“Becoming the Storm”

Keynote Address delivered at Fall 2015 Lavender Graduation, University of North Texas

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Dear friends and colleagues, students and family members, thank you so much for joining us here today to recognize the accomplishments of these graduates. I’m honored and humbled to be asked to speak to you today. In a few weeks you’ll have the chance to be part of the larger community of UNT graduates, to be recognized by the university President and the faculty, and to be part of a crowd listening to an anonymous someone telling you about your potential and the future, and reminding you of your responsibilities as you go forth into the world. Some of you will be with your families, some of you will attend with friends and classmates, some of you may attend alone, and some of you will not attend at all. I won’t be at the university graduation, but I’m glad I get to be part of this ceremony. It means a great deal to me to know that you chose to be part of this event, and that I get to share it with you. As we come of age as queer people – and I use queer here as an umbrella term to encompass the widest possible scope of the LGBTQIA community – as we come of age we grow, and adapt, and our sense of family changes. We have the families we were born with, and our families of choice, we have the communities from which we emerged and the communities into which we grow. Sometimes those families, those communities overlap, like a Venn diagram showing at its intersection Who You Are Now, and sometimes those circles remain discrete and separate. I’m honored that for today at least I am part of the family you chose to mark this occasion with, and I’m deeply touched to share this day with you.

I feel I would be remiss if I didn’t take a moment to acknowledge some of the events that have shaken our world this past couple of weeks: The failure of HERO, Houston’s non-discrimination ordinance, after a viciously transphobic campaign; the ugly petition to “Drop the T” from LGBT causes and publications started by reactionaries within our own community; the racist actions at Missouri and Yale and too many other campuses that have left so many feeling silenced and terrorized; and of course the awful violence that took place this week in Beirut and Baghdad, and last night in Paris. It’s easy, too easy, to feel overwhelmed by these and other events that make our world seem like a dark place where love and joy are hard to find. I’m as vulnerable as anyone to feelings of despair, when my righteous anger dwindles and I feel helpless in the face of so much reckless hate and horror. Last night as I watched the news while finishing up this talk I felt myself being overtaken by helplessness, and I was reminded of a quote by one of the great humanists of the 20th century, Fred Rogers. If you’re not familiar with that name, Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister who was better known for his public television show, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. He was also a great force for good in the world and is one of my heroes. Mister Rogers said this about facing tragedy:

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in

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times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."

I’m glad, that after a dark night such as the one we shared last night, that I get to be here with you, in a community based in love and respect, pride and hope, a community that cherishes caring and mutual support, and a community that rises to the occasion to help others in a way that few others do. I know I’m supposed to say something inspirational here, or to offer advice or admonition, but I find myself rather at a loss to do so. In preparing for this talk, I watched a few other commencement addresses on YouTube, by people who are rather more famous and accomplished than me, and was disappointed for the most part in how much time was spent offering un-asked-for advice for how to be better citizens, corporate minions, or whatever. I’m not a person who likes to give advice, mainly because it irritates me when my advice isn’t taken, but also because it rankles me to be on the receiving end of it. But that’s not why I had trouble crafting this talk. The fact is, I don’t need to tell you about responsibilities because you have already taken responsibility for yourselves, by investing in your future and pursuing an education in an anti-intellectual age. I don’t need to tell you what it’s like in the world, because you’re already part of it. Many of you held down jobs (sometimes more than one) to get through school, some of you became independent involuntarily because you chose to live as your authentic self and not the person your family wanted you to be, and all of you have been making decisions that will shape your lives in ways you can only imagine now. The truth is, I had trouble coming up with anything inspirational to say to you today, because it is you who inspires me.

And perhaps that’s what is most important for you to hear today: that you are amazing, wonderful individuals who are cherished and valued. Your courage, your hope, and your honesty in the face not only of the typical challenges all students encounter, but in the face of such opposition as remains part of our culture - that inspires me. I’m proud that it is you who will inherit this world, and you who will lead our community into the future.

I wish my generation had left things a little better that we have, though. I wish we’d pursued protections in housing, employment, and healthcare with the same zeal we pursued marriage equality. I wish we’d been better about embracing our trans brothers and sisters, and all people of color within our community, so that there would never be a question of dropping the T, and that no one would feel unloved or unwelcome because of the color of their skin, the nature of their faith, or the place of their birth. You’re inheriting a flawed, fractured, and fractious community, but it’s also one that is moving with the force of history toward better things for all of us. And I’m not going anywhere, so this maudlin talk of what you’re inheriting from my generation is a little premature, because I intend to toil alongside you for a good long time to come, to continue making the great changes we need to make to ensure a better future. And though I am not going to give advice, I am going to ask you to join me in doing a few things as you move into the next stage of our mutual struggle.

First, never allow the haters to silence you. Speak truth to power even when our leaders - be they University Presidents or the President of the United States - capitulate and retreat into cowardice. Always combat ignorance with honesty, and be relentlessly intolerant of intolerance. Make trouble - still waters are often hiding something, so make a splash whenever you can.

Second, please never lose your anger. One of the greatest and most problematic elder statesmen of our community, Larry Kramer, has been declaring for 30 years that if you’re not angry, you’re not paying attention. I ask you to join me in paying attention. Rage is the fuel of
revolution, and we must all be revolutionaries, now more than ever. Coming out is a revolutionary act. I know you all understand that coming out isn’t a one-time thing and that we do it over and over. Every time you do it brings new revelations, and challenges the assumptions of those who would keep us silent, alone, and afraid.

Coming out can be exhausting, but if anger is our energy, then comfort is the enemy, as much or even more so than those who despise us. I ask you to combat complacency with knowledge, and if you ever feel you have nothing left to achieve for yourself, please find someone else to fight for.

Though I’m using combative language here, I ask us all to remember that there is great strength in compassion, and the best work we can do in the world comes from a place of caring and empathy. It’s also important to have compassion for ourselves, and recognize that it’s ok to get tired, to fall short of our goals, even to despair, and it’s only through shared compassion that we can get through those valleys.

The last thing I would ask you to do is to strive every day, even in small ways, to make the glorious myth of the LGBTQIA Community a reality. It’s easy sometimes to dismiss the idea of the queer community because it seems too big, too fractured, too diverse, and that we’re too different from each other to make real community possible. But community has to start somewhere, and I ask you to join me in letting it begin with us. If you’re a gay guy, talk to lesbians; if you’re a queer girl, talk to gay guys. Befriend a trans person. Get to know someone with less money than you, and get to know someone with more money than you. Take a drag queen to coffee. Have dinner with someone significantly older than you, go to brunch with someone significantly younger than you. Get to know someone not of your race, someone from a different faith tradition than your own, someone who faces physical challenges you don’t share. Thank an ally, and more importantly, be an ally. Together we can show that differences are what make us stronger, differences are what make community worthwhile, and through understanding and cherishing those differences, we can make the future a better place for all of us.

The great German historian and mystic Walter Benjamin wrote that history is an angel blown backwards into the future by a great storm called Progress. Today as we mark this occasion together, we are balanced on a point where your history meets your future. It’s a glorious and perhaps frightening point to be at, and it is up to you to decide what you do next. It’s my wish for you that you choose to be part of the storm.