I will be back to speak briefly on Saturday at the conclusion of the summit. Thank you again.