

**Commencement Address, Department of History  
University of California, Berkeley — May 16, 2017**

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(Informal title: “Tenderness”)**

Congratulations, class of 2017. We are pretty sure you are the best class that has ever graduated from this department. And since this is the best department in the best university in the country, we are sure you are the best of the best.

Well, as you’ve gathered from Mark’s very moving introduction, I am not Rachel Maddow or Diane Feinstein or J. K. Rowling. I’m not, in short, someone who has come from afar to speak to you across a distance. We are insiders together here, so I’ve got to talk—as we do in our seminar rooms and offices—with the honest intimacy of old companions.

I’m going to run with this to talk about something basic—our feelings.

They run high at this moment. And they are probably conflicted. I hope you all feel joy and pride and exhilaration. I suspect most of you also feel anxiety and the sorrow of separation. These are solitary feelings. But they’re also communal. Graduation is a uniquely emotional affair—one quite different from a wedding, for example—since it celebrates at once so many special individuals while bringing together so many of us who have been part of your experience and care profoundly about you.

We are your professors and GSIs. We are your families, dear friends and lovers. I am guessing that some of us are your coaches and bosses and other inspiring models.

Flooded with our own thoughts, we are also intensely alert to one another—to tears and laughter, to words both spoken and imagined.

So, in this moment of magical connection, I want to say something about a particularly precious feeling—tenderness. My subject today is tenderness.

Let me lead with a poem composed in Japan over a thousand years ago. It’s written in the voice of a mother addressing her daughter. But it can easily be transposed into the voice of any lover addressing any beloved.

I cherish you, darling child,  
As the god of the seas treasures the pearls in his chest of jewels.  
But you have been torn from me, like a vine, to follow your husband  
To a faraway place.  
Since then, your lovely brows  
Curving like the distant waves  
Linger always in my mind.  
My heart, unsteady as a boat in a storm,  
Is near to breaking with longing.  
If I had foreseen this longing,  
I would have lived with you  
Gazing on you every hour of every day  
As on a shining orb.

The poem is about separation, occasioned here by marriage, although it speaks, I think, to any moment—like graduation—that so disturbs routine that our truest bonds are exposed with a sort of terrifying clarity.

We don't always handle these moments well. They are too big, especially when complicated by too little sleep, too much logistical craziness, and, perhaps in the rare case, too much alcohol followed by too much caffeine. But even short tempers and clumsy gestures signify the caring—the raw tenderness—that unites us almost unbearably when tomorrow is a mystery.

I graduated in 1968 (almost 50 years ago) from Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart. The ceremony was outdoors. It rained. My grandmother was there, my parents, my brother and sisters, a boy named David, teachers I cherished (some I didn't), and classmates I count to this day as my closest friends, although we would never spend more than a night together after departing the campus.

Our emotions, fevered in any case, were much intensified by the turmoil of a time, worth remembering, when we looked to one another for consolation and for hope when hope was hard.

1968, as you all know, was a year of awesome trial. The deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam reached a peak (at over 540,000 men). Shocking developments like the Tet Offensive and the My Lai massacre wrenched apart all complacent narratives about the meaning of that war. And casualties on all sides mounted catastrophically.

Throughout the year, large and fractious movements protested the war in Vietnam as well as bitter violations of human rights. They included the Poor People's March on Washington during May and June. They included the demonstrations, often led by students but joined by complex constituencies, that spread from Columbia University in April across the country and the globe—to Paris, Mexico City, Tokyo, many other locales, and, crucially, Czechoslovakia, where the Prague Spring ended in August with the Soviet invasion of 200,000 soldiers.

Some of the most cathartic events occurred at the party conventions, also in August, when the Republicans nominated Richard Nixon for president in Miami and the Democrats nominated Hubert Humphrey in Chicago (amid impassioned demonstrations and appalling police violence).

But nothing in 1968—or in much of our history—can approach the trauma of the two assassinations. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4; Robert Francis Kennedy was shot in the early morning of June 5 at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. He died the next morning.

What I want to focus on here is not their deaths but their eulogies, and the tenderness that was somehow mustered to meet horror with humanity. Yes, then and throughout the year, there were riots and more killings and consuming rage. There were also voices of miraculous compassion that helped convert the purpose of those lost lives into beacons for the rest of us.

Robert Kennedy himself set the model in impromptu remarks, delivered from a flat-back truck in Indianapolis, soon after he learned of Martin Luther King's killing.

What we need is not hatred but love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward all those who suffer.

During the funeral services in Atlanta on April 9, Benjamin Mays (president emeritus of Morehouse College) described King as:

a man who believed with all his might that the pursuit of violence at any time is ethically and morally wrong; that God and the moral weight of the universe are against it; that violence is self-defeating; and that only love and forgiveness can break the vicious circle of revenge.

The main eulogy came from Martin Luther King himself, by way of a recording of a sermon made earlier in the year.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day . . . [a]nd if you can get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell him not to talk too long . . .

Tell him not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others . . . [t]hat Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.

I want you to say. . . that I tried to be right on the war question . . . that I did try to feed the hungry, . . . to clothe those who were naked, . . . to visit those who were in prison.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice, . . . a drum major for peace . . . And all of the other shallow things will not matter.

Robert Kennedy's funeral service took place at St. Patrick's cathedral on June 8. Edward Kennedy delivered the eulogy, which included the well-known lines urging us to remember his brother "simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it."

The eulogy also quoted Robert Kennedy's own words:

[M]illions are trapped in poverty while the nation grows rich and wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere . . . [Such evil] reflects the imperfection of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, our lack of sensibility towards the suffering of our fellows. But we can perhaps remember—if only for a time—that those who live with us are our brothers [and sisters]; that they share . . . the same short moment of life; that [we all seek] nothing but the chance to live out [our] lives in purpose and happiness.

Well, dear people, these voices of tenderness from 1968 belong to us forever. And we sometimes hear them afresh today, another time of awful turmoil, from the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis, Angela Merkel, and some others.

But we don't hear them enough. Anger and injury too often out-shout humanity and love—what I am calling tenderness.

So, here I offer simple encouragement to take the lead, to take the attitude of mutual care and gentleness that binds us today outward. Every day.

Let me be clear that there are two things I am NOT saying: I am not saying “Be Polite.” And I am not saying “Be Quiet.”

I *am* one of the world’s biggest fans of politeness (and its sisters—civility and forbearance). But these are second-tier values, all but invisible in a King and Kennedy vocabulary that insisted, instead, on the loving fellow-feeling that, alone, opens the possibility of understanding.

There are gulfs in understanding, of course. Which is why quiet, or any kind of retreat, is so bad a choice in a world so desperately in need of conversation. Tweets don’t do it. Candid talk *in search of* understanding, ethically grounded talk open to surprise by vulnerable and imperfect people—this kindles hope.

Actually, there is a third thing I am not saying: I am not saying “be hard on yourselves.” The tenderness we try to take to others we must show ourselves. We carry too much. We stumble. If vanity can sometimes tempt us, the daily demon is self-reproach. A little is all to the good. A lot, NO! Accept—like King and Kennedy accepted—that we do not belong to the heavenly choir of angels. Then humbly, bravely get on with things.

And now! We’re going to close with words written not by me but, in their original form, by Jimmy Campbell, Reg Connelly, and Harry M. Woods in 1932. And we’ll be listening not to me but to Tammy Hall on the piano and the astonishing voice of one of our doctoral students who is also one of the great musicians of California (and beyond)—the wonderful Kim Nalley.

(Kim Nalley then sings “Try a Little Tenderness.”)