Address to the Class of 1967 at Our Fiftieth Reunion
Oberlin, Ohio, May 21, 2017
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Here I am again. I’m touched that the Reunion Committee asked me to speak – this is a kind of coming full circle for me. I addressed our class and the alumni at our graduation in 1967, and my late husband, Carey McWilliams, addressed us at our 25th reunion.

I was close to only a few of you when I was a student, but I remember most of you. And even those of you I didn’t know shared with me an intense, difficult, formative, character-strengthening experience here. Looking out at your faces is moving to me. It’s a remarkable thing how, after many years, people at first look very old and strange, and then something happens psychologically that makes them visually the same person they were. Continuity comes back. You all look to me now like updated, recognizable versions of who you were in 1967.

I was asked to reflect on our experiences together and then to talk about going forward. I’ll start with the reminiscences, trying to resist the temptation toward rose-colored nostalgia.

First, the difficulties: Evidently, we all felt out of place when we arrived. Reading the comments collected in our reunion book, I am struck by how many of us wrote about feeling intimidated, overwhelmed, as if we didn’t belong. The reasons were diverse – “I was from a small town,” “I grew up on a farm,” “I was from the South,” “I was in an ethnic [or racial] minority,” “I was in a sexual minority,” “I grew up outside the United States,” “My family was politically conservative” – but the feeling was similar. In addition, we all seem to have felt stupid in comparison with undergraduates of extraordinary erudition, brilliance, and wit. I remember the Conservatory students talking about not feeling the intellectual equals of the College students, while we in the College group knew we were not the equals of the “Connies.” They had not just talent; they had grit. As Barbara Hirschfeld commented today, “We could be fuck-ups, but they were disciplined.” It seems that a lot of College students – I was among them – had been reasonably skilled at some musical form before our freshman year and had come to Oberlin partly for its music. But on witnessing what real musicianship is, they put their instrument away for at least twenty years.
I don’t think anybody felt at home here that first year. And we were held to such high intellectual standards that it was easy to feel through our whole college experience that we were inferior outliers. I’m curious: How many of you have the anxiety dream about having a paper due that you didn’t study for, or an exam for which you’re unprepared? [many hands] Those are common dreams, but I suspect that for you as for me, the setting in which those nightmares are staged is Oberlin. I have a recurring dream that I owe a paper to a professor from whom I never took a class, and I wake up in a cold sweat trying to figure out how to get it done, despite not having done the reading, by the imminent deadline. Speaking of dreams (as a psychoanalyst, I habitually pay attention to them), and of feelings of not fully belonging, the Monday before this reunion, I dreamed that I came here and was settling into our reunion dorm when someone came to tell me there had been a mistake: I had been housed four miles out of town.

This reunion has recreated familiar and taxing feelings from our four years here: We are surrounded by extraordinary opportunities – tours, archives, exhibitions, discussion groups, guided walks, departmental events – far too many options to deal with, leading to the constant guilt that we’re not taking proper advantage of all we’ve been offered. We all seem to have regrets about what we failed to do fifty years ago, when such rich opportunities were so close at hand. Several classmates have expressed a wish to have their undergraduate education now.

Despite our insecurities, we were an intense, opinionated, argumentative group; judgmental certainties were common. I recall that there was briefly a Young Socialist club here, with three members. And it had a schism. But for all our fractiousness, we cherished a culture of civility.

Looking back, I can see that the Oberlin environment of our era encompassed a unique confluence of at least three different world views. First, there was still a significant impact of the American Social Gospel movement that had catalyzed the founding of the college and propelled both abolitionism and the early women’s suffrage movement. That midwestern, Protestant (dominantly Calvinist) tradition of radical engagement with what we would now call social justice issues kept us insistently reminded to leave the world a better place than we had found it.

Second, there were the influences of a more urban, Northeastern-based, mostly Jewish, liberal-left intellectual and artistic sensibility that tilted toward encompassing theories and
ideologies, philosophical immersion, and the questioning of received wisdom. These two gestalts were not entirely incompatible, but they lived in some tension with one another.

Third, I think there was also a significant undertone of a European sensibility, influenced by teachers who had come from Europe, some because of the Holocaust. Their voice differed markedly from the optimistic, pragmatic, pursuit-of-happiness tone of the dominant American culture. Their vision was more tragic than comic or ironic; they assumed that suffering was inevitable, that issues are complicated, that not all problems are resolvable by hard work and good will, that paradoxes and trade-offs are inevitable. I’m thinking of Professors Artz, Lanyi, Barenbaum, Danenberg, Szykowski, and other European-born scholars who helped deconstruct some of the smug, adolescent certainties of the society to which they had immigrated.

Carey used to quip that while most Americans approach explanation via the application of “Occam’s razor,” there was a contrary intellectual orientation that he called “Lanyi’s balloon”: 

*For anything important, there is no single-factor explanation.* It was student lore that if you wanted to get an A on a “blue book” for Professor Lanyi, your chances increased in direct proportion to the number of explanatory principles you invoked for an international event: the geographical location of the country, its resources, the state of its economy, its history, its ethnic and religious composition, the personality of its leaders, its terrain, its weather . . . .

We were immersed in all these currents and had to make our own individual integrations. This was hard, but on the plus side, I think we felt genuinely cared for by our professors. A striking number of contributors to the reunion book mentioned faculty members whose influence was transformative. When I looked for who was mentioned the most, I found it was Ellen Johnson. What a gift, to prepare us – by such an animated, intimate love for her field – for a lifetime of appreciation of modern art. Also mentioned frequently were Robert Fountain, Marcia Colish, Geoffrey Blodgett, Clyde Holbrook, David Young, Ellen Repp, and many others who were devoted to nurturing us. In this context, I’d like to speak for Carey, to whom teaching was a sacred calling: He cared about you and would be so proud that I am trying to articulate the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual outcomes of our having studied with so many committed Oberlin mentors.

I was also struck, in reading my classmates’ accounts of their lives, with how many of you mentioned your spirituality, your religious convictions, the transcendent quests that have
been compelling to you. We were all forged in a crucible that produced a certain intellectual, moral, esthetic, civic, and spiritual sensibility. We were serious. We were seekers.

Looking back, we can see that our class was right on the cusp of unprecedented social change. Born mostly in 1945, we were the leading edge of the baby boom generation, the first group for whom the great machine of post-war American commercialism cranked up. We were mostly children of privilege who took our privilege for granted. For example, most of us assumed that we would easily find a job when we finished our education – and not just any job, but work that had some redeeming social value. Even if we were still unsure of our eventual career destination, we could get some position in social work, or as a hospital aide, or in teaching…. Contemporary graduates would give a lot to have that confidence.

And we felt safe here. I’m not sure we were actually as safe as we felt, whether there was more rape and crime than was ever reported, but most of us felt extremely protected in this oasis in the Ohio cornfields. The birth control pill offered safe sex in an era before HIV and many other sexually transmitted diseases. We were here just before the explosion of drug use among college students. And although we did drink, and enjoyed it, there was never at Oberlin the culture of binge drinking that now beleaguer contemporary American colleges. We didn’t depend on getting blotto as a condition of socializing with each other.

In retrospect, we can see that we were rather naïve integrationists, mostly oblivious to sexual and gender diversity, chafing at restrictions on women but with our consciousness still unraised by the resurgence of feminism soon to come. We shared a strong sense of moral purpose. The down-side of that is that we could be arrogant, self-righteous, tiresome to others. But the up-side is emblazoned in our life stories in the helping professions, volunteer work, the arts, teaching, science and research, public service, peace-keeping, pro bono professional work, mentoring, political and civic involvement, and other efforts to make good on our values. A friend of mine says she loves to socialize with Oberlin grads “because no one is going to talk about how much money they make or what expensive commodities they own.”

In our first semester here, we were shocked by the Kennedy assassination. I think we thought assassinations happened only in history books. Devastated, we gathered together to mourn in Finney Chapel. We all remember exactly where we were when we heard the news. Many have told me that at this reunion they made a point of returning to that place. This shared
grief diluted our individual feelings of marginality and accelerated our development of a deep sense of community.

This is what stands out most to me about our Oberlin past. Let me move to the second part of what I was asked to talk about, the present and the future. Again, I’ll start with the negatives: Aging sucks. There are so many losses at our age: of health, of function, of effortless sexuality, of beauty, of power. Many hopes have been disappointed, and many relationships are gone. For me, perhaps the most troubling loss is the mental decline. I somehow never expected to be unable to depend on my own mind. I could not have imagined this deficit at a younger age – my mind is “me” and feels ongoing. But now, I am an exemplar of Billy Collins’s poem “Forgetfulness,” which I can’t resist quoting, for anyone not familiar with it, in its entirety:

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
ever even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.
No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

Thank God we all understand this and have the consolations of each other’s compassion. This brings me to the positive side of being in our seventies. It can be a relief not to be pushed around by hormones. We don’t have to prove anything anymore. We’ve learned to accept life as it is. We’ve learned how to cope with suffering. The grip of vanity has loosened. Our self-esteem is much less fragile. We’ve reached some capacity for compassionate acceptance of our younger selves. We’re less judgmental and more forgiving generally. We have a sense of proportion. We’re approaching a state of wisdom, often framed as the consolation prize for getting older. I have heard a lot of wisdom from my classmates over the past two days.

I was here in Oberlin for Commencement Weekend in 1966. There was an elderly alumnus – I think he was in his nineties – who addressed the graduating students. He started his talk by saying, “First, I want to assure the Class of ’66 that there is no sin that you have committed that I have not outgrown.” I appreciate even more now what he meant.

And then there is, for many of us, the joy of grandchildren, which, as a poet friend of mine recently noted, may be “the only life experience that lives up to its advance press.” From the discussions over this weekend, it has become clear to me how central it is, in the remaining life goals that many of us have set for ourselves, to do right by the next generations.

We’re looking now at the last phase of our lives. At this age, mortality is no longer an abstraction: We all can hear the waterfall in the distance. We don’t know whether we have two years or twenty-five years, but life now has a kind of bracketed-ness that did not characterize our earlier developmental phases. There is a boundary to what lies ahead. Over one hundred of our classmates are no longer with us. Not all of us will be alive at our next reunion.

Limitation is painful, but it can also be comforting and healing. Remember how overwhelming and depressing it felt to be told about our “unlimited potential”? In one of our discussion groups, Candis Cousins framed the realization of mortality as a “gift.” At our age, we’ve learned that serenity lies not in getting what you want but in appreciating what you have. All the “wisdom traditions,” from Judaism and Christianity to Buddhism and Hinduism, and
even to secular movements such as my own psychoanalytic version of the examined life, have emphasized this, in profound contrast to the prevailing American myth of redemption by material success. I’ve been fascinated by how advertisers these days appeal not to our sexuality, as they once did (as in “Buy this car and you’ll get the beautiful woman”), but to what we psychologists call pathological narcissism. Contemporary ads pander to an immature, unrealistic sense of entitlement: “You deserve it,” “You’ve earned it,” “You’re worth it.” People who buy into this version of pursuing happiness are in for bitterness, resentment, and emptiness.

Arthur Miller was once asked if he wanted to live forever. He replied “Eternity would give me nothing by which to measure my life.”

All the mourning we do at this age is good for us. The grief process is nature’s way of helping us to move on, to come to terms with what is still sweet about being alive, to find meaning in what is rather than what should be, to find compassion for all suffering. It opens a space for kindness and a generosity of spirit, including toward those who will come after us.

These are disturbing times politically. We still have much work to do in pushing back against a debased version of an America that is full of entitlement, eager to scapegoat, devoid of any public language of sacrifice for the common good. We are all working on that in our own ways. And Oberlin continues to pass on the imperiled torch that illuminates a more honest version of the good life. There have been lots of conversations this weekend about how to hold our culture to a standard of empathy and civility, how to keep our peculiar, Oberlin-forged sensibility alive.

I will close by quoting my beloved professor Andrew Bongiorno, on his acceptance of an award from the alumni honoring his long career here: “This is not the time for regretting failures that can no longer be remembered. It is the time, rather, for gratefulness.”

To classmates and teachers, alive and dead, to the Reunion Committee, to all that Oberlin has been and remains: Thank you.