

Nora Ephron

Remarks to Wellesley College Class of 1996

President Walsh, trustees, faculty, friends, noble parents...and dear class of 1996, I am so proud of you. Thank you for asking me to speak to you today. I had a wonderful time trying to imagine who had been ahead of me on the list and had said no; I was positive you'd have to have gone to Martha Stewart first. And I meant to call her to see what she would have said, but I forgot. She would probably be up here telling you how to turn your lovely black robes into tents. I will try to be at least as helpful, if not quite as specific as that.

I'm very conscious of how easy it is to let people down on a day like this, because I remember my own graduation from Wellesley very, very well, I am sorry to say. The speaker was Santha Rama Rau who was a woman writer, and I was going to be a woman writer. And in fact, I had spent four years at Wellesley going to lectures by women writers hoping that I would be the beneficiary of some terrific secret -- which I never was. And now here I was at graduation, under these very trees, absolutely terrified. Something was over. Something safe and protected. And something else was about to begin. I was heading off to New York and I was sure that I would live there forever and never meet anyone and end up dying one of those New York deaths where no one even notices you're missing until the smell drifts into the hallway weeks later. And I sat here thinking, "O.K., Santha, this is my last chance for a really terrific secret, lay it on me," and she spoke about the need to place friendship over love of country, which I must tell you had never crossed my mind one way or the other.

I want to tell you a little bit about my class, the class of 1962. When we came to Wellesley in the fall of 1958, there was an article in the Harvard Crimson about the women's colleges, one of those stupid mean little articles full of stereotypes, like girls at Bryn Mawr wear black. We were girls then, by the way, Wellesley girls. How long ago was it? It was so long ago that while I was here, Wellesley actually threw six young women out for lesbianism. It was so long ago that we had curfews. It was so long ago that if you had a boy in your room, you had to leave the door open six inches, and if you closed the door you had to put a sock on the doorknob. In my class of, I don't know, maybe 375 young women, there were six Asians and 5 Blacks. There was a strict quota on the number of Jews. Tuition was \$2,000 a year and in my junior year it was raised to \$2,250 and my parents practically had a heart attack.

How long ago? If you needed an abortion, you drove to a gas station in Union, New Jersey with \$500 in cash in an envelope and you were taken, blindfolded, to a motel room and operated on without an anesthetic. On the lighter side, and as you no doubt read in the New York Times magazine, and were flabbergasted to learn, there were the posture pictures. We not only took off most of our clothes to have our posture pictures taken, we took them off without ever even thinking, this is weird, why are we doing this? -- not only that, we had also had speech therapy -- I was told I had a New Jersey accent I really ought to do something about, which was a shock to me since I was from Beverly Hills,

California and had never set foot in the state of New Jersey... not only that, we were required to take a course called Fundamentals, Fundies, where we actually were taught how to get in and out of the back seat of the car. Some of us were named things like Winkie. We all parted our hair in the middle. How long ago was it? It was so long ago that among the things that I honestly cannot conceive of life without, that had not yet been invented: panty hose, lattes, Advil, pasta (there was no pasta then, there was only spaghetti and macaroni) -- I sit here writing this speech on a computer next to a touch tone phone with an answering machine and a Rolodex, there are several CD's on my desk, a bottle of Snapple, there are felt-tip pens and an electric pencil sharpener... well, you get the point, it was a long time ago.

Anyway, as I was saying, the Crimson had this snippy article which said that Wellesley was a school for tunicata -- tunicata apparently being small fish who spend the first part of their lives frantically swimming around the ocean floor exploring their environment, and the second part of their lives just lying there breeding. It was mean and snippy, but it had the horrible ring of truth, it was one of those do-not-ask-for-whom-the-bell-tolls things, and it burned itself into our brains. Years later, at my 25th reunion, one of my classmates mentioned it, and everyone remembered what tunacata were, word for word.

My class went to college in the era when you got a masters degrees in teaching because it was "something to fall back on" in the worst case scenario, the worst case scenario being that no one married you and you actually had to go to work. As this same classmate said at our reunion, "Our education was a dress rehearsal for a life we never led." Isn't that the saddest line? We weren't meant to have futures, we were meant to marry them. We weren't' meant to have politics, or careers that mattered, or opinions, or lives; we were meant to marry them. If you wanted to be an architect, you married an architect. Non Ministrare sed Ministrari -- you know the old joke, not to be ministers but to be ministers' wives.

I've written about my years at Wellesley, and I don't want to repeat myself any more than is necessary. But I do want to retell one anecdote from the piece I did about my 10th Wellesley reunion. I'll tell it a little differently for those of you who read it. Which was that, during my junior year, when I was engaged for a very short period of time, I thought I might transfer to Barnard my senior year. I went to see my class dean and she said to me, "Let me give you some advice. You've worked so hard at Wellesley, when you marry, take a year off. Devote yourself to your husband and your marriage." Of course it was stunning piece of advice to give me because I'd always intended to work after college. My mother was a career women, and all of us, her four daughters, grew up understanding that the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was as valid for girls as for boys. Take a year off being a wife. I always wondered what I was supposed to do in that year. Iron? I repeated the story for years, as proof that Wellesley wanted its graduates to be merely housewives. But I turned out to be wrong, because years later I met another Wellesley graduate who had been as hell-bent on domesticity as I had been on a career. And she had gone to the same dean with the same problem, and the dean had said to her, "Don't have children right away. Take a year to work." And so I saw that what Wellesley wanted was for us to avoid the extremes. To be instead, that

thing in the middle. A lady. We were to take the fabulous education we had received here and use it to preside at dinner table or at a committee meeting, and when two people disagreed we would be intelligent enough to step in and point out the remarkable similarities between their two opposing positions. We were to spend our lives making nice.

Many of my classmates did exactly what they were supposed to when they graduated from Wellesley, and some of them, by the way, lived happily ever after. But many of them didn't. All sorts of things happened that no one expected. They needed money so they had to work. They got divorced so they had to work. They were bored witless so they had to work. The women's movement came along and made harsh value judgments about their lives -- judgments that caught them by surprise, because they were doing what they were supposed to be doing, weren't they? The rules had changed, they were caught in some kind of strange time warp. They had never intended to be the heroines of their own lives, they'd intended to be -- what? -- First Ladies, I guess, first ladies in the lives of big men. They ended up feeling like victims. They ended up, and this is really sad, thinking that their years in college were the best years of their lives.

Why am I telling you this? It was a long time ago, right? Things have changed, haven't they? Yes, they have. But I mention it because I want to remind you of the undertow, of the specific gravity. American society has a remarkable ability to resist change, or to take whatever change has taken place and attempt to make it go away. Things are different for you than they were for us. Just the fact that you chose to come to a single-sex college makes you smarter than we were -- we came because it's what you did in those days -- and the college you are graduating from is a very different place. All sorts of things caused Wellesley to change, but it did change, and today it's a place that understands its obligations to women in today's world. The women's movement has made a huge difference, too, particularly for young women like you. There are women doctors and women lawyers. There are anchorwomen, although most of them are blonde. But at the same time, the pay differential between men and women has barely changed. In my business, the movie business, there are many more women directors, but it's just as hard to make a movie about women as it ever was, and look at the parts the Oscar-nominated actresses played this year: hooker, hooker, hooker, hooker, and nun. It's 1996, and you are graduating from Wellesley in the Year of the Wonderbra. The Wonderbra is not a step forward for women. Nothing that hurts that much is a step forward for women.

What I'm saying is, don't delude yourself that the powerful cultural values that wrecked the lives of so many of my classmates have vanished from the earth. Don't let the New York Times article about the brilliant success of Wellesley graduates in the business world fool you -- there's still a glass ceiling. Don't let the number of women in the work force trick you -- there are still lots of magazines devoted almost exclusively to making perfect casseroles and turning various things into tents.

Don't underestimate how much antagonism there is toward women and how many people wish we could turn the clock back. One of the things people always say to you if you get upset is, don't take it personally, but listen hard to what's going on and, please, I beg you,

take it personally. Understand: every attack on Hillary Clinton for not knowing her place is an attack on you. Underneath almost all those attacks are the words: get back, get back to where you once belonged. When Elizabeth Dole pretends that she isn't serious about her career, that is an attack on you. The acquittal of O.J. Simpson is an attack on you. Any move to limit abortion rights is an attack on you -- whether or not you believe in abortion. The fact that Clarence Thomas is sitting on the Supreme Court today is an attack on you.

Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim. Because you don't have the alibi my class had -- this is one of the great achievements and mixed blessings you inherit: unlike us, you can't say nobody told you there were other options. Your education is a dress rehearsal for a life that is yours to lead. Twenty-five years from now, you won't have as easy a time making excuses as my class did. You won't be able to blame the deans, or the culture, or anyone else: you will have no one to blame but yourselves. Whoa.

So what are you going to do? This is the season when a clutch of successful women -- who have it all -- give speeches to women like you and say, to be perfectly honest, you can't have it all. Maybe young women don't wonder whether they can have it all any longer, but in case of you are wondering, of course you can have it all. What are you going to do? Everything, is my guess. It will be a little messy, but embrace the mess. It will be complicated, but rejoice in the complications. It will not be anything like what you think it will be like, but surprises are good for you. And don't be frightened: you can always change your mind. I know: I've had four careers and three husbands. And this is something else I want to tell you, one of the hundreds of things I didn't know when I was sitting here so many years ago: you are not going to be you, fixed and immutable you, forever. We have a game we play when we're waiting for tables in restaurants, where you have to write the five things that describe yourself on a piece of paper. When I was your age, I would have put: ambitious, Wellesley graduate, daughter, Democrat, single. Ten years later not one of those five things turned up on my list. I was: journalist, feminist, New Yorker, divorced, funny. Today not one of those five things turns up in my list: writer, director, mother, sister, happy. Whatever those five things are for you today, they won't make the list in ten years -- not that you still won't be some of those things, but they won't be the five most important things about you. Which is one of the most delicious things available to women, and more particularly to women than to men. I think. It's slightly easier for us to shift, to change our minds, to take another path. Yogi Berra, the former New York Yankee who made a specialty of saying things that were famously maladroit, quoted himself at a recent commencement speech he gave. "When you see a fork in the road," he said, "take it." Yes, it's supposed to be a joke, but as someone said in a movie I made, don't laugh this is my life, this is the life many women lead: two paths diverge in a wood, and we get to take them both. It's another of the nicest things about being women; we can do that. Did I say it was hard? Yes, but let me say it again so that none of you can ever say the words, nobody said it was so hard. But it's also incredibly interesting. You are so lucky to have that life as an option.

Whatever you choose, however many roads you travel, I hope that you choose not to be a lady. I hope you will find some way to break the rules and make a little trouble out there. And I also hope that you will choose to make some of that trouble on behalf of women.

Thank you. Good luck. The first act of your life is over. Welcome to the best years of your lives.