

Commencement Speech, Wellesley College

by Hillary Rodham

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"I am very glad that Miss Adams made it clear that what I am speaking for today is all of us -- the 400 of us -- and I find myself in a familiar position, that of reacting, something that our generation has been doing for quite a while now. We're not in the positions yet of leadership and power, but we do have that indispensable task of criticizing and constructive protest and I find myself reacting just briefly to some of the things that Senator Brooke said. This has to be brief because I do have a little speech to give. Part of the problem with empathy with professed goals is that empathy doesn't do us anything. We've had lots of empathy; we've had lots of sympathy, but we feel that for too long our leaders have used politics as the art of the possible. And the challenge now is to practice politics as the art of making what appears to be impossible, possible.

What does it mean to hear that 13.3 percent of the people in this country are below the poverty line? That's a percentage. We're not interested in social reconstruction; it's human reconstruction. How can we talk about percentages and trends? The complexities are not lost in our analyses, but perhaps they're just put into what we consider a more human and eventually a more progressive perspective. The question about possible and impossible was one that we brought with us to Wellesley four years ago. We arrived not yet knowing what was not possible. Consequently, we expected a lot. Our attitudes are easily understood having grown up, having come to consciousness in the first five years of this decade - - years dominated by men with dreams, men in the civil rights movement, the Peace Corps, the space program - - so we arrived at Wellesley and we found, all of us have found, that there was a gap between expectation and realities. But it wasn't a discouraging gap and it didn't turn us into cynical, bitter old women at the age of 18. It just inspired us to do something about that gap.

What we did is often difficult for some people to understand. They ask us quite often, "Why, if you're dissatisfied, do you stay in a place?" Well, if you didn't care a lot about it you wouldn't stay. It's almost as though my mother used to say, "I'll always love you but there are times when I certainly won't like you." Our love for this place, this particular place, Wellesley College, coupled with our freedom from the burden of an inauthentic reality allowed us to question basic assumptions underlying our education. Before the days of the media orchestrated demonstrations, we had our own gathering over in Founder's parking lot. We protested against the rigid academic distribution requirement. We worked for a pass-fail system.

We worked for a say in some of the process of academic decision making. And luckily we were in a place where, when we questioned the meaning of a liberal arts education, there were people with enough imagination to respond to that questioning. So we have made progress. We have achieved some of the things that we initially saw as lacking in that gap between expectation and reality. Our concerns were not, of course, solely academic as all of us know. We worried about inside Wellesley questions of admissions, the kind of people that were coming to Wellesley, the kind of people that should be coming to Wellesley, the process for getting them here. We questioned about what responsibility we should have for both our lives as individuals and for our lives as members of a collective group.

Coupled with our concerns for the Wellesley inside here in the community were our concerns for what happened beyond Hathaway House. We wanted to know what relationship Wellesley was going to have to the outer world. We were lucky that one of the first things Miss Adams did was to set up a cross-registration with MIT because everyone knows that education just can't have any parochial bounds any more. One of the other things that we did was the Upward Bound program. There are so many other things that we could talk about; so many attempts, at least the way we saw it, to pull ourselves into the world outside. And I think that we've succeeded. There will be an Upward Bound program, just for one example, on the campus this summer.

Many of the issues that I've mentioned - - those of sharing power and responsibility, those of assuming power and responsibility have been general concerns on campuses throughout the world. But underlying those concerns there is a theme, a theme which is so trite and so old because the words are so familiar. It talks about integrity and trust and respect. Words have a funny way of trapping our minds on the way to our tongues but there are necessary means even in this multimedia age for attempting to come to grasps with some of the inarticulate maybe even inarticulable things that we're feeling. We are, all of us, exploring a world that none of us understands and attempting to create within that uncertainty. But there are some things we feel, feelings that our prevailing, acquisitive, and competitive corporate life, including tragically the universities, is not the way of life for us. We're searching for more immediate, ecstatic and penetrating modes of living. And so our questions, our questions about our institutions, about our colleges, about our churches, about our government continue. The questions about those institutions are familiar to all of us.

We have seen heralded across the newspapers. Senator Brooke has suggested some of them this morning. But along with using those words - - integrity, trust, and respect - - in regard to institutions and leaders we're perhaps harshest with them in regard to ourselves.

Every protest, every dissent, whether it's an individual academic paper, Founder's parking lot demonstration, in unabashedly an attempt to forge an identity in this particular age. That attempt at forging for many of us over the past four years has meant coming to terms with our humanness. Within the context of a society that we perceive - - now we can talk about reality, and I would like to talk about reality sometime, authentic reality, inauthentic reality, and what we have to accept of what we see -- but our perception of it is that it hovers often between the possibility of disaster and the potentiality for imaginatively responding to men's needs. There's a very strange conservative strain that goes through a lot of New Left, collegiate protests that I find very intriguing because it harkens back to a lot of the old virtues, to the fulfillment of original ideas. And it's also a very unique American experience. It's such a great adventure. If the experiment in human living doesn't work in this country, in this age, it's not going to work anywhere.

But we also know that to be educated, the goal of it must be human liberation. A liberation enabling each of us to fulfill our capacity so as to be free to create within and around ourselves. To be educated to freedom must be evidenced in action, and here again is where we ask ourselves, as we have asked our parents and our teachers, questions about integrity, trust, and respect. Those three words mean different things to all of us. Some of the things they can mean, for instance: Integrity, the courage to be whole, to try to mold an entire person in this particular context, living in relation to one another in the full poetry of existence. If the only tool we have ultimately to use is our lives, so we use it in the way we can by choosing a way to live that will demonstrate the way we feel and the way we know. Integrity -- a man like Paul Santmire. Trust. This is one word that when I asked the class at our rehearsal what it was they wanted me to say for them, everyone came up to me and said, "Talk about trust, talk about the lack of trust both for us and the way we feel about others. Talk about the trust bust." What can you say about it? What can you say about a feeling that permeates a generation and that perhaps is not even understood by those who are distrusted? All they can do is keep trying again and again and again. There's that wonderful line in East Coker by Eliot about there's only the trying, again and again and again; to win again what we've lost before.

And then respect. There's that mutuality of respect between people where you don't see people as percentage points. Where you don't manipulate people. Where you're not interested in social engineering for people. The struggle for an integrated life existing in an atmosphere of communal trust and respect is one with desperately important political and social consequences. And the word "consequence" of course catapults us into the future. One of the most tragic things that happened yesterday, a beautiful day, was that I was talking to a woman who said that she wouldn't want to be me for anything in the world. She wouldn't want to live today and look ahead to what it is she sees because she is afraid. Fear is always with us but we just don't have time for it. Not now.

There are two people I would like to thank before concluding. That's Ellie Acheson, who is the spearhead for this, and also Nancy Scheibner who wrote this poem which is the last thing I would like to read.

"My entrance into the world of so-called "social problems" Must be with quiet laughter, or not at all. The Hollow men of anger and bitterness The bountiful ladies of righteous degradation All must be left to a bygone age. And the purpose of history is to provide a receptacle For all those myths and oddments Which oddly we have acquired And for which we would become unburdened To create a newer world To translate the future into the present We have no need of false revolutions In a world where categories tend to tyrannize our minds And hang our lives up on narrow pegs. It is well at every given moment to seek the limits in our lives. And once those limits are understood To understand that limitations no longer exist. Earth could be fair. And you and I must be free Not to save the world in a glorious crusade Not to kill ourselves with a nameless gnawing pain But to practice with all the skill of our being The art of making possible."