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# ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES



## MERYL STREEP

### STAND UP AND SPEAK UP

<https://youtu.be/PwQrtzi8ozc>

When I was a little girl growing up in middle-class New Jersey, my entire artistic life was curated by people who lived in the straight jacket of a very conformist suburban life. In the late '50s and early '60s, all the houses in my neighborhood were the same size. In the developments, they even were the same shape and color and style. And in the schools, your job was to put pennies in your loafers and look the same as everybody else and act the same way as everybody else. Standing out, being different was like drawing a target on your forehead. And you had to have a special kind of courage to do it. And some of my teachers were obliged to live their whole lives hidden, covertly. But my sixth and seventh grade music teacher, Paul Grossman, was one of the bravest people I knew. Because later, when I was in graduate school, I read that he had transitioned and become one of the first transgender women in the country. And after the operation, she reported back as Paula Grossman. To our middle school in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, where she had taught for 30 years, and she was promptly fired.

But she pursued her case for wrongful dismissal and back pay through the courts for seven years, all the way to the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, her case was not accepted, and she lost, but she won her pension under a Disability Allowance settlement, although she was disabled only by the small minds of the school board. She was a garrulous, cantankerous, terrific teacher, and she never taught again. But her case set the stage for many discrimination cases that followed. She and her wife raised their three girls. She worked as a town planner, and she had an act playing piano and singing in cocktail lounges around New Jersey. But I remember her as Mr. Grossman, and I remember when he took us on a field trip to the Statue of Liberty in 1961. And our whole class stood at the feet of that huge, beautiful woman and sang a song he had taught us, that was taken from the lyrics, the lyrics were taken from the poem by Emma Lazarus engraved at the base of the monument.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

I can't remember what I did Tuesday, but I remember...I remember that song Mr. Grossman chose to teach us. It stirred my 11-year-old heart then, and it animates my conscience today. That's what great teachers do. She died in 2003, God rest her soul.

Okay, here's my theory. I'm going to go very fast, so have to stay with me, OK? Human life has been organized in a certain way. The hierarchy set, who's in charge, who makes the laws and who enforces the laws, pretty much the same way for 40,000 years. Yeah, I know, I know. There were some small number of matrilineal cultures and some outliers who were more tolerant to differences, very true; but pretty much and so-called democracies, the great democracy of Greece, where women and slaves were excluded. Pretty much through our history, might made right and the biggest and the richest and the baddest were the best. And the man, pretty much always was a man.

But suddenly, at one point in the 20th century, for reasons I can't possibly enumerate in the two minutes that I have left, something did change. The clouds parted and women began to be regarded, if not as equal, but as deserving of equal rights. It's true. It was a first. Men and women of color demanded their equal rights. People of sexual orientation and gender identification outside the status quo also demanded their equal regard under the law. So did people with disabilities. We all won rights that had already been granted us in the Constitution 200 years before in theory. But the courts and society finally caught up and recognized our claims. And amazingly, and, in the terms of the whole human history, blazingly fast, culture seemed to have shifted. All the old hierarchies and entitlements seemed to be on shaky ground which brings us to now.

Here we are in 2017 and our browser seems to have gone down. And we are in danger of losing all our information. And we seem to be reverting to the factory settings. But we're not. We're not going to go back to the bad old days of ignorance and oppression and hiding who we are because we owe it to the people who have died for our rights and who died before they got their own. And we owe it to the pioneers of the LGBTQ movement, like Paula Grossman, and to the people on the frontlines of all civil rights movements not to let them down. I am the most overrated and most overdecorated and currently, currently, I am the most over berated actress, who likes football, of my generation. But that is why you invited me here! Right?

Okay. The weight, the weight of all my honors is part of what brings me here to the podium. It compels me. It's against every one of my natural instincts, which is to stay the f\*ck home. It compels me to stand up in front of people and say words that haven't been written for me, but that come from my life, my conviction and that I have to stand by because it's hard to stand up. It's hard. I don't want to do it. I don't want to be here. I want to be home and I want to read and garden and load my dishwasher. I do. I love that. It's embarrassing and terrifying to put the target on your forehead. And it sets you up for all sorts of attacks and armies of brownshirts and bots and worse. And the only way you can do it is to feel you have to. You have to. You don't have an option. You have to stand up, speak up, act up!

Thank you. You are. You are it! You are it!

And when I load my dishwasher from where I live in New York City, I can look out my window and I see the Statue of Liberty. And she reminds me of Mr. Grossman and the first trip there and all my great grandparents who came through and passed by that poem. Many of them fled religious, religious intolerance in the old world and we Americans have the right to reject the imposition of unwanted religious practice in our lives. We have the right to live our lives, with God or without her, as we choose. There's a prohibition in this country against the establishment of state religion in our Constitution, and we have the right to choose with whom we live, whom we love and who and what gets to interfere with our bodies. As Americans, men, women, people, gay, straight, LGBTQ, all of us have the human right to

life and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And if you think people were mad when they thought the government was coming after their guns, wait until you see they try to take away our happiness!

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