

## Chiaroscuro

Address to Lavender Graduation

May 20, 2009

Without darkness, we cannot know the clarity of the light. The great painters of the Italian Renaissance knew this and coined a term to describe the subtle interplay of shadow and light that gave images their beauty and depth. The term is *chiaroscuro* (KYAH RO SCU RO. In chiaroscuro, contrasts in light give volume to representations of three-dimensional objects, not the least of which being the human body. We might also think about our minds, identities, politics, and futures through this term as well.

I am honored to speak before you to day, to address the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsex, otherwise queer, and allied class of 2009, in the full acknowledgement that your lives, our lives, are marked by the depth of chiaroscuro; to stand fully in the light of day you have felt the weight of shadows that make your emergence from this stage of your life all the more meaningful. In college, you have become three-dimensional.

This visual technique is an apt way to describe a way of being in the world that is complex, liminal, in-between, in other words, queer. It is a mode of existence that questions the attempts of the powerful to define us as one thing, or another. We are rightly suspicious of any flattened too-bright or singular representation of our experience.

Combined with more formal learning experiences, our lives are resources for fathoming the complexity of words and things.

Where does this learning take place? The university is a crucible of the self; it is challenging enough for any student to leave familiar ways, people, and places and come into contact with thousands of strangers with different names, different lives, different ambitions, different senses of self and purpose. For students who have been afforded, for perhaps the first time in your lives, the urgency and risk of exploring your alternative gendered and sexed selves, the challenges have been that much greater.

To learn to distinguish among lover and ally and foe, to know where and with whom you stand, has required the development of a finely tuned sense of your surroundings. It is a skill learned never perfectly and always through the hard experience of a friend's turning away in fear, a parent's distance, a teacher's ignorance, fellow students' continually calling anything that they don't like "gay." One is put in the position of having to retort, "Yes, that exam was absolutely fabulous," or "Oh, you think the t.a.'s a lesbian? When are her office hours?"

No one escapes the existential terror of coming to terms with oneself. But you have learned better than most how to survive it. To find yourselves, you have found each other, drawn together by the magnetic pull of difference. In addition to learning about chemistry, business, engineering, filmmaking, politics, art, music, literature, writing,

math, philosophy—you have learned the arts of community and organization. Your presence here is testimony to that achievement.

It is a skill that puts you at an advantage in a world of both shadows and full sun. The depth of a life lived in struggle, a complex life, a beautiful life, is a gift you bring to the world.

And what is the nature of the world that waits before you? In many ways, it is rather queer, especially in Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, and Iowa. Not to mention American Idol. And let us not underestimate the profound challenge to oppression, exclusion, and heteronormativity that comes when we approach the marriage license counter—or the registrar's office. Our embodiment of difference, of the complexity of light and shadow, is a source of pride and joy that is not be negated by full inclusion in the privileges and rights assumed by others. In these decisions and many others, we must make our lives not in terms of harsh absolutes between sameness and difference, but rather in the rippling cast of early morning shadows on Barton Creek or sunset at the Oasis.

The UT tower casts an unforgiving shadow, and progress here has been uneven at best, requiring constant vigilance and struggle. However, we must recognize that the last several years at U.T. have been remarkable times for the glbtq community. Do you realize that you have been part of making history? During the last four, five (or maybe six?) years of your life here at U.T., the gender and sexuality center has come into its own

and asserted powerful leadership in educating the university community and offering a safe space for us all. During your time at U.T., the Queer Student Alliance won the university's top award for the best student organization, and a faculty-staff organization found its footing here in the struggle for domestic partner benefits. Just last year, the University non-discrimination clause was amended to include the protection of transgender persons. Each of us is stronger because of our collective efforts; our joint struggles are stronger for our individual voices and talents. We are necessary to one another's demand for lives of inclusion, respect, and joy in diversity. And we will need that collective strength to face what lies ahead in the shadows.

Violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and especially transgender and transex members of our community is an ever-present danger. As freeing and vexing and hurtful and joyful as your college experience has been, you will enter a wider world where hatred and discrimination still lurk. What we have won must be guarded lest it be taken away; this is the hard lesson learned in California. But without heartbreak, we would not know the strength of our hearts.

It's impossible to avoid the fact that you are graduating into a stormy economy, but your strengths will serve you well. You already know how to overcome adversity. You already possess the skills necessary to work with others toward the goals of your own survival and the mutual transformation of the world. You already know yourself and possess the maturity born of growing up queer. Project that strong sense of yourself. And *protect* it so that you may carry on day after day.

The late 19<sup>th</sup>-century British poet Percy Shelly envisioned more than survival for humanity the revolutionary play *Prometheus Unbound*. In the last act of the play, the character Panthea speaks words on the question of light and darkness:

I rise as from a bath of sparkling water,  
A bath of azure light, among dark rocks,  
Out of the stream of sound.  
Peace, peace! a mighty Power, which is as darkness,  
Is rising out of Earth, and from the sky  
Is showered like night, and from within the air  
Bursts, like eclipse which had been gathered up  
Into the pores of sunlight; the bright visions,  
Wherein the singing Spirits rode and shone,  
Gleam like pale meteors through a watery night.

Arise from the shadowy shoals; be like the eclipse gathered up into the pores of sunlight;  
emerge to face a power which is as darkness; meet it with bright visions; ride and shine  
like meteors through the watery night.

You might think that this is single the most impractical piece of advice you have ever received. But not so. Here is how to pursue the bright vision of your own and our collective freedom.

First, honor the struggles of comrades who fight for inclusion in society's institutions and access to the common wealth. For some of your friends and lovers, health care, pensions, and all the expressions of care recognized by society are matters of actual life and death. Those fighting for marriage equality will not be corrupted by heteronormativity. Rather, they will survive to transform it.

Second, do not go it alone. Don't be strangers. You know by now that we most fully become ourselves when we are together. We need organizations to do the necessary work of remaking the world to include us, rather than reworking ourselves to fit in. And everyone needs to find recognition of our whole selves in a safe place among kindred souls. The differences among us, the shifting patterns of shadow and light across our community, make us only stronger.

Third, have each other's backs. Solidarity is not easy across differences, but remember that support for the more vulnerable lifts all affected by oppression; overcoming differences in the multiple expressions of sex and gender means that when you are blindsided someone for whom you have fought will carry you.

Fourth, take the lead when others fall down or when they threaten to trample others. But don't be afraid to follow strong advocates of your interests. Sometimes other people will do right by you. Grant your trust, even though it may be betrayed.

Finally, do not hide your queer light under a bushel unless you are going to set the bushel on fire. You may be tempted to hide out, blend in, present yourself as uncomplicated as sunshine or as anonymous as the darkness. Do neither. Or both.

In cinema, critics have said, a paradigmatic use of chiaroscuro marks the 1988 Italian film *Cinema Paradiso*. Directed by Giuseppe Tomatore, the film recounts, in flashback, the deep friendship shared by two men, Alfredo and Salvatore (Toto), around the art of filmmaking. The blind Alfredo urges Toto to move away from their small town permanently in order to pursue his destiny as a great filmmaker. It is a coming-of-age film steeped in shadowy nostalgia; according to film critics, chiaroscuro deepens its sentimentality.

It is also a very queer film, Toto's campy desire for the character Elena notwithstanding. Queer fans, recognizing this appeal, have even gone so far as to a video of make gay and lesbian kiss scenes against the film's score. And there is a great deal one could say about Alfredo's symbolic blindness, the depth of love shared between the men, and Alfredo's self-sacrificing exhortation to Toto to leave rural life for a city in which he can truly be himself. Particularly, however, a subplot of the film involves a priest censoring every passionate kissing scene from movies shown at the Cinema Paradiso. When Toto returns

to his hometown for Alfredo's funeral, he discovers a film reel Alfredo left for him, containing all of the excised kissing scenes. Scenes of forbidden love were Alfredo's last, shadow-dappled gift to his friend. Noting of the scene's relevance to the glbtq struggle, New York Times columnist Bob Herbert describes Salvatore: "He watches, profoundly moved, as one couple after another gives physical expression to their mutual love." He added, "In the magic of movie making we can sometimes recapture the intimacy that is lost to misguided and intolerant customs and policies. Real life is another matter."

But Bob Herbert is wrong: Real life is *not* another matter. Here it is before you, beloved, brilliant and courageous graduates. Here is your charge as you present yourself to the wider world. Remember your friends here in the small town that is college; protect yourself and each other, but not to the point of refusing to take risks; recognize, respect, and support the necessary struggles undertaken by others; ally yourself not with the powerful but with the oppressed, because together you are stronger than the oppressor; embody solidarity; do not go it alone. Carry with you the scenes of your past as you pursue your destiny. Recognize that your complexity, the depth you carry born of struggle and self-knowledge, is a gift and a strength. Refuse to be one thing or another: "normal," integrated, uncomplicated or separated by difference and alienation.

These are no small tasks. But each of you is uniquely ready and possessed of the requisite talent and learning to proceed, and beautifully. For *you* are the masters of chiaroscuro.