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Commencement Speech at Mount Holyoke College

I LOOK AT ALL OF YOU TODAY and I cannot help but see myself twenty-five years ago, at my own Barnard commencement. I sometimes seem, in my mind, to have as much in common with that girl as I do with any stranger I might pass in the doorway of a Starbucks or in the aisle of an airplane. I cannot remember what she wore or how she felt that day. But I can tell you this about her without question: she was perfect.

Let me be very clear what I mean by that. I mean that I got up every day and tried to be perfect in every possible way. If there was a test to be had, I had studied for it; if there was a paper to be written, it was done. I smiled at everyone in the dorm hallways, because it was important to be friendly, and I made fun of them behind their backs because it was important to be witty. And I worked as a residence counselor and sat on housing council. If anyone had ever stopped and asked me why I did those things—well, I'm not sure what I would have said. But I can tell you, today, that I did them to be perfect, in every possible way.

Being perfect was hard work, and the hell of it was, the rules of it changed. So that while I arrived at college in 1970 with a trunk full of perfect pleated kilts and perfect monogrammed sweaters, by Christmas vacation I had another perfect uniform: overalls, turtlenecks, Doc Martens, and the perfect New York City Barnard College affect—part hyperintellectual, part ennui. This was very hard work indeed. I had read neither Sartre nor Sappho, and the closest I ever came to being bored and above it all was falling asleep. Finally, it was harder to become perfect because I realized, at Barnard, that I was not the smartest girl in the world. Eventually being perfect day after day, year after year, became like always carrying a backpack filled with bricks on my back. And oh, how I secretly longed to lay my burden down.

So what I want to say to you today is this: if this sounds, in any way, familiar to you, if you have been trying to be perfect in one way or another, too, then make today, when for a moment there are no more grades to be gotten, classmates to be met, terrain to be scouted, positioning to be arranged—make today the day to put down the backpack. Trying to be perfect may be sort of inevitable for people like us, who are smart and ambitious and interested in the world and in its good opinion. But at one level it's too hard, and at another, it's too cheap and easy. Because it really requires you mainly to read the zeitgeist of wherever and whenever you happen to be, and to assume the masks necessary

to be the best of whatever the zeitgeist dictates or requires. Those requirements shapeshift, sure, but when you're clever you can read them and do the imitation required.

But nothing important, or meaningful, or beautiful, or interesting, or great ever came out of imitations. The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.

This is more difficult, because there is no zeitgeist to read, no template to follow, no mask to wear. Set aside what your friends expect, what your parents demand, what your acquaintances require. Set aside the messages this culture sends, through its advertising, its entertainment, its disdain and its disapproval, about how you should behave.

Set aside the old traditional notion of female as nurturer and male as leader; set aside, too, the new traditional notions of female as superwoman and male as oppressor. Begin with that most terrifying of all things, a clean slate. Then look, every day, at the choices you are making, and when you ask yourself why you are making them, find this answer: for me, for me. Because they are who and what I am, and mean to be.

This is the hard work of your life in the world, to make it all up as you go along, to acknowledge the introvert, the clown, the artist, the reserved, the distraught, the goofball, the thinker. You will have to bend all your will not to march to the music that all of those great "theys" out there pipe on their flutes. They want you to go to professional school, to wear khakis, to pierce your navel, to bare your soul. These are the fashionable ways. The music is tinny, if you listen close enough. Look inside. That way lies dancing to the melodies spun out by your own heart. This is a symphony. All the rest are jingles.

This will always be your struggle whether you are twenty-one or fifty-one. I know this from experience. When I quit the New York Times to be a full-time mother, the voices of the world said that I was nuts. When I quit it again to be a full-time novelist, they said I was nuts again. But I am not nuts. I am happy. I am successful on my own terms. Because if your success is not on your own terms, if it looks good to the world but does not feel good in your heart, it is not success at all. Remember the words of Lily Tomlin: If you win the rat race, you're still a rat.

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Look at your fingers. Hold them in front of your face. Each one is crowned by an abstract design that is completely different than those of anyone in this crowd, in this country, in this world. They are a metaphor for you. Each of you is as different as your fingerprints. Why in the world should you march to any lockstep?

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The lockstep is easier, but here is why you cannot march to it. Because nothing great or even good ever came of it. When young writers write to me about following in the footsteps of those of us who string together nouns and verbs for a living, I tell them this: every story has already been told. Once you've read Anna Karenina, Bleak House, The Sound and the Fury, To Kill a Mockingbird and A Wrinkle in Time, you understand that there is really no reason to ever write another novel. Except that each writer brings to the table, if she will let herself, something that no one else in the history of time has ever had. And that is herself, her own personality, her own voice. If she is doing Faulkner imitations, she can stay home. If she is giving readers what she thinks they want instead of what she is, she should stop typing.

But if her books reflect her character, who she really is, then she is giving them a new and wonderful gift. Giving it to herself, too.

And that is true of music and art and teaching and medicine. Someone sent me a T-shirt not long ago that read "Well-Behaved Women Don't Make History." They don't make good lawyers, either, or doctors or businesswomen. Imitations are redundant. Yourself is what is wanted.

You already know this. I just need to remind you. Think back. Think back to first or second grade, when you could still hear the sound of your own voice in your head, when you were too young, too unformed, too fantastic to understand that you were supposed to take on the protective coloration of the expectations of those around you. Think of what the writer Catherine Drinker Bowen once wrote, more than half a century ago: "Many a man who has known himself at ten forgets himself utterly between ten and thirty." Many a woman, too.

You are not alone in this. We parents have forgotten our way sometimes, too. I say this as the deeply committed, often flawed mother of three. When you were first born, each of you, our great glory was in thinking you absolutely distinct from every baby who had ever been born before. You were a miracle of singularity, and we knew it in every fiber of our being.

But we are only human, and being a parent is a very difficult job, more difficult than any other, because it requires the shaping of other people, which is an act of extraordinary hubris. Over the years we learned to want for you things that you did not want for yourself. We learned to want the lead in the play, the acceptance to our own college, the straight and narrow path that often leads absolutely nowhere. Sometimes we wanted those things because we were convinced it would make life better, or at least easier for you. Sometimes we had a hard time distinguishing between where you ended and we began.

Remember yourself, from the days when you were younger and rougher and wilder, more scrawl than straight line. Remember all of yourself, the flaws and faults as well as the many strengths.

So that another reason that you must give up on being perfect and take hold of being yourself is because sometime, in the distant future, you may want to be parents, too. If you can bring to your children the self that you truly are, as opposed to some amalgam of manners and mannerisms, expectations and fears that you have acquired as a carapace along the way, you will give them, too, a great gift. You will teach them by example not to be terrorized by the narrow and parsimonious expectations of the world, a world that often likes to color within the lines when a spray of paint, a scrawl of crayon, is what is truly wanted.

Remember yourself, from the days when you were younger and rougher and wilder, more scrawl than straight line. Remember all of yourself, the flaws and faults as well as the many strengths. Carl Jung once said, "If people can be educated to see the lowly side of their own natures, it may be hoped that they will also learn to understand and to love their fellow men better. A little less hypocrisy and a little more tolerance toward oneself can only have good results in respect for our neighbors, for we are all too prone to transfer to our fellows the injustice and violence we inflict upon our own natures."

Most commencement speeches suggest you take up something or other: the challenge of the future, a vision of the twenty-first century. Instead I'd like you to give up. Give up the backpack. Give up the nonsensical and punishing quest for perfection that dogs too many of us through too much of our lives. It is a quest that causes us to doubt and denigrate ourselves, our true selves, our quirks and foibles and great leaps into the unknown, and that is bad enough.

But this is worse: that someday, sometime, you will be somewhere, maybe on a day like today—a berm overlooking a pond in Vermont, the lip of the Grand Canyon at sunset. Maybe something bad will have happened: you will have lost someone you loved, or failed at something you wanted to succeed at very much.

And sitting there, you will fall into the center of yourself. You will look for that core to sustain you. If you have been perfect all your life, and have managed to meet all the expectations of your family, your friends, your community, your society, chances are excellent that there will be a black hole where your core ought to be.

Don't take that chance. Begin to say no to the Greek chorus that thinks it knows the parameters of a happy life when all it knows is the homogenization of human experience. Listen to that small voice from inside you, that tells you to go another way. George Eliot wrote, "It is never too late to be what you might have

been." It is never too early, either. And it will make all the difference in the world. Take it from someone who has left the backpack full of bricks far behind. Every day feels light as a feather.



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