

## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Oberlin College, May 29, 1989

I congratulate you all on this moment of your lives. Most people don't remember their commencement addresses. Next year, when someone asks you who spoke at graduation, I wonder what you will say. I remember she was a middle-aged Black woman. I remember she had a nice voice. I remember she was a poet. But what did she say? After all, there are no new ideas. Only new ways of making those ideas real and active through our lives. What you most of all do not need right now is more rhetoric. What you need are facts you don't ordinarily get to help you fashion weapons that matter for the war in which we are all engaged. A war for survival in the twenty-first century, the survival of this planet and all this planet's people.

Thanks to Jesse Jackson (Poem)

The US and the USSR  
are the most powerful countries in the world  
but only 1/8 of the world's population  
African people are also 1/8 of the world's population.  
1/2 of the world's population is Asian.  
1/2 of that number is Chinese.  
There are 22 nations in the Middle East.  
Not three.

Most people in the world  
are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female  
Non-Christian  
and do not speak english.

By the year 2000  
the 20 largest cities in the world  
will have two things in common  
none of them will be in Europe  
and none in the United States.

You are all so very beautiful. But I have seen special and beautiful before, and I ask myself where are they now? What makes you different? Well, to begin with, you are different because you have asked me to come and speak with you from my heart, on what is a very special day for each of you. So when they ask you, who spoke at your commencement, remember this: I am a Black feminist lesbian warrior poet doing my work, and a piece of my work is asking you, how are you doing yours? And when they ask you, what did she say, tell them I asked you the most fundamental question of your life—who are you, and how are you using the powers of that self in the service of what you believe?

You are inheriting a country that has grown hysterical with denial and contradiction. Last month in space five men released a satellite that is on its way to the planet Venus, and the infant mortality rate in the capital of this nation is higher than in Kuwait. We are citizens of the most powerful country on earth—we are also citizens of a country that stands upon the wrong side of every liberation struggle on earth. Feel what that means. It is a reality that haunts each of our lives and that can help inform our dreams. It's not about altruism, it's about self-preservation. Survival.

A twenty-eight-year-old white woman is beaten and raped in Central Park. Eight Black boys are arrested and accused of taking part in a rampage against joggers. That is a nightmare that affects each of our lives. I pray for the body and soul of every one of these young people trapped in this compound tragedy of violence and social reprisal. None of us escapes the brutalization of the other. Using who we are, testifying with our lives to what we believe is not altruism, it is a question of self-preservation. Black children did not declare war upon this system, it is the system which declared war upon Black children, both female and male.

Ricky Boden, eleven, Staten Island, killed by police, 1972. Clifford Glover, ten, Queens, New York, killed by police, 1975. Randy Evans, fourteen, Bronx, New York, killed by police, 1976. Andre Roland, seventh grader, found hanged in Columbia, Missouri, after being threatened for dating a white girl. The list goes on. You are strong and intelligent. Your beauty and your promise lie like a haze over your faces. I beg you, do not waste it. Translate that power and beauty into action wherever you find yourself to be, or you will participate in your own destruction.

I have no platitudes for you. Before most of you are thirty, 10 percent of you will be involved with space traffic and 10 percent of you will have contracted AIDS. This disease which may yet rival the plague of the Dark Ages is said to have originated in Africa, spontaneously and inexplicably jumping from the green monkey to man. Yet in 1969, twenty years ago, a book entitled *A Survey of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, written by John Cookson and Judith Nottingham, published by Monthly Review Press, discussed green monkey disease as a fatal blood, tissue, and venereally transmitted virus which is an example of a whole new class of disease-causing organisms, and of biological warfare interest. It also discussed the possibilities of this virus being genetically manipulated to produce “new” organisms.

But I do have hope. To face the realities of our lives is not a reason for despair—despair is a tool of your enemies. Facing the realities of our lives gives us motivation for action. For you are not powerless. This diploma is a piece of your power. You know why the hard questions must be asked. It is not altruism, it is self-preservation—survival.

Each one of us in this room is privileged. You have a bed, and you do not go to it hungry. We are not part of those millions of homeless people roaming America today. Your privilege is not a reason for guilt, it is part of your power, to be used in support of those things you say you believe. Because to absorb without use is the gravest error of privilege. The poorest one-fifth of this nation became 7 percent poorer in the last ten years, and the richest one-fifth of the nation became 11 percent richer. How much of your lives are you willing to spend merely protecting your privileged status? Is that more than you are prepared to spend putting your

dreams and beliefs for a better world into action? That is what creativity and empowerment [are] all about. The rest is destruction. And it will have to be one or the other.

It is not enough to believe in justice. The median income for Black and Hispanic families has fallen in the last three years, while the median income of white families rose 1.5 percent. We are eleven years away from a new century, and a leader of the Ku Klux Klan can still be elected to Congress from the Republican party in Louisiana. Little fourteen-year-old Black boys in the seventh grade are still being lynched for dating a white girl. It is not enough to say we are against racism.

It is not enough to believe in everyone’s right to her or his own sexual preference. Homophobic jokes are not just fraternity high jinks. Gay bashing is not just fooling around. Less than a year ago a white man shot two white women in their campsite in Pennsylvania, killing one of them. He pleaded innocent, saying he had been maddened by their making love inside their own tent. If you were sitting on that jury, what would you decide?

It is not enough to believe anti-Semitism is wrong, when the vandalism of synagogues is increasing, amid the homegrown fascism of hate groups like the Christian Identity and Tom Metzger’s American Front. The current rise in jokes against Jewish women masks anti-Semitism as well as women hatred. What are you going to say the next time you hear a JAP story?

We do not need to become each other in order to work together. But we do need to recognize each other, our differences as well as the sameness of our goals. Not for altruism. For self-preservation—survival.

Every day of your lives is practice in becoming the person you want to be. No instantaneous miracle is suddenly going to occur and make you brave and courageous and true. And every day that you sit back silent, refusing to use your power, terrible things are being done in our name.

Our federal taxes contribute \$3 billion yearly in military and economic aid to Israel. Over \$200 million of that money is spent fighting the uprising of Palestinian people who are trying to end the military occupation of their homeland. Israeli soldiers fire tear gas canisters made in America into Palestinian homes and hospitals, killing babies, the sick,

and the elderly. Thousands of Palestinians, some as young as twelve, are being detained without trial in barbed-wired detention camps, and even many Jews of conscience opposing these acts have also been arrested and detained.

Encouraging your congresspeople to press for a peaceful solution in the Middle East, and for recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people, is not altruism, it is survival.

In particular, my sisters and brothers, I urge you to remember, while we battle the many faces of racism in our daily lives as African Americans, that we are part of an international community of people of Color, and people of the African diaspora around the world are looking to us and asking, how are we using the power we have? Or are we allowing our power to be used against them, our brothers and sisters in struggle for their liberation?

Apartheid is a disease spreading out from South Africa across the whole southern tip of Africa. This genocidal system in South Africa is kept propped into place by the military and economic support of the U.S., Israel, and Japan. Let me say here that I support the existence of the state of Israel as I support the existence of the U.S.A., but this does not blind me to the grave injustices emanating from either. Israel and South Africa are intimately entwined, politically and economically. There are no diamonds in Israel, yet diamonds are Israel's major source of income. Meanwhile, Black people slave in the diamond mines of South Africa for less than thirty cents a day.

It is not enough to say we are against apartheid. Forty million of our tax dollars go as aid to the South Africa-backed UNITA forces to suppress an independent Angola. Our dollars pay for the land mines responsible for over 50,000 Angolan amputees. It appears that Washington is joining hands with South Africa to prevent [the] independence of Namibia. Now make no mistake. South Africa, Angola, Namibia will be free. But what will we say when our children ask us, what were you doing, mommy and daddy, while american-made bullets were murdering Black children in Soweto?

In this country, children of all colors are dying of neglect. Since 1980, poverty has increased 30 percent among white children in america. Fifty

percent of African American children and 30 percent of Latino children grow up in poverty, and that percentage is even higher for the indigenous people of this land, American Indians. While the *Magellan* capsule speeds through space toward the planet Venus, thirty children on this planet earth die every minute from hunger and inadequate health care. And in each one of those minutes, \$1,700,000 are spent on war.

The white fathers have told us: "I think, therefore I am." But the Black mother within each one of us—the poet inside—whispers in our dreams: "I feel, therefore I can be free." Learn to use what you feel to move you toward action. Change, personal and political, does not come about in a day, nor a year. But it is our day-to-day decisions, the way in which we testify with our lives to those things in which we say we believe, that empower us. Your power is relative, but it is real. And if you do not learn to use it, it will be used, against you, and me, and our children. Change did not begin with you, and it will not end with you, but what you do with your life is an absolutely vital piece of that chain. The testimony of your daily living is the missing remnant in the fabric of our future.

There are so many different parts to each of us. And there are so many of us. If we can envision the future we desire, we can work to bring it into being. We need all the different pieces of ourselves to be strong, as we need each other and each other's battles for empowerment.

That surge of power you feel inside you now does not belong to me, nor to your parents, nor to your professors. That power lives inside of you. It is yours, you own it, and you will carry it out of this room. And whether you use it or whether you waste it, you are responsible for it. Good luck to you all. Together, in the conscious recognition of our differences, we can win, and we will. *A LUTA CONTINUA* [The struggle continues].