

WGS Joint M.A. Commencement Address '07
Professor James Mandrell

I'd like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to speak today. This is a wonderful and important occasion, in many respects the capstone of an exciting year of transition for me. I'm particularly glad to be able to celebrate with you, the graduate students, since one of the best classroom experiences I've ever had involved WMGS 205 last spring, the graduate course on theories of women's and gender studies.

What made that course so special, I think, was the way that our discussions ranged from the readings to other issues, topical and personal. We talked about the question of choice in the context of the South Dakota proposal for increased limitations on abortion, of the appropriate place for and topics of sex education, and, most poignantly for me, the matter of how: how did women in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and even before, endure the struggle for basic civil rights and equality knowing—or not—that they might never see or experience the fruits of their labors. What was implied in our discussions of our forebears was the sense that things were much better now, that we were the beneficiaries of their extraordinary efforts, and, of course, we are. And yet

The last year has provided us with ample evidence that hard-won gains are rarely secure and that we ourselves will need to continue to struggle on many fronts, not just for equality and basic civil rights for women, but, as theories of intersectionality make clear, for equality and basic civil rights for people of different races and ethnicities, of different economic and educational backgrounds and opportunities, and of different genders and sexualities, to name just a few of the most obvious areas of contention. Just this past month, Anthony Kennedy wrote a troubling decision for the majority on the Supreme Court regarding late-term abortions in *González v. Carhart*. However we feel individually about the matter of abortion in general or late-term abortions in particular, Justice Kennedy's language ought to give us pause. Ruth Bader Ginsburg forcefully dissented from Kennedy's ruling and spoke directly from the bench, noting that the thinking of the majority "reflects ancient notions about women's place in the family and under the Constitution—ideas that have long since been discredited." Again, how we feel about abortion is not the issue here; the paternalism of five men writing about women's health, women's emotions, and the nature of love is. And yet

In the last several weeks, Don Imus infamously joked about the Rutgers University women's basketball team in language that cost him his job. More recently, some of Imus's colleagues on another show at that same station were fired after a racially-motivated prank directed at Asian-Americans attracted attention. And just a couple of days ago, two personalities from XM radio were placed on unpaid leave after they encouraged vulgar remarks about several conservative women. Perhaps the fact that the words of these men attracted attention is progress. And yet

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, reiterated his support for "don't ask, don't tell," the ban on gays and lesbians serving openly in the military, because homosexual acts, according to him, "are immoral," akin to a member of the armed forces conducting an adulterous affair with the spouse of another service member. Pace knows this because of his upbringing. And yet

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference, our former governor Mitt Romney remarked on the speaker to follow him, “I am happy to hear that after you hear from me, you will hear from Ann Coulter. That is a good thing.” Among the good things she said that day was this pearl of wisdom: “I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, but it turns out you have to go into rehab if you use the word ‘faggot.’” And yet . . .

Michael Richards, more famously known as Kramer on *Seinfeld*, erupted in an offensive tirade against a black man during one of his routines. Mel Gibson, detained for suspicion of driving under the influence, launched into a rant against Jews. TV actor Isaiah Washington called a gay colleague a “faggot” while taping the show *Grey’s Anatomy*. And yet . . .

As a white man, I can’t claim to know firsthand the many varieties of prejudice and hatred at work in the world. But I hear and see them around me. For all the work that our forebears did, for all of their heroic efforts and the debt of gratitude that we owe them, there is still much more to do. Harvey Fierstein commented in a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, apropos of the Imus debacle, that we can’t sit back to pick and choose our issues, can’t be selective in our approach to hatred. He says, “you cannot harbor malice toward others and then cry foul when someone displays intolerance against you. Prejudice tolerated is intolerance encouraged. Rise up in righteousness when you witness the words and deeds of hate, but only if you are willing to rise up against them all, including your own. Otherwise suffer the slings and arrows of disrespect silently.” And yet . . .

There are times when it’s hard enough to get from point A to point B, when any protests will fall on deaf ears, when I’m dog tired and feel alone in the world. What then?

A few years ago, speaking at this same event in my capacity as acting program chair, I told two stories that I’d recently heard. I’d like to share them again, because they continue to give me great comfort and they help to answer the question, for me at least, “What then?”

A friend of friend who worked in an AIDS hospice on Cape Cod, was feeling alone and burned out on Christmas Day. He took himself for a walk on one of the Provincetown beaches and was idling along when behind him he heard someone cry out, “Joy!” He turned around and saw a woman, little more than a speck on the beach, her arms up, and she shouted “Joy!” once again. He started walking quickly toward her and shouted “Joy!” in answer. And so it continued for the next few minutes, them walking towards each other, the sounds of the word “Joy!” in call and response. As they started to get close enough to speak in more normal tones of voice, the woman suddenly stopped and looked behind my friend’s friend. He heard a rustle in the grasses and jumped aside as a giant golden retriever bounded through the sand. “Joy!” the woman exclaimed, “Where have you been?”

The second story involves an elderly teacher of meditation from California who was giving a workshop in upstate New York. He was in his late 80s, and as the students in the group knew, had lost his wife just a couple of weeks before. At the close of the workshop, one of the students asked the teacher how he was dealing with his wife’s death, how he could start traveling and teaching again so soon. The professor answered with a kind of parable: there are two rooms beside each other, connected by a door. One room is bright with light, the other is stone dark. What happens when the door is opened? No matter which way the door opens, from the dark room to the light room or the other way around, light floods darkness. The teacher missed his wife, of course, but he kept remembering that light floods darkness and was able to move forward.

I confess that there are times when I bite my tongue or turn my back on comments and situations in which I should say or do something. I'm tired, beleaguered, mindful of the fact that nothing I say or do will alter the moment at hand or, worse yet, the long term. And while I agree with Harvey Fierstein that "prejudice tolerated is intolerance encouraged," that we should always "rise up in righteousness when we witness the words and deeds of hate," there are those moments when it feels impossible for me.

Perhaps I'm wrong when I say that I expect that all of us have those moments. Perhaps I'm trying to comfort or excuse myself. And yet I suspect that others will draw comfort, as I do, from the realization that things are indeed better today than they were even a few generations ago; that our tasks are somewhat easier than they were; that we have wonderful communities of people, such as here in the Program in Women's and Gender Studies, to sustain us; and that, when things seem really bleak, joy can be found in the most surprising places, and that light always floods darkness.

The community I found with some of you in the 205 course in particular and that I've found in Women's and Gender Studies in general has also sustained me, and I thank you once again. I realized that our efforts, extraordinary or not, are meaningful in ways and at times we can't know. Which is why, when we doubt, when we feel tired, we would do well to remember our forebears who, despite their own doubts and exhaustion, continued their work, as if thinking of Paul Robeson's inspiring words: "Sorrow will one day turn to joy. All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding and everyone will be free." Congratulations to you all and, as you leave Brandeis, remember that you are still a part of the community of the program in Women's and Gender Studies, that there is joy to be found in the world, that light always floods darkness, and that your efforts, both small and large, will be gratefully remembered at some commencement in the future.