

Acclaimed Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addressed Harvard's Class of 2018 on Class Day, May 23, 2018. We produce here the full verbatim transcript of the speech for everyone. You can also download this transcript as PDF file for your later offline reading.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a writer of short stories, and nonfiction. She has written the novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* and many others.

Here is the full text of her speech titled "**Above all else, do not lie.**"

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - Speech TRANSCRIPT:

Good afternoon. Harvard Class of 2018, hello.

Thank you so much for asking me to be here today. It meant a lot to me, to know that you, the students, select the class day speaker. Thank you.

Congratulations to you and to all your loved ones who are here.

I spent a wonderful year at the Radcliffe Institute here at Harvard, doing a fellowship in 2011 and I fell in love with Cambridge and so it's very good to be back.

My name is Chimamanda; in Igbo, it means my personal spirit will never be broken. I'm not sure why but some people find it difficult to pronounce.

A few years ago, I spoke at an event in London. The English woman who was to introduce me had written my name phonetically on a piece of paper. And backstage she held on tightly to this paper while repeating the pronunciation over and over. I could tell, she was very eager to get it right.

And then she went on to the stage and gave a lovely introduction and ended with the words “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Chimichanga.”

I told — I told this story at a dinner party shortly afterwards. And one of the guests seemed very annoyed that I was laughing about it. “That was so insulting”, he said, “that English woman could have tried harder.”

But the truth is she did try very hard. In fact, she ended up calling me a fried burrito because she had tried very hard and then ended up with an utterly human mistake that was the result of anxiety.

So, the point of this story is not to say that you can call me Chimichanga. Don't even think about it.

The point is that intent matters, that context matters. Somebody might very well call me Chimichanga out of a malicious desire to mock my name, and that I would certainly not laugh about. But there is a difference between malice and a mistake.

We now live in a culture of calling out, a culture of outrage, and you should call people out. You should be outraged. But always remember context and never disregard intent.

ABOVE ALL ELSE DO NOT LIE

If I were asked the title of my address to you today, I would say “Above all else do not lie.” Or don't lie too often, which is really to say tell the truth. But lying, the word, the idea, the act has such political potency in America today, but it somehow feels more apt. Above all else do not lie.

I grew up in Nigeria through military dictatorships and through incipient democracies. And America always felt aspirational. When yet another

absurd thing happened politically we would say, this can never happen in America.

But today the political discourse in America includes questions that are straight from the land of the absurd. Questions such as should we call a lie a lie? When is a lie a lie?

And so, Class of 2018 at no time has it felt as urgent as now that we must protect and value the truth.

Before I tell you about not lying, I must first admit —

So before I tell you about not lying, I must first admit to lying. I routinely lie about my height even at the doctor's office.

In Lagos, when I am meeting friends for lunch, I lie about being stuck in traffic when I'm really still at home only just getting dressed.

Now there are other lies. Sadly, however, I cannot tell you about them without having to kill you afterwards. But what I know is that I have always felt my best and done my best when I gear toward truth, when I don't lie. And the biggest regrets of my life are of those times when I did not have the courage to embrace the truth.

Now telling the truth does not mean that everything will work out. Actually, it sometimes doesn't. I'm not asking you to tell the truth, because it will always work out, but because you will sleep well at night. And there's nothing more beautiful than to wake up every day holding in your hand the full measure of your integrity.

BULLSHIT DETECTOR

Many years ago, before my first novel was published, I attended a writers' conference here in the US. It was a gathering of many aspiring writers and

a few established writers. Now the former, the aspiring writers, sucking up to the latter, the established writers - was a revered ritual of the conference.

And so during one of the breaks, I walked up to a man, an established writer whose name I knew well but whose work I had not read. I shook his hand and told him what a fan I was: "I love your work", I said.

His wife was sitting next to him: "So which of his books have you read?", she asked and I froze.

"Which have you read?" she asked again.

Everyone at the table was quiet, watching, waiting. I smiled a mad smile, and I mumbled "the one about — the one about the man discovering himself" which of course was complete bullshit.

But I thought it might be convincing since that kind of describes half of all the novels written by men. And then I fled.

But before I fled, I heard the writer say to his wife "Honey, you shouldn't have done that."

But the truth is that I shouldn't have done that.

To read a novel is to give honor to art, why lie about giving honor to something to which you have not?

I was of course absolutely mortified that day. But I have come to respect what that writer's wife had: a fantastic bullshit detector.

And now that I have the good fortune of being an established writer, one who does not like to miss an opportunity to wallow in praise by the way, I can sense when a person is saying empty words and it feels much worse

than if they had said nothing at all.

ALSO READ: Barely Recognizable: Lisa Nichols at
TEDxCalicoCanyon (Full Transcript)

So have a good bullshit detector. If you don't have it now, work on it. But having that detector means that you must also use it on yourself. And sometimes the hardest truths are those we have to tell ourselves.

When I first started sending out my early writing to agents and publishers and started getting rejections, I convinced myself that my work had simply not found the right home, which might have been true.

But there was another truth that took me much longer to consider, that the manuscript was not very good. And in fact, the first novel I wrote or what I thought was a novel, eventually needed to be put away in a drawer. And I'm so grateful that it was never published.

It is hard to tell ourselves the truth about our failures, our fragilities, our uncertainties. It is hard to tell ourselves that maybe we haven't done the best that we can. It is hard to tell ourselves the truth of our emotions that maybe what we feel is hurt rather than anger, that maybe it is time to close the chapter of a relationship and walk away. And yet when we do, we are the better off for it.

I understand that the Harvard College mission calls on you to be citizen leaders. I don't even know what citizen leader means. It sort of sounds like a Harvard Graduate saying I went to college in Boston, which by the way has to be the most immodest form of modesty.

Please, class of 2018, when you are asked where you went to college just say Harvard.

By the way — By the way, I went to Yale for graduate school, not New Haven which has other universities. But we also know that in the grand snobbery sweepstakes of prestigious American colleges, grad school doesn't really count, it's undergrad that counts. So it's entirely possible that I don't even know how all of this works.

So you're charged to be citizen leaders which I suppose means that you're charged to be leaders. I often wonder who will be led if everyone is supposed to be a leader. But whether you are a leader or whether you're the led, I urge you always to bend toward truth, to err on the side of truth.

And to help you do this, make literature your religion, which is to say read widely, read fiction and poetry and narrative non-fiction. Make the human story the center of your understanding of the world. Think of people as people, not as abstractions who have to conform to bloodless logic but as people: fragile, imperfect, with prides that can be wounded and hearts that can be touched.

Literature is my religion. I have learned from literature that we humans are flawed, all of us are flawed. But even while flawed, we are capable of enduring goodness. We do not need first to be perfect before we can do what is right and just.

And you Harvard class of 2018 are not unfamiliar with speaking the truth. When you stood alongside dining-hall walkers during the strike, when you protested the end of DACA, when you supported the Black Lives Matter movement, you were speaking the truth about the dignity that every single human being deserves. I applaud you. I urge you to continue.

BE COURAGEOUS

But remember that now, outside the cocoon of Harvard, the consequences will be greater, the stakes will be higher. Please don't let that stop you from telling the truth. Sometimes especially in politicized spaces, telling

the truth will be an act of courage; be courageous.

Never set out to provoke for the sake of provoking, but never silence yourself out of fear that the truth you speak might provoke; be courageous.

People can be remarkably resistant to the fact that they do not like, but don't let that silence you from speaking the truth; be courageous.

Be courageous enough to acknowledge that even if there is no value in the position of the other side, there is value in knowing what that position is. Listen to the other side, at least the reasonable other side.

Be courageous enough to acknowledge that democracy is always fragile, and that justice has nothing to do with the political left or the political right.

Be courageous enough to recognize those things that get in the way of telling the truth — the empty cleverness, the morally bankrupt irony, the desire to please, the deliberate obfuscation, the tendency to confuse cynicism for sophistication.

Be courageous enough to accept that life is messy. Your life will not always perfectly match your ideology. Sometimes even your choices will not align with your ideology. Don't justify and rationalize it; acknowledge it. Because it is in trying to justify that we get into that twisting dark unending tunnel of lies from which it is sometimes impossible to re-emerge whole.

Be courageous enough to say I don't know. This might be harder to do with everyone calling you 'Harvard'. But ignorance acknowledged is an opportunity; ignorance denied is a closed door, and it takes courage to admit to the truth of what you do not know.

Some people think that Harvard is the best school in the world. Personally, I'm not so sure. I need to know what my people at Yale think about that. But I do know that for many people all over the world, Harvard has become much more than just a school. Harvard is a metaphor for untouchable intellectual achievement.

And now that you are Harvard graduates — well, actually almost Harvard graduates. You don't actually have your degrees; you wouldn't get them until tomorrow and I suppose there is still time for the Harvard administration folks to change their minds about giving it to you. But assuming they don't change their minds and you do get your degrees tomorrow, and become Harvard graduates, the world will make assumptions about you. Many of them will be to your benefit, such as the assumption of competence and intelligence. Employers will pay attention to your resume when they see Harvard on it.

ALSO READ: [The Strangest Secret by Earl Nightingale \(Full Transcript\)](#)

But there will be other assumptions. People who don't know anything about you except that you went to Harvard will assume that you feel superior, that you think you're all that. They will roll their eyes when you make a normal human mistake.

You might hear at some point in your life in a tone that cannot be described as nice: 'There goes Harvard'.

Now full disclosure. A friend once told me that the only thing he learned at Harvard was to behave like a person who went to Harvard. And I have often repeated that story quite gleefully. So you will inspire resentment and hopefully that will help you keep in mind the humanity of every one including the privileged.

But these assumptions that people will make about you are minuscule

compared to the enormous privilege that comes with a Harvard degree. You now have a certain kind of access, a certain kind of power. And I know it is terribly clichéd to say that you must now use this power to change the world, but really, you must now use this power to change the world.

Change a slice of the world, no matter how small. If you feel a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo, nurture that dissatisfaction, be propelled by your dissatisfaction, act, get into the system and change the system. Challenge the still assumptions that undergird so many of America's cultural institutions. Tell new stories, champion new storytellers because the truth is that the universal does not belong to anyone group of people. Everybody's story is potentially universal, it just needs to be told well.

Change the media in America, make it about truth, not about entertainment, not about profit making but about truth. And while you're doing it, be astute about when you need balance and when you don't. Because sometimes seeking balance gets in the way of telling the truth. If you're reporting about the sun rising in the east, you do not need to hear the other side because there's no real other side.

A Harvard degree will give you access and opportunities, but sadly I have to inform you that it will not make you invincible. You still have that fragile human core at the center of all of us. There will be times when you are petrified of failing, when fear of failure holds you back. In those moments here is the truth that is easy to forget, you don't actually know that you will fail.

I was lucky to be given a great gift by the universe, knowing from childhood what I loved most. I was lucky to have wonderful supportive parents who encouraged me and my parents are here today.

Writing is what I love. Had I not had the good fortune of being published, I

would be somewhere right now completely unknown, possibly broke but I would be writing.

Some of you here today like me know what you love, and some of you don't. If you don't know, you will. If not something that you love, then something that you like or something that you don't hate - or something. You will find it. But to find it you must try.

The wonderful Shonda Rhimes said very wisely that you have to do something until you can do something else. Try. If it doesn't work out, try something else.

I knew from spending a year in medical school that it was not for me, actually that's not really true. I knew even before medical school but going to medical school clarified it for me and it's not wasted time, it's experience and experience will serve you in ways you do not expect.

I cannot tell you how many times in the course of writing my second novel, **Half of a Yellow Sun**, which was a deeply — which was a deeply emotional book for me, I felt choked with uncertainty. I would climb into bed and eat chocolate. But I knew that after all the chocolate eating, after all the sinking into a dark place, that I would get up and keep writing.

I cannot tell you how often I would sit down to write and instead I would find myself going online to look at shoes and to put different shoes in various online carts and then remove some and put some back and order some and then not order some.

I'm actually thinking of starting a society of esteemed procrastinators and I suspect that many of you would probably sign up. Procrastination is a form of fear and it is difficult to acknowledge fear. But the truth is that you cannot create anything of value without both self-doubt and self-belief. Without self-doubt you become complacent, without self-belief you cannot succeed; you need both.

And there is also the fear of measuring up - of keeping up, which for you might be heightened by the heavy weight of all those Harvard expectations.

I want to share a line from a lovely poem by Mary Oliver: whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination.

When you fall into the funk of competition, when you compare yourself with other Harvard graduates, when you worry that you didn't get that job at Goldman or McKinsey or in Silicon Valley right after graduation or didn't win a Pulitzer at 30 or didn't become a managing director or partner of something at 35, think of literature.

Think of the early bloomers and the late bloomers. Think of the many experimental novels that do not follow the traditional form. Your story does not have to have a traditional arc. There is an Igbo saying [Igbo language]; it translates literally to: whenever you wake up, that is your morning. What matters is that you wake up.

The world is calling you. America is calling you. There is work to be done, there are tarnished things that need to shine again. There are broken things that need to be made whole again. You are in a position to do this. You can do it.

Be courageous. Tell the truth. I wish you courage and I wish you well.

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