



ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG SUBTITLES



GLENN CLOSE

BE KIND

https://youtu.be/4_3qH9QZCz0

When I graduated, 45 years ago, I was the first woman in my family to earn a college degree. My mother never finished high school. She got married at 18 and had her first child two years later. Neither of my grandmothers, or great-grandmothers, went to college. In their society, at the time, it just wasn't done. My paternal grandmother, however, did run away from Texas and worked in a bank in order to put her sister through college. My two sisters never went to college. So being here today has an extra special significance for me.

I just want to mention briefly why I happened to end up at William & Mary. I won't go into the complexities of the story, but suffice it to say that the first time I saw this campus was in the late 60's when I sprinted off the girls' bus, in my cheery travel uniform, as a member of a singing group for which I wrote songs and performed for five years after high school. The show was the offshoot of a cult-like group that my parents fell prey to when I was 7-years-old. Once off the bus, we enthusiastically set up our mics and speakers in the old Student Rec Center on Dog Street, and proceeded to sing our hearts out for whatever students paused to listen.

As I sang the simplistic songs and did the regimented choreography, I studied the students who were lounging on the furniture or leaning against the walls and there came a moment when I knew that I had to somehow leave the group and come get my education here. And you want to know why? It was because, almost to a person, they were looking at us like this ... as if they were thinking — "Really?" That's what I'd been secretly feeling for a long, long time, but I hadn't had the courage to face it and do something about it. "Really? Is this who I really am?"

Somehow, in spite of my ignorance, I sensed that on this campus, I would find kindred souls. So eventually, against their wishes, and with no encouragement, whatsoever, I left the group and, 49 years ago, I entered The College of William & Mary in Virginia, a 22 year-old clueless freshman, with an essentially empty toolbox and a passionate determination to get a liberal arts education and become an actress. That fateful September, I walked into Phi Beta Kappa Hall and auditioned for the first play being staged that season — Twelfth Night. Professor Howard Scammon, head of the Theater Department, cast me in one of the principal roles: Olivia. He eventually understood the seriousness of my intent and was my mentor for the four years I was here. Meanwhile, I soaked up everything I could learn and, like a desert when the rains come, for the first time in my life I started to bloom. The rest is history.

I wanted to tell you about why I ended up here because I have learned how important it is to have a healthy dose of skepticism. I don't mean cynicism or contempt, I mean the crucial ability to question and assess — from a dispassionate, objective point of view — whatever beliefs or tribes you eventually choose to



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espouse. It doesn't come to me naturally. I had been raised to be a total believer, to not question. But for me, coming into this ideas-rich community, having had all my beliefs and behaviors dictated to me from the age of 7, it was vital that I learn how to question. You have a much harder time of it now than I ever had. When I graduated, there was no Internet. You wrote your papers on typewriters! There was no Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. I didn't have the added, enormous pressure of social media against which to develop as an adult. I think my mind would have exploded. I didn't have that insistent, seductive noise in my pocket and at my fingertips. Even now, I try to question, but how do I maintain my individuality without thinking that I am somehow not relevant, not hip enough, rich enough, not posting enough, that I don't have enough followers?

What each of you have, and what you must believe in from this day forward, is your inherent uniqueness. Your singular point of view. No one looks out onto the world through your eyes. Your perspective is unique. It's important and it counts. Try not to compare it to anyone else. Accept it. Believe in it. Nurture it. Stay fiercely, joyously connected to the friends you have made here, to those you love and trust. You will have each other's backs for the rest of your lives.

I wish I were funny like Robin Williams. I wish I could make you laugh so hard you'd fall off your chairs. I'm not wise. I have had the lucky chance to learn by doing. After being in my profession for 45 years, though, I have learned a few things that I want to briefly share with you today.

In order to inhabit a character I have had to find where we share a common humanity. I can't do characters justice if I am judging them. I have to find a way to love them. The exploration into each character I play has made me a more tolerant and empathetic person. I have had to literally imagine myself in someone else's shoes, looking out of someone else's eyes. I urge you to learn how to do that. You can with practice. Start by being curious about the "whys" of someone's behavior. Before you judge someone, before you write them off, take the time to put yourself in their shoes and see how it feels.

I have been a part of collaborative companies of actors and directors for 45 years. Companies are like living organisms, extremely sensitive to the chemistry, to the contributions of all those involved. When I was in a Broadway musical early in my career, my dressing room was right next to the stage door. I wasn't the star, but I was a co-star and I was working my ass off every night to squeeze all there was to squeeze out of what was a pretty thankless role. It was hard work. The play was a big hit, which was fabulous, but every performance I would empty myself out, emotionally and physically, onstage and every night I could hear the producers come in the Stage Door and pass by my dressing room, on their way up to schmooze the star. It really hurt that they never knocked on my door, not to schmooze or hang out, but to simply say thank you for the hard work — eight shows a week — for which they were reaping huge benefits.

I remember that hurt and because of it, when I am the member of a company, especially if I am leading that company, I am careful to notice everyone on the team, learn about what they do and thank them. People like the craft-service guy on a movie set, who gets up earlier than everyone else and leaves the set after everyone else, who hauls heavy urns of coffee and food from location to location, rain or shine. To be aware of and to sincerely appreciate the contributions of everyone on a team makes a palpable difference.



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Then there is kindness. My nephew, Calen, lives with schizophrenia. He had his first psychotic break when he was 17. My sister, Jessie, Calen's mom, lives with bipolar disorder. Ten years ago, we founded an organization called Bring Change to Mind to fight against the stigma around mental illness because they found that stigma is as hard — sometimes harder — than the diseases themselves. We decided to talk about mental illness and stigma on a national platform. Jessie and Calen were inconceivably courageous, because 10 years ago, not many people were talking about it.

The fact is that, conservatively, one in six of us in this room is touched in some way by mental illness. It makes absolutely no sense to me that we don't talk about it like any other chronic illness. Starting the conversation is the first step. Two days ago, I was with Calen, in front of 2,000 people, listening to him talk about living with something as scary as schizophrenia. I am astounded by how he has willed himself to manage his illness. He spoke, albeit sometimes hesitantly, searching for words without losing his train of thought, talking with grace and knowledge. Someone from the audience asked him what they should do when confronted with someone who is struggling with mental health issues and Calen simply said, "Be kind."

Kindness. It's a simple word, but it is essential if we are to survive as a species on this planet. So I come to another thing I've learned. I learned, from reading the writings of the great Edward O. Wilson, that one of the core reasons we have been so successful as a species is that we evolved the capacity to empathize. That means that the tribes who espoused empathy were more successful at survival than the ones who didn't. In order for the community, the tribe, to survive and thrive, we humans had to evolve the ability to register the emotions, the plight, the fears and the needs of other members of our tribe and to respond to them with empathy. We die without connection. Nothing is worse for us humans than to be bereft of community. Empathy evolved because two eyes looked into two eyes. It's the most immediate and powerful way we humans communicate. Empathy evolved because we looked at each other, face to face, not on a screen. Studies have shown that the farther away we get from two eyes looking into two eyes, the harder it is to empathize. What I have learned is that if we are to remain a free and viable society, we need to spend less time looking at screens and more time looking into each other's eyes.

To end, I thought I'd share with you bits of a letter that somehow got to me from an old William & Mary friend. I wrote it to him 42 years ago, when I had been out in the world for three years. Reading it from where I am now in my life and in my career was quite moving. I wrote:

My mind has been all over the place because of a very erratic rehearsal schedule. I did get the part of Estelle in The Rose Tattoo and am right now of the frame of mind that I should never have taken it. The scene is over before it starts. There is no time to really make any kind of statement. ... any kind of progression. So one has to enter as a totally interesting and real person, be on for five minutes and leave. I really hate it, but I suppose it's a good exercise of sorts. I'm just at the despairing stage and am feeling totally untalented. ... Oh, well.

To maintain any semblance of wit and equilibrium seems to be a major feat. As life unfolds before me, I have more and more respect for anyone who survives and prevails. Just to endure is impressive enough, but to endure and to triumph — on your own terms — is the feat of a lifetime. Everyone needs so much



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gentleness and love. I don't mean that idealistically; I mean it as a major means of survival. There is just too much working against sanity and civilization. ... from within ourselves, to the differences between people and sexes ... to the whole human comedy. Gentleness and love. I can forget so easily, but it's always a great comfort to come back to.

I'm going to cook a hamburger and some zucchini.

Thank you.