

Thank you for that lovely intro, Nancy. I'm Gayle Abrams, and I'm really happy to be here with you today, and to support this amazing cause.

So-- a few years ago, I was at my daughter's bat mitzvah.
And I had invited my father's ex--girlfriend to attend.
Let's call her Carla.
My father hadn't been together with Carla for many years,
But I had always really liked her, so I invited her.
Anyway, my dad came up to me, and he said: Wow. I just saw Carla.
She looks TERRIBLE.
And I turned to him and I said: "Have YOU looked in a mirror lately?"

Well he laughed really hard at that...which felt good.
Because I've always wanted to make my dad laugh.
You see in my house growing up, he had all the power.
So when I was a kid, and for a long time after that, I worked very hard to please him
and be the kind of person he'd approve of.

I got A's in school. Sometimes I had to cheat to get them.
But it was worth it so he would think I was smart.
I built up a hard shell-- and tried not to need anyone-- because he thought people
who needed other people were weak, and I didn't want to be weak.
I worried a lot about my weight. My father only liked people who were thin.
He was disdainful of anyone who was fat.
And as I mentioned, I learned to be sarcastic and to land a joke.

So really I had good training for being a writer in TV, because a big part of the job
when you are on the staff of a tv show is shape shifting.
You have to write in someone else's voice, and see the world the way they see it, and
please the showrunner and be someone they want to be around.
You have to be good at not being yourself.

So the way I adapted to what my dad wanted me to be when I was young, is the way
I turned myself into the kind of person each showrunner wanted me to be.

When I worked for Gary David Goldberg, creator of Brooklyn Bridge and Family
Ties, I played up my Jewish side and wrote scenes about deep emotions and became
a big proponent of hugs.
When I worked for Frasier, I played up my intellectual side, ordered a subscription
to the New Yorker and became deeply uncomfortable with hugs.

When I worked on Rodney, I started speaking slowly and saying southern things like
y'all.
When I worked on Gilmore Girls, my mouth became a fountain full of cultural
references and I've never spoken so fast.

But just as significant as what I had to DO and SAY and BE to please each showrunner
Was what I had to make sure I DIDN'T do and DIDN'T say.

What do I mean?

Well, I've worked on sixteen shows in my career. And out of those sixteen, only two of them had a show runner who was not a straight, white male. Two shows out of sixteen. And so I knew I had to be careful to be the kind of woman men want to be around.

To me that meant being non-threatening. So early on, I developed the habit of prefacing everything I said with some sort of self-deprecating disclaimer, like "this is probably wrong" or "this is probably terrible."
By the way, most of the time I knew what I was going to say—was actually pretty terrific.

It also meant taking care of my appearance. So I went on diets, I exercised regularly. I did those things for myself, yes, because I cared about how I looked and also about my health and wellbeing. I mean, who doesn't want to look good?
But I also knew it would make things easier.

There is a certain stereotype about the type of guy who becomes a comedy writer. Basically he had to learn to be funny if he was ever going to get a date for the prom. But it's different for women. If you are overweight or don't do your hair or make up, it can be perceived as a sign you don't really care what men think about you -- and that's threatening.

So I gave a lot of thought to my looks over the years. And even after a very late night rewrite, when all the guys would come straggling in the next day unkempt and unshaven, I would dress nice and wash my hair and shave under my armpits--

"Ahhh!" I imagine my male colleagues yelling. "Don't tell us about the hair under your armpits! We don't want to think about that kind of stuff. Women's bodies are hairless. They don't need to shave or wax or get lasered. They're perfect!"

Which brings me to another unspoken rule...If you want to survive as a woman on a comedy staff, you have to keep a lot of personal information to yourself.

What kind of information? Like that women go to the bathroom. That they fart. That they have bladder infections, vaginal yeast. That they bleed. "Stop!!" "Shhhh!!"
"Please!!!" The men cry out! They cover their ears! "I can't hear you.
LALALALALALA. Never mention those words again."

And since I wanted to keep working in the TV business, I didn't.

But it wasn't just physical things I learned to keep under wraps. I also suppressed my feelings. My truths.

Like over and over, when we were figuring out the stories in the writers' room, I'd hear guys say that men and women are different. Women are natural caregivers, happy to stay in and tend to the home, while men need to go out and provide. This did not ring true to my experience. My husband was much more intuitive about taking care of our children when they were little than I ever was. But I could see that the men I worked with needed to believe their wives were happy and fulfilled putting their own careers on hold to oversee the household. It justified their own neglect. And that's just one example.

Over the years I suppressed many of my thoughts and ideas, out of fear I would offend, put off or just outright bore my male colleagues. That was on top of thinking about how I looked, what I wore, and what I projected. I was careful to flatter and flirt...in appropriate amounts, and also to never be the thing men really hated: an angry woman! That was a part of myself I rarely let out of its cage.

Then I got a deal to write my own TV show. This was around 2003.

At this time, there had been a string of shows on-- that all basically fit a certain model. We used to call them: Fat guy, beautiful wife.

Courtney Thorne Smith was married to Jim Belushi on *According to Jim*.

Leah Remini was married to Kevin James on *King of Queens*.

Meghan Price was married to Donal Logue on *Grounded for Life*.

There was a show called *Still Standing* where Jamie Gertz was married to a fat British actor named Mark Addy.

Marge was married to Homer on *the Simpsons*

Lois was married to Peter on *Family Guy*.

Can any of you even THINK of a show where there was a fat woman with a really hot husband?

Seriously try

Keep thinking

Try harder

Didn't think so.

Anyway, that year there was a woman president at ABC. Her name was Susan Lyne, and she wanted a show for Jessica Simpson.

I don't know if you've ever seen the movie *Broadcast News*— but William Hurt plays the anchor of a news show who's really good looking -- but really dumb -- and Holly Hunter is this super brainy news producer who's frustrated because she has to work with someone so unqualified.

Well I pitched a show, which was basically *Broadcast News*-- only the William Hurt character from the movie- is played by Jessica Simpson.

I based the character off Jessica's real life persona, like in the show she got on the wrong plane because she didn't know Vegas was really LAS Vegas --and that kind of thing.

So my show was about sexism-- because Jessica Simpson's character is not qualified to be an on air correspondent on a news show. -- but she's hired for the job, and the Holly Hunter producer character has to work with her, because all the men in the office want to have sex with her.

It was actually a good idea. And Jessica Simpson was funny and really easy to work with. But unfortunately the situation was torture for me.

Because when you've spent your whole life trying to please other people and write what they want you to write and BE what they want you to be
And when all your bosses up until this point have been guys –
so you've gotten REALLY USED TO SUPPRESSING ALL YOUR STORIES
And you don't even know anymore how you as a woman ACTUALLY FEEL—
it's very hard to suddenly trust your own point of view --or even know what it is.

But-- it ended up not mattering. I made the pilot, and I was in the process of editing it when Susan Lyne got fired. I actually ran into her that day – at lunch at a SUSHI restaurant down the street from the studio...and she said: it's been great working with you, gayle – let me know how the show turns out.

"Sure-- I'll send it to you." I told her, my voice growing weak and pained. Because of course, I knew at that moment, the pilot was dead.

Abc hired a guy named Steve McPherson to replace Susan at the network. He actually went on to be President for the next 6 years. I was told Steve didn't like Jessica because she wouldn't flirt with him. I don't know if that's true. But, he didn't pick up the pilot. Instead he picked up a show called Rodney, which was written by a friend of mine – And as I mentioned earlier I did end up working on it-- so I won't dis it.

But I will just point out that Rodney was a fat guy with—you guessed it. A beautiful wife.

And I will also point out that Steve McPherson was forced out of ABC not that long ago because of multiple sexual harassment allegations against him.

Anyway, after the Jessica debacle, I did try to write a show from my own point of view a few other times.

There was a pilot called Mean Moms where a woman lawyer becomes a stay at home mom when she and her husband move out to Malibu,

because you can get a bigger house for your money and they have a great public school system. This is a person who has navigated Harvard Law School and the LA Criminal Courts, yet she is totally intimidated by the women who run the School PTA. I made sure to write in a lot of really attractive women characters in bathing suits so the guys, and especially Steve McPherson, would want to watch, but that show didn't get picked up either.

Then I wrote a different show about a woman lawyer. I guess in another life I thought I should be a lawyer. She's married with young kids and every day feels like a marathon, and she starts to fantasize about having an affair. It was the kind of show guys make about themselves all the time. About a character who struggles with growing up and taking responsibility for their actions. How they're drowning under the pressure to make a living and support a family. How they love their spouse and kids but long to run away. And it scared the shit out of people. That's not how women feel, I was told. They LIKE making dinner every night and taking care of people 24-7. They DON'T WANT to have affairs. I felt ashamed I had even WRITTEN in the first place.

So I continued to work on other people's shows and to write stories from their points of view and to turn myself into the kind of woman they wanted to be around.

I worked on a show about a guy who's an author

I worked on a show about a guy who doesn't know how to parent his teenage daughters.

I worked on a show about a guy without a belly button.

The last STAFF job I had was from 2012 to 2014, when I wrote for a TV Land show called "The Soul Man." Cedric the Entertainer played a former R & B superstar who has become a minister. When he gets the calling to go from soul singer to soul saver, he moves from Las Vegas to St. Louis with his wife, who was played by NIECY Nash – which is funny to me now, when I think about it –because, of course, it was another fat guy with a beautiful wife.

When my friend asked me if I wanted come to work on the show with him, I hesitated. I did want a job and it's always great to make a salary and the show filmed at a studio that was literally down the street from my house, so I certainly couldn't complain about the commute.

But I just didn't know if I could write the character's voices:

They were a black family living in the Midwest. And the guy was a reverend. You know, like In a church. And the characters had very traditional positions on gender.

But I took the job. And I studied the episodes they had made so far -- and I worked hard to channel Cedric's point of view. But I struggled. I didn't get the references people would make, and I didn't want to write any scripts. Honestly, I was sick of writing from someone else's point of view. The constant shape shifting. I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. Or maybe I just didn't want to.

At this same time, one of my best friends, a woman named Barb Burg, was battling cancer. Barb was the first friend I had made as an adult. We had met at our first jobs out of college, working in the publicity department of Bantam Books.

And over the years we had stayed close even though she lived in New York and I lived in L.A., because we were always going through the same things it seemed, and we saw life the same way.

In fact, she would always joke that we had the same life just on opposite coasts.

So Barb had cancer and she was undergoing chemo therapy and radiation and laser surgery on her brain—while I was trying to write stories about funny things that could happen to a former R & B singer who is now the reverend at a church. And it all started to feel pretty absurd.

And the thing is—I had never actually wanted to write TV in the first place. What I'd really wanted was to be a novelist. That's why I had gone to work in publishing in my twenties and met Barb in the first place. But I'd never had the courage to try.

So in between seasons of the show, I started writing a novel about my friendship with Barb. It was called the same life on opposite coasts.

WRITING THE BOOK WAS REALLY DIFFICULT – WHICH MAKES SENSE IN RETROSPECT BECAUSE I HAD NEVER ACTUALLY WRITTEN SOMETHING COMPLETELY IN MY OWN VOICE. IT WAS COUNTER INTUITIVE FOR ME.

Over the years I had tried to SUPPRESS my voice. I had literally censored myself every day, all the time. Really for as long as I could remember.

Now -- coaxing it out

And not deleting everything I wrote was a form of agony.

I worried that if I wrote my truth people might be angry with me.

I would lose my friends.

I wouldn't be loved.

But I told myself : you're just writing it for you. Nobody else has to see it. Just keep at it.

I think I thought by writing about my life, I would understand it better—but also, like I said, I'd always wanted to write a novel, and I felt like I had the skills to do it now, at least in a way I didn't have when I was young.

I knew I could get to the end of something-- so I was determined to do that. Get to the end. Not give up. That's why I was writing my book, as a gift to myself....

Of course I didn't know when I started writing the story that Barb would die.

That was April 29th, 2014, just about four years ago. I was 50 years old.

After she died, my reasons for writing the book changed. Yes, I still wanted to write a novel – to finish – more than ever, because I knew not to take my life for granted any more....and I also knew if I died tomorrow, I would want to leave a finished book. I would want to get to the end of that, more than I would want to get a TV show on the air -- or make a big stash of money or please some random boss...or anything. It was THAT important to me.

Finishing the book took on this vital importance both because I needed to prove to myself I could do it, but also, because what I realized-- once I started to read it back to myself— was that I was creating a memory of Barb. If I got her essence on the page, I would always have her with me. Her life had mattered SO MUCH to mine. And I didn't want to forget her.

Her death made it clear to me that my time here was short.
I needed to write what I wanted to write.
And be who I wanted to be.
I know she would want that.
That was her gift to me.

So the book is currently titled Same Life, Opposite Coasts. I've finished writing it, and I've been sending it out, trying to get an agent. I don't know what will happen with it yet. But I do hope you'll see it on bookshelves soon.

But-- Whether it becomes a New York Times Bestseller or nobody reads it—
It doesn't really matter.
Because for me, writing it is just the beginning
And soon I'll be working on my next book,

which I guess, if I'm trying to write in my own voice now--
will be a lot about night sweats. And hormonal acne. And how I can't even drink a sip of wine now without getting a headache— and how I hurt my back reaching for a sponge under the sink,
and how I've managed to develop a chronic eyelid condition that is sort of like dandruff of the lashes, which the eye doctor explained comes from dryness.
In fact, as he was examining my eyes, he actually exclaimed: "Oh wow! That's so cool! I can see them drying up right now."

So...yeah. all the fun that comes with growing older—
But also the wisdom.
You know, people always say "Just be Yourself"
But in my career - that always seemed really wrong to me
And truly FOR WOMEN I don't think that was the path to success.
But now I sincerely hope that's changing. For my daughter, who's here today--
And for all of our girls. Our daughters, our granddaughters
I hope you can be yourself.