Commencement Address

Macaulay Honors College

June 8, 2016

It is an honor, a privilege, and a pleasure to have the opportunity to address and congratulate you today. My warmest and most enthusiastic congratulations to parents, family, and friends of the graduates. I know how proud you must be of what they have accomplished. I also have some idea of your contribution to their accomplishments. You deserve public as well as private thanks for all you have done for them.

Congratulations also to Macaulay teachers, advisors, and administrators. You know better than anyone else what these students have gone through to apply to this college, to stick with the program, and to complete its arduous requirements while dealing with the inevitable crises that affect young adults at this vulnerable and dramatic stage of life.

But mostly I want to address my remarks to you the graduates of Macaulay Honors College. I regret not having had the chance to meet you personally although I hope there is still time to remedy this omission, especially for those of you who plan to attend NYU or Cornell.

Your Interim Dean, Mary Pearl, sent me profiles for some of you. I have no idea how representative this sample might be but even so, some clear themes emerge. You are an extraordinarily diverse group in background and interests, but united in your remarkable achievements before and during your participation in Macaulay. When I see who you are, I am even more honored to be invited to speak to you this afternoon.

But let me cut right to the theme that emerged most strongly from your profiles—the one mention every one of the profiles had in common, and the one that resonated most strongly with me. You chose to enter the Macaulay Honors College because it offered you a free education.

This resonated with me because I too am the product of a public, free education. My family had no money. We moved from New York to Los Angeles when I was 12 years old because my father thought the west coast offered better opportunities. But he died the following year and after that I lived with my mother—newly a single mom--in the only place she could afford: a small, one-bedroom apartment from which I went to junior high and high school.

But I could escape that life. No member of my family had ever gone to college, but I could. I lived in California, a state with an extraordinary public education system. I got into the University of California at Berkeley. Tuition was free. Student fees were $32 a year. And I lived at the student coops which didn’t cost much because they required 5 hours work a week from every resident. Between what I had saved from jobs and a $300 scholarship, I was able to leave a difficult home situation and go to a good state university.

I say this not to be boasting. On the contrary. The point I want to make is that what I did was *normal.* There was nothing special about getting a free education. Everyone in my high school expected to go to UCLA or Berkeley and pay for room, board, and books with money earned baby sitting or working odd jobs during the summer. And this was not just in California. Across America, state governments were committed to the idea that a flourishing economy—and a flourishing democracy--require educated citizens. State legislators wanted their own children to go to the University of California. They believed that any student with good grades from high school, rich or poor, deserved a first-rate education.

Alas, times have changed. Today, Macaulay is a rare exception. Today, unless you come from a family with lots of money, you must expect to take on massive loans to pay for your education. Debts like these limit career options and turn graduates into the equivalent of indentured servants. If you do not fully appreciate how important the Macaulay Honors College has been to your life, just talk to your friends who have loans that will have to be paid off for decades.

Unlike you, they do not have the option of taking jobs in the public interest sector, in public agencies or private non-profit groups doing work that is deeply meaningful personally and for society, but rarely pays well. You may be planning to work in business or finance but you do not have to. Thanks to a free education, you have a choice.

And I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity, as I have tried to do.

I went to Berkeley more than half a century ago, during times of enormous social turmoil. My college years and those as a graduate student in the 1950s and 1960s were deeply affected by the McCarthy era of suppression of dissent, the Civil Rights movement, the movement against the Vietnam War, and Berkeley’s own Free Speech Movement. Those movements were part of my education. Like so many other students, I was caught up in them, not least because we could see that these movements were changing America--and much for the better.

Civil rights actually happened. The Vietnam War ended. Berkeley allowed free speech.

I was lucky enough to come from a generation that could see how advocacy for political change makes a difference to the kind of society we live in.

Although I joined student protests against the Berkeley administration at the time, I have never stopped being grateful for my Berkeley education. I am heartbroken—no, I am outraged--that students from families like mine no longer have the same opportunities that I had.

Outrage is a strong word and I don’t use it lightly. To do anything about injustice in society, we need more of it. Just in my lifetime, America has gone from a society that deeply valued—and was willing to pay for--at least some level of equal opportunity to a society that actively promotes a widening gap between those who are born rich and those born poor.

The student movements of the 1960s were in part responsible for diminishing that gap.

But we greatly underestimated the power of the pushback that followed. We underestimated how strongly those in power do not like giving it up. We underestimated how the consolidation of the power of corporations would weaken government commitments to common citizens. As corporations grew larger, the government granted them greater rights and taxed them less. Funding for public purposes declined. State taxes once paid for nearly all of Berkeley’s expenses. This year, it’s just 13%. The State pays at least 20% less for each Berkeley student than it does for each prisoner in California jails. Student tuition fills the gaps.

Hence: outrage. But outrage is useless without a focused target, and that’s where advocacy enters the picture.

If you want to engage in advocacy, there are many ways to do it and make a difference in people’s lives. Mine happens to be through food and I want to say a little about how that happened.

I was a science major as an undergraduate and I later went on for a doctorate in

molecular biology. I fully expected to have a career as a bench scientist but that idea got derailed by the reality of my having gone to graduate school with two small children. During my postdoctoral years, it became obvious that there just weren’t enough hours in the day to manage family and research. Some women may be able to do that, but I was not one of them. Instead, I took a teaching job in a college biology department.

My department was unusual in that its faculty believed that they should be able to teach any subject whether they knew anything about it or not. Students were petitioning the department to teach something that seemed more relevant to human biology, and I was assigned a nutrition course.

This was like falling in love and I’ve never looked back. I could immediately see that nutrition was a fabulous way to teach undergraduate biology. There is nothing abstract about it. Everyone can relate to it and it made teaching easy and fun.

My next jobs were teaching nutrition at a medical school where I did not publish and perished. I went back to school to get a master’s in public health nutrition and then worked as a nutrition policy advisor for a government agency in Washington DC. From that, I ended up at NYU where I have lived happily ever after.

I date my food advocacy work to the early 1990s when I attended a meeting at the National Cancer Institute on behavioral causes of cancer--cigarettes and diets. I knew that smoking cigarettes caused lung cancer. But at that conference, I watched speaker after speaker showing slide after slide of cigarette marketing not only in the United States but in Africa, the high Himalayas, remote islands in the Pacific. One speaker showed slide after slide of cigarette marketing to children.

These talks were a revelation. I knew cigarette companies marketed to children, but I had never paid any attention to it. Cigarette marketing was so much a part of the landscape that I hadn’t noticed it. I came away from that meeting convinced that those of us who cared about public health should be paying close attention to food-company marketing. We should be doing the same for Coca-Cola as those speakers were doing for cigarettes.

So I started paying attention to the billions of dollars a year that food companies spend on marketing here but also throughout the world. Food is not cigarettes, of course, but food companies, like cigarette companies, are not social service agencies. They are businesses whose primary responsibility is to generate income for stockholders. When I wrote about this in *Food Politics* in 2002, I thought I was stating the obvious.

My most recent book is *Soda Politics,* which came out last October. Sodas have sugars but no other redeeming nutritional value, but they are made by huge, worldwide corporations with stockholders to please. In this book, I talk about how soda companies spend fortunes to oppose public health initiatives, and even greater fortunes to market their products in Asia, India, and Africa to people who need food, not liquid candy.

In my books, articles, blog, and the courses I teach at NYU, I advocate for healthier food systems for people and the planet. To achieve healthier food systems, we need government policies that put some curbs on inappropriate and undemocratic levels of corporate power.

I can say things like this because everyone eats. Everyone gets it. Using food as an example, everyone can understand how industrial agriculture affects climate change, how food industry sponsorship of research can corrupt science and scientists, and why monoculture and corporate control of the food supply are legitimate concerns about GMOs. Through food, I can talk about immigration, and the pay and human rights of farm, restaurant, and supermarket workers. Such issues may seem remote from people’s daily lives. Food brings those issues home.

Using food as an entry point, I can talk about why advocacy for social justice is so badly needed, and how to do it effectively. That’s the route I found.

I hope that you will find your own. At the very least, you could express your gratitude to Macaulay by advocating for more funding for public education at every level.

If enough of us join together to demand social justice, we might get at least some of what we are asking for.

No matter what you do in your post-Macaulay life—whether you go into science, business, education, or jobs in the private or public sector--you will encounter injustices. Pay attention to them. Do whatever you can about them in whatever way you can.

This is the best thanks you can give to Macaulay Honors College for the opportunities it has offered to you.

Many thanks to the College and to all of you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today.

My warmest congratulations to all of you.