

**WGS Undergraduate Commencement Address
May 2008
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Welcome students, family members, board members and faculty connected with Brandeis University's wonderful Women's & Gender Studies Program, that today is celebrating its 30th birthday.

It is a special honor to have been asked by the Women's & Gender Studies Program graduating seniors to offer the commencement address at this special occasion. Today is a special day in another way, as one of the graduates – Reba Kolber – pointed out to me this morning. It is the day that the state of California legalized gay and lesbian marriage. Another reason to celebrate.

My theme today is one that should be familiar to you because it was a slogan of what we, in the U.S., call the Second Wave of the Women's Movement, a movement that – fortunately for me - burst forth at the same time that I started my career as a sociologist. That theme is the relation between the personal and the political.

My comments on the theme of the relation between the personal and the political will take the shape of a few life lessons I have learned in the last 40 years. The first lesson has to do with creating a life with a life partner or sometimes a series of partners, whoever it is, and whatever you call this person. In 1967, for heterosexual people (which we didn't even define ourselves as being), life partners were called a husband and wife, and a partnership was called a marriage. When my husband and I married in 1967, we truly had no idea what we were doing. The state was very involved in relationships, including the fact that in Massachusetts unmarried women could not legally obtain birth control.

One of our first meaningful conversations occurred after my new husband asked me "What's for dinner?" First of all, I had no idea how to cook, nor did we have money to go out for dinner. Second, I certainly did not know how to plan ahead for dinners.

But I did not say these things in response to his seemingly normal question – what's for dinner? Instead I said, "Why is that my responsibility?" The personal had become political, or to put it another way, the personal had become definitional.

Baffled by my response, he answered, "Because you're the wife." And somehow, I answered, "In this relationship, there is no wife." The category no longer existed as we knew it. Therefore, we had to redefine relationships and terms. So, "life lesson number one," is that in order to change the world, you have to change definitions and relationships. You have to make up new words, such as sexual harassment, date rape, domestic violence, and more. And it isn't easy to use new definitions. It's much easier to slip back into the familiar.

Time went on and eventually the two of us came to Brandeis with two young children, our daughters. As it turned out, one of the children developed an illness very early in her life. The conflict between work and family, particularly between doing the focused work needed to earn tenure, and the focused work needed to take care of an ill child, is excruciating. I learned that no matter how well organized you are, life happens.

But more important, I learned a lot about the medical care system. When the physician could not diagnose my daughter's illness, he jumped to the conclusion that I was imagining things. The theory that mothers cause illness or are over-protective, or are neglectful, or are neurotic, is still rampant in our society, as one of the WSRC scholars has documented. In our society, mothers are still suspect – especially single mothers, or racial minority mothers, or mothers who have too few children, have no children, have too many children, have the wrong kind of children, have the wrong theory about raising your children. Just think of Sue Miller's amazing novel The Good Mother.

And then the physician asked me if I was abusing my daughter. Despite his offensive question, it took assertiveness to tell him that he made me uncomfortable and I was switching doctors. To this day, I consider assertiveness training one of the great and under-recognized gifts of the women's movement.

Switching doctors does not solve the problem, of course. Why should the next doctor be any better? The problem isn't personal – the particular doctor – it's political – the sexism within the medical care system, an issue that the women's movement has worked on assiduously, ever since the publication of Our Bodies Ourselves. This issue is being studied by Dr. Linda Pololi.

When I went to the next doctor, I came prepared. I brought my husband along. My goal was to change the dynamics of the interaction. I predicted that he would not be accused of imagining the illness. And he wasn't.

From then on, we decided that – in order to get the best possible care for our daughter - my husband would be responsible for most of the doctor's visits. This experience taught me first hand how closely linked gender and power are. This experience inspired me to accumulate power despite my gender and to use it wisely. I never want to be in a position that I cannot protect the people I love from what might harm them, just because I'm a woman. There is nothing wrong with that. Power can be used for the good. I don't want to be powerless. Power is not a dirty word. In men, power is sexy. We know that in studies of women's attitudes toward men. Men, on the other hand, find powerless, childlike women to be sexy. We need to switch both of these ideas around.

A few years later, we sent our children to Jewish day schools for various reasons - our desire that they have a strong Jewish identity, understand their culture and learn Hebrew – in addition, it was an excellent school. To my surprise, our older daughter learned feminism in Jewish day school. On the first day of kindergarten, her teacher handed out kipot to all the boys. (That'll do it!). She asked why she didn't get one. The very wise

teacher actually acknowledged that she didn't know, and she would find out and bring an answer to the class the next day. The following day, the teacher told the class that if the girls wanted to have kipot, they could, and she walked over to our daughter's table. My daughter then, unbelievably, said, "I don't want one, I just want to know that I could have one." Jewish day school gave my daughters lots of these kinds of opportunities. You can learn to be a feminist anywhere.

When our younger daughter graduated from 8th grade, the highest grade in the school, there was a big commencement ceremony held in a synagogue, because the school's auditorium was not large enough and in order to express a tie between the school and the community. The dean of students, a woman, made a remark at that commencement that struck me at the time and which I remember to this day.

Turning to the 8th graders, she said, "In this room, you have everything you need. You have your parents, you have your teachers, you have your friends, and you have the Torah." Let's break that down, or as you have learned to say, let's unpack this sentence.

A hush fell over the sanctuary, as everyone absorbed the wisdom of her words, words I think about at every commencement ceremony and I'm thinking about right now. Translated into politically correct language, she was saying, "you have your family, you have your teachers, you have your friends, and you have your education."

You have your family. Life lesson: If you don't have family, go out and make one. I was in Eilat, the southern most tip of Israel, two days ago, and visited a relative I hadn't seen in years because the place is very remote. He told me that because most of the residents of Eilat live so far away from their relatives, they have created very strong substitute families among themselves, which have the same functions.

You have your teachers. Life lesson: If for some reason, you have not yet found a life teacher, go out and find one. Find a wise woman. Be her student the rest of your life. And then be a wise woman to someone else.

You have your friends. Life lesson: Nurture your friendships. Without friends in this world, you will be lost. Friends not only provide continuous love, but also provide the opportunity for you to give, in a way unaffected by the obligations of family. A friend is someone to whom you give and from whom you receive. I have seen women go through hell and come out well because of their friends.

You have your Torah, or education, or culture. Life lesson: Make sure you have a Torah or culture of some sort. You have all learned about global feminisms; you have learned about the significance of culture. All feminisms are rooted in cultural specificity. Know where you came from and how it shaped you. Learn not only about "the other" but also about yourself.

The last life lesson I would like to share with you is what I call the secret wisdom of invitations. In Hebrew, the word "invitation" is "hazmana." "Hazmana" has the word

“zman” in it, which means “time.” This idea has led me to the somewhat mystical belief that invitations come at the right time. You just have to recognize them.

When someone you trust says to you, “I think you would really like to do x” or “please come with me to y” – it might be an invitation to try something you haven’t considered, something connected to what they see in you. Listen to the invitations you receive.

I’ll give you one example. The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, which I established in 1997, brings to our campus many Scholars-in-Residence from all over the world, each year. You might have met some of them. Last year, one of these people was a professor of Dutch and German language and history, from the University of Florida in Gainesville. As we got to know one another and become friends, she told me that she also teaches summer school in Utrecht, Holland, to students from all over the world. The focus is on Dutch history, in the context of European history more generally, and with a strong gender focus.

I was born in Amsterdam shortly after the Holocaust. I think I know about my roots, but I need to know my history much better. She somehow saw this in me and invited me to enroll in her summer school program with 18-21 year olds. I accepted. I am moving to Utrecht for 6 weeks this summer. The time is right because my children more or less know what they are doing; and my life partner more or less knows what he is doing. Everyone can come visit. I have INVITED them. As Hillel said, if not now, when? I don’t know what you think of this, but family must be a place where everyone can grow.

I am so grateful to the women’s movement and to the Women’s and Gender Studies Program for helping me see the world with fresh eyes. I am eager to hear how you transform the personal into the political and vice versa. As a sociologist, I know that we are all part of much larger processes, but I also know that we can shape the world as well. I look forward to learning about your life lessons. The world is a better place because you are in it.