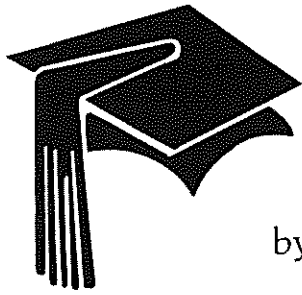


Commencement Address



1980

by Adrienne Rich



This is going to be both a personal and a pragmatic Commencement address. There is a tradition, in the mainstream both of scholarly and of clinical expertise, by which the speaker or writer assumes the voice of neutral, objective wisdom, unsoiled by personal experience; a tradition according to which the giver of wisdom claims his — or her — authority without admitting personal scars, personal problems with certain issues, or any such vulnerability which might make her or his argument or judgment liable to the accusation of subjectivity or “emotionalism.” This has been the scholarly, the clinical, the legislative, the philosophical and political method of male control of institutions and knowledge.

But, as the white South African feminist and anti-racist Olive Schreiner said of writing novels, *There is another method: the method of the life we all live*. Feminist practice of ideas and criticism has at least tried to adhere to this “other method” — in this case, the method of trying to say, to some extent, who I think I am who speak to you, where I think I am emerging from, what problems I encounter in trying to do this work. For feminist theory has from the first been based on female experience, slowly trying to realize “the life we all live” as women — itself an enormous international and interracial project — against the mythic structures of the presumed objective male consciousness. It has been based on women’s recognition that whoever we are, we are outsiders to those mythic structures; that we represent a generally invalidated, invisible or taboo tradition of thought and action, that the very language in which we speak of this may be turned against us, because language itself has been distorted in the service of keeping us from power, visibility, and integrity.

But what does it mean to say “who we are”? I begin by speaking as a feminist, but of course I am speaking out of a tradition of outsiderhood, of all those — pre-

dominantly but not exclusively women — who have been swept aside as marginal, devalued, enslaved, made invisible both in slavery and in our resistance to it, objectified and perceived as Other by a mainstream which is predominantly male and white, which dreads its own secrets as it dreads the power residing in those it has defined as unfit, incapable, weak, sick, untrustworthy, and in need of control. And because language itself — labels — have been used to keep our power, integrity, sometimes our very existence, unknown to us and to each other, we may well have reason to dread labels. All of us — women in general, people of color (but again, especially women of color), people who are materially poor in cultures which value material wealth, (and again, throughout the world women are materially the poorest group), the low-ranked, the deviant, those who do not satisfy a certain physical image of beauty, youth, skin-color and fitness — we have been labelled enough by others; and we know that their labels have led and are leading to gynocide, to genocide, to the ancient recourse of “blaming the victim” for the crime — indeed, of defining us as “natural” victims.

Yet, I believe profoundly in the efficacy and necessity of self-naming. I believe in it not only as a method of placing ourselves in relation to our public statements and acts, but as part of a long process of private reclamation of our identities, a process which I believe to be the very root and soil of our work. For none of us has one name only, though our reducers and objectifiers would have us think so, in order to keep us boxed-in, fragmented from each other, ignorant of our wholeness and connectedness.

I speak as the daughter of a Jew who had deeply internalized anti-Semitism and an Anglo-Saxon Protestant who had deeply internalized misogyny. I grew up in a white, middle-class, predominantly Protestant world, well-educated but also ignorant as only the privileged can be. The climate of societal and personal racism into which I was brought has changed little in that world since the 1930’s and 1940’s, when instead of naming it “racism” white people murmured about “the Negro problem” and cartoons in the newspapers jeered Eleanor Roosevelt as a “nigger-lover.” It was also a climate of polite anti-Semitism in which the word “Jew” was virtually whispered, and in which my parents hoped for me to “pass” as Christian and marry Anglo-Saxon. My childhood coincided with the Depression and with the holocaust in Europe. There was nothing in my expensive private education to encourage me to examine these events. At home, I was encouraged to read widely and to think of myself as a poet; but when I brought a volume of Eleanor Roosevelt’s memoirs home from

the library I was chided for reading "trash"; when I went, at seventeen, on my own, to the first documentary films of the Allied liberation of Dachau and Bergen-Belsen, my parents were seriously upset: why would I want to see such things? I grew up believing that I must be heterosexual because nothing in that world allowed me to know there was anything else to be. Black people were "a problem"; Jews were outsiders or Biblical characters; lesbians and homosexual men were unspoken-of, unspeakable-of, hence invisible. I married a Jew, in part I believe as a first act of trying to grapple with the ambiguities of "passing", and with my own inarticulate, unacknowledged feelings of being "other" — for, what *was* a woman poet?

Sometime in the fifties I found that some women in the past had written of women as outsider, as lacking rights, as deemed unworthy of education, lacking in her self. Sometime in the early sixties I began the long struggle to understand that if as woman I felt like an outsider, as white I lived in the tunnel-vision of one kind of "insiderhood" within dominant white culture, against whose crippling perceptions I have to struggle in my life, as surely as I have had to struggle with the physical crippling of my body. I became in the fifties the mother of three children and for a long time believed that this proved I could not possibly be a lesbian. I *am* a lesbian, and believe I have been one all my life, much of that time in conflict with the visible or intangible signals that told me I could not possibly feel or act upon a primary devotion, loyalty or longing for other women; that such feelings either did not exist, or were signs of illness. I am a lesbian/feminist, by which I mean, as I have said elsewhere, that *the meaning of our love for women is what we have constantly to expand*, and that in redefining love in accordance with female values we also reject the sadistic violence, the using, the objectifications, the expediencies, the dishonesty, the sentimentalizations, the false ideas of freedom, which have characterized heterosexual coupling and romance. As a lesbian/feminist I believe that loving women means something more than personal relationships, that the release of women's devotion and strength to each other means looking beyond our immediate selves to the condition of women very different from ourselves, everywhere in the world, and listening with deep attention to what they are saying.

To rethink love and sexuality in terms of female values will also be a necessary task for those men who wish to reject the male definition of sexuality as the exercise of male power and violence, the equating of the erotic with the pornographic and necrophiliac. I am profoundly cynical about the limelight currently being cast on "the New Age sensitive man," the

"counter-culture male," the "new fatherhood," while violence against women continues to be accepted as a fact of life, pornography is justified as the exercise of free speech by men who call themselves radicals, and the vast international enterprise of female sexual slavery is rendered almost invisible by the media. It will truly be something new when men become, in Lillian Smith's words, "disloyal" to masculine civilization, in such ways and numbers as women everywhere obscurely or militantly have done.

I am a poet, therefore I believe that the reality of the dream, the waking vision, the moment of pure imaginative defiance of gravity, is equal to any other reality, and has the power to shape other reality. I am a woman who also believes that material conditions shape and influence the forms of psychic life; that a continual resonance is playing between the two; that material conditions, like being poor or rich, like being of the wrong or right gender or color, have much to do with who shall be poets, who shall be literate even, who shall have the tangible means to express and interpret the inner life, who shall presume to speak for "humanity", who indeed shall presume to speak at all.

And if I lay such stress on identity, it is because of the power and influence of the profession into which you are going forth. Especially in this particular decade, with its incoherence of values, its electronic technology which keeps the luxury of freedom of speech in the hands of a very few, its panicky terror of difference and otherness, only an unflinching scrutiny of your own identities — the roots of your own opinions — will make it possible for you to become healers, rather than contagion-bearers of the infections of the social order.

But that scrutiny cannot be simply the kinds you have been taught according to a masculine-centered, white-centered methodology. Much of the on-going work you will have to do to become true *social workers* is the re-visioning of the methodologies you have been taught, the sifting through of what you have been learning. You have to keep asking yourselves: *who* created those methodologies, *whose* purposes they have served, *how* they have worked to maintain or subvert male power and violence, the very distribution of power and resources, both tangible and intangible, that depends on the negation and control of women, on the splitting of personal and political, professionalism and activism, clinical practise and social criticism. And, in an era when there is widespread repudiation of many established methods of healing and medical practise — this Valley alone is a welter of "alternative therapies" — you have to look with as clear an eye on what is supposed to be "alternative" in method, and, again, ask yourselves, *who* created

these alternatives, *to whom* are they available, *whose* purposes they serve, *how* in practise they too may overtly or covertly work to perpetuate injustice, violence, the concentration of power in the hands of males; how what calls itself "holistic" may also be yet another disguise for patriarchal fracture. And these questions lead to the eyeing of other social institutions, including the invisible ones like motherhood, like heterosexuality. You may of course choose to do none of this. It can be easy in your profession to make a living, find a secure niche in a troubling world, and implicitly help prop up the very conditions that, for example, create a predominantly female "help-seeking" population, a predominantly poor and non-white prison population.

I want to say quite explicitly and bluntly that much of the theory and practise of the profession in which you are about to receive your degrees has *not* been healing, has been iatrogenic in fact — treatment that creates its own diseases. The psycho-therapeutic professions have been, in the twentieth century West, perhaps the most strenuous means — apart from physical violence — of enforcing heterosexuality and of side-tracking and defusing female rebellion.

Women have been drugged, electro-shocked, subjected to psycho-surgery and behavior modification in the name of curing them of lesbianism, of so-called inappropriate anger, of physical resistance, of failing to stay in their assigned place. And for poor and Third World women, prisons are the means of social control, the analogue of the mental hospital. What I hope you will carry away from this talk, is that whether you like to think of it as such or not, and however you may practise it, this clinical profession of yours is an actively political institution. *To destroy in order to save* — one of the famous rationales of the United States military in Viet Nam — is also the meaning of iatrogenic medicine, iatrogenic therapy, clinical treatment which seeks to pacify just and healthy anger, and to adjust people to their own enslavement, which teaches them to feel no pain in the remembered ebbing of their lost selves under the pressure of conformity; "therapy" which denies or dismisses the existence of sexual, racial and economic oppression.

I have recently read a remarkable novel, *The Salt Eaters*, published last spring by Toni Cade Bambara, a novel I recommend to you precisely because its theme is the splitting and attempted integration of healing and politics, and one Black woman's journey through that process. In it, the psychic healer Minnie Ransome reminds her client Velma, longtime political activist who has just attempted suicide, that "wholeness is no trifling matter." In *The Salt Eaters*, white racism is the ever-present outside pressure; the

inside pressures being the sexual politics of the Black community, the temptations to identify with the oppressor, to accede to despair, the losing touch with old and powerful kinds of knowledge of resistance. In this novel it is clear that neither the wounded activist Velma nor the would-be healer Minnie can afford to trifle; what is needed is a different way of seeing, of conceiving the task altogether. Velma recalls her flight into the swamp, "hunting" for her lost self, that is, for her real power, and she muses on the different meanings of that word, "to hunt":

... hadn't she observed the difference, watched the different brands of hunting? The pulling of the bow, the pulling of the truck alongside the prey and mowing it down, taking it over . . . Taking over a life. That was not hunting as the sisters explained it, sang it, acted it out . . . The keeping in the sights the animal, or child, man or woman, tracking it in order to learn their way of being in the world. To be at home in the knowing. The hunt for balance and kinship was the thing.*

And therefore the search for our own identities, which makes possible the recognition of — and the learning from — selves different from our own, must also be a search for the racist, for the woman-hater, for the homophobe, for the anti-Semite, within us; for the sources of our fears of difference; for the coward within us who knows but will not speak out against external woman-hating, racism, enforced heterosexuality, persecution of difference. We must begin there, in struggle with all that each of us has breathed in from childhood, in daily, visceral struggle for values in this violent and incoherent culture with its deceptive and selective permissiveness, its "valueless individualism" as Kathleen Barry, feminist theorist and activist, has phrased it.* Women everywhere today are articulating the need for values, for language, for ways of living in the world, which are not simply new masks for old beliefs and old practises which have consistently denied the value of women's lives. And we are seeing more and more clearly, as we communicate and learn increasingly across national frontiers and barriers of culture, that where women's lives are treated as valueless save in the service of men, every other form of difference can be abhorred, exploited, thrust to the margins of life, and the earth itself harrowed with contempt and wasted with indifference, treated as though she were not part of us, and we of her.

*Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*. Random House, 1980, pp. 266-7.

*See Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*. Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 223-6.