Commencement Address Claremont

Thank you so much for having me here. Lavender graduates of Pomona, Scripps, Harvey Mudd, Claremont, Pitzer, this is a time to honor your achievement. Those from the Claremont Graduate School, and the Keck Institute—dang—this is a time to be relieved, isn't it? You passed... You made it!

This is a time to reflect, to celebrate. This is time to be out and proud and queer. You have been strong, you've been tenacious—you’ve worked so hard for this moment. One does not graduate without being tested... YET do this AND come here to Lavender Graduation means that not only you were here for a degree—you’ve been on a less traveled road of discovery, education, and growth. And now—well, you’re growing further on... And into this world where...well...

This is not a graduation speech I am used to making. I think we all kind of know we’re in the middle of some interesting times... Actually divisive times. Heartbreaking times. Mind numbingly misunderstood times.

In preparing this graduation speech, I was looking at another address I gave just a couple short years ago... And gosh it was hopeful—we had these gorgeous No on H8 photos, slick commercials for marriage equality, and Doogie Howser talking about raising a family, a place at
the table, and to the suicides, so many thought the answer would be rich gay actors making videos saying “it gets better.”

Those reassuring images seem almost quaint right now. Sure, you can get married, but can you get your medicine? Will the doctor treat you?

The fact that you are here at a Lavender Graduation, even at a University—has is in itself become a more a courageous act. Even places of higher learning have not been immune to change. My friend and colleague, who has been out as trans at her the University of Pittsburgh for years now, peeing without incident, for the first time might have to break school policy to urinate.

Beyond queer land, in the meantime, even as I am writing this...I watch young men in Baltimore throwing rocks and bricks at police. And beyond that—a college in Kenya is shut down indefinitely after folks with guns executed 147 students... and uh, our climate's not getting any more stable, either.

You know...sometimes it does not seem to be getting better.

This is the world in which you will enter as a professional or an academic and queer. Marriage equality may have worked to get a place at the table. But there will be places where it is illegal for you to pee...
These viewpoints did not result from rigorous discourse. The policies upon which they are based did not pass peer review. These are deer-in-the-headlights moments...for those of us, especially, who entered a world of learning and higher education, really excellent consortium of campuses—for the freedom to THINK... to then face the sort ignorance many of us worked so hard to mend, transcend, or even escape.

Because especially for queers, this is kind of ignorance puts us in danger. We study, we apply the rules of logic, of learning, of theory—we devote our time to an ideal of art or performance—yet suddenly someone’s not serving cake or pizza...

This is not theoretical. This is about us, here and now. Where, in addition to being queer, depending on who you are, it will be risky to walk without ID papers, or for your child play with a toy gun in your front lawn.

And for many, the worst of these will be the places where you will find opportunity or, perhaps more importantly, the places where your presence can do so much good. So as much as we celebrate here, it is a celebration that we hold while knowing we move outward to a world where there is so much work to do.

As queers, as members of the LGBT community, as allies, I don’t think anything I am saying is news to you. Some of you might be asking—can we still hope to thrive? Can we hope to work constructively in a place
that seems to ignore the critical thinking, scholarship, art, science, logic—learning—yet so desperately needs it? Can we hope do it and still be joyful? Can we hope to still be ourselves?

I am here to tell the Claremont Lavender Graduates of 2015—that the answer is yes. Absolutely, yes. In fact, forget hope. I believe you should expect.

You should expect to have your work appreciated in ways you did not predict. We know that no one has a right to limit who you are. But you'll find the someone who has limited you—is you. As a Lavender graduate, your success affects others. Your achievements inspires others. Your life saves someone else’s. Get used to that concept. This will happen no matter how unimportant or insignificant you think you are.

When I look at this college, and the first thing I see is it’s not a college at all. It’s a consortium. Scripps is Scripps. Pitzer is Pitzer. Harvey Mudd is Harvey Mudd. And so on and so on and think about it. Each school kind of does its own thing, yet all of Claremont becomes enriched.

Likewise, no matter what you are studying, from whichever college, in whichever discipline, you will find that your success enriches the queer community. You will find that just as there is no single right way to be queer, there certainly is no right way for a queer person to think. Not everyone has to be on the front lines of social justice, nor should those front lines the same for everyone.
I’m an English professor. I’m a writer. I don’t cure diseases or build shelters or change laws. I don’t make anything except words. I write poems and stories. But people have told me my writing has saved their lives. Has helped them feel connected to someone, understood. Here, now, I never expected that poetry would bring me to you. I just wanted to stop my own pain and live a relatively abuse-free life—maybe have a couple books out—but not this.

Working in the queer community means your work will touch the souls of others.

**Expect to make deeper friends and personal connections.** People who share your professional and social interests are special enough. But on top of that, people who share your drive, your compassion, *and* who share your queerness—your alienations, your victories—all this sharing means the friends and colleagues you make on this journey will be gold.

These will be folks you’ll see for the first time in five years at a conference or an airport and suddenly it you’ll be sitting in a diner in a city none of you have been to, eating the crispiest, creamiest hash browns in the world at 3 AM, marveling at how much you each have to share.
These will be people whom you want to see grow old, and grow with—for every wrinkle will be connected to battles, struggles, tears, and sweet successes you have together earned.

**Expect to have a richer understanding of your education, and what it actually was.** It’s a cliché that your past failures will become your greatest resources. Yet, that our queer community has endured failure is no cliché. And your practice at coming back from failure and disappointment and institutionalized ignorance will serve you in your professions and in your life.

Have an idea or theory or process that others may not accept? An amazing idea that no one believes? You’ve been there. Invalidation? No problem. Weird corporate procedures? You’ve already dealt with college bureaucracy and the QRC—trust me, you’re prepared.

When my first book came out, people were asking how I had the courage to write a book that bridged different genres—a book that might be hard to categorize. I am thinking... Gosh seriously? I’m trans, I have to deal with people doubting whether I’m a boy or a girl or a god knows what. So “is this poetry or prose? Where do I put this book?” That’s minor.

Which is not to say you’ll be ready for everything. **Expect your life to remain exciting and challenging. Expect to find your learning has just begun.**
You’ll learn a lot about others and the world in which we share. You’ll learn that brilliant people working with every fiber of their beings can be ignored because of the color of their skin, or the family into which they were born. You’ll have your carefully crafted theories chewed up and thrown back at you. A degree doesn’t always mean you’re an expert. You’ll learn race isn’t always about race. Class isn’t always about class. Gender is far more complicated than gender. And queer? Well... I’ll just say learn to be humble...

Expect to learn a lot about yourself, as well. You’ll realize that you don’t really know who you are—not completely. You think you’re amazing; other people are being hurt and disappointed. You think you’re failing, others are so amazed.

More than ever you will learn that are not fully cognizant, nor in control of your own story. And just as a quick side note—you’re probably a workaholic and not half as lazy as you think you are.

And yet, even in this maelstrom, expect that you may still believe in trying to do the right thing. You will have your heart broken. You will lose loved ones. You will want to scream sometimes. And yes, your heart will break, more often then you’d like.
Yet expect to still believe in people. And, even with your failures, your mistakes, expect to have an ever-more grateful belief in yourself. I try to work, write novels, tour—and in the meantime, people are being killed, being bullied into suicide.

But if I stop writing, then what? How does not being true to myself help anything? I may not be able to save to world all at once, or the queer community all at once... Yet if I try to move forward with dignity, with integrity—at least then, there is a chance to make it better tomorrow.

And in so doing, expect to find that you are more resilient, stronger, more capable of love than you might have ever imagined.

And because of this, in being queer, you should expect to experience greater joy, a greater experience of being alive, of existing, than those to whom struggle is liking a tweet, or unfriending someone on Facebook.

Most people at a candlelight vigil do not have to wonder what it means to truly feel alive. The person at the hospice giving her trans sister a manicure is not wondering if her life matters. And it is strange, from these moments can come a profound appreciation for joy.

Joy keeps us alive. You have a right to take a break, to fall in love, to be loved. I expect you to have it in your own lives. Yes, my work can come from dark places, but when someone says they will hold my words in their hearts forever—why not feel joy?
Because, to work hard is one thing. To work hard joylessly is another. Without personal enjoyment—life’s not only not fun; it’s impossible.

One of the most insidious forms of oppression is the idea that we must remain constantly on the job, and vigilant. That way, I have found, lies burnout. Lies bitterness. You can get sick that way.

I miss so many of my friends. But part of missing them is smiling at the times we had together—and it makes me appreciate even more those loved ones who are still next to me.

We are pretty cool bunch, you know. We’ve been through a lot. We’ve shared, we’ve cried. We’ve gotten horribly angry with each other; we’ve reconciled. We have lived.

But through it all, we’re still working on a book, a paper. Thinking of that amazing student. And I am looking forward to this summer when I can start my next book in earnest...to have a pen and a blank sheet of paper, where anything can happen.

It means so much to me, this work I do, this life I live, this family I love.

I look at you, talking about all these expectations you have, but when I see you, there is so much I expect, as well. It’s not my place to burden you with them, but I will say that I am so very happy with what I see.
This was one of the most difficult speeches I have ever had to write. In light of bigotry and intolerance masquerading as religious freedom. In light of the Baltimore, continued inequities in this country based on skin color. In light of 147 of our academic siblings in Kenya, college students just like you, who will never be part of a graduation, Lavender, or otherwise.

So part of me wants to protect you, to keep you safe—but I am instead smiling, holding back maybe a few tears, seeing you go out into this world. Because you are strong. I know you are already protecting yourselves better than I ever could, and will probably one day even protect me.

So just remember, eat your vegetables. Wear your sweaters when it is cold outside. Trust your judgment and don't do things you know are wrong. Get plenty of sleep and try not to work too hard. (But you better not party too hard, either!)

And remember, patience, all. Patience. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Don't expect it all at once. Keep your bearings. Do your best. It will be amazing. That you can expect.
I will end by appropriating the words of a certain rich white, sexually very confused poet—whom, in honor of all those beautiful queer voices and voices of color who died nameless, I will not name either.

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same, 10

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Those of you here, you amazing Lavender grads of 2015. For taking the road less traveled by, I salute you, honor you, and look forward with all my heart to all the differences that your travels shall make!