

Faculty Remarks
The 11th Annual Lavender Graduation Celebration
Prof. Martha L. Olney
April 29, 2011

Thank you very much.

On behalf of the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley,
Let me be the first to say to the Class of 2011:

Congratulations!

We the faculty hope that during your years at Berkeley,
that we have
stretched you,
pulled or pushed or dragged you in new directions,
that we have taught you new ways of thinking,
that we have in short,
had a role in transforming you into a true Golden Bear.

What is that?

What does it mean to “be a Golden Bear?”

Well, to me, it means using what you’ve learned here
and what you’ll continue to learn in the future
to make the world a better place.

I am, as you know, an economist by training.

In economics, we emphasize the role of costs and benefits in making decisions.

For instance: Should I travel after graduation?

What are the costs?

What are the benefits?

If the benefits outweigh the costs, then yes, travel!

If the costs are more than the benefits, then no, don’t.

In economics, we teach **that**

this sort of cost / benefit analysis

can be applied to nearly any decision:

Should my company produce more frozen yogurt?

Should I use my cell phone when I drive?

Should I ask you-know-who out after graduation?

It's a very powerful tool
that is used every day in many ways
even by people who are not aware that
they're thinking about costs & benefits.

But I want to say:
economics doesn't always get it right.
Economics sometimes gets it wrong.

Cost / benefit analysis ensures that *your* decisions will make you better off.

But does cost/benefit analysis ensure that *your* decisions
will make the world better off?
Will your decisions make the world a better place?

The answer matters because that's what it means to be a Golden Bear:
make the world a better place.

So we want to ask:
Whose costs?

Just mine?

Or should I take into account the negative effects on others as well?

Whose benefits?

Just mine?

Or should I take into account the positive effects on others as well?

Making the world a better place
requires taking into account
not just your own personal costs and benefits
but the costs your behavior imposes on others – the external cost
and the benefits your behavior provides to others – the external benefit

For instance,

Should I join the Peace Corps?

Should I become a teacher?

Should I take a job in a non-profit?

Should I be Billy . . .

In each of those cases,
a simple cost / benefit analysis
would probably lead you to conclude: No.
I should not.

I should not because
 I would make far less money
 joining the Peace Corps,
 becoming a teacher,
 working in a non-profit,
 than I could doing many other things.

That's what a simple cost / benefit analysis
 would lead you to conclude.

But that simple analysis, I think, is wrong.
 We should, I believe, take the rest of the world into account.
 We should consider, as economists say,
 the external costs and the external benefits of our actions.

We should, that is, endeavor to make the world a better place.

Wow, you may be thinking.
 So does she really think I shouldn't become
 an accountant
 a lawyer
 a writer
 an investment banker
 a university president
 Does she really think I should
 take a vow of poverty
 forego income
 ignore my student loan debt?

No.
 I don't.

I want to suggest that to each and every one of us in this room,
 there is a simple way that we can make the world a better place.

We don't have to forego income, or take a vow of poverty.
 We can make the world a better place, with one simple act:

Come out.

That's it.

Come out.

I hear some of you:

“Oh girl, you think I’m not already out?”

“Girl, it doesn’t GET much more out than this!”

You’d be surprised.

One of the things I’ve learned
is that coming out
is not a one-time deal.

You think: but I came out 5 years ago.

Perhaps.

But tomorrow you’ll meet someone new,
who looks at your pink nail polish and still doesn’t get it.

Come out.

In 5 years, you’ll be comfortable in your job
and someone new will join the firm.
And when you say “we” went on a fun trip last weekend,
he’ll say, “oh, yes, my wife and I did that trip, too.
Where did you and your husband stay?”
And you’ll say, “My *wife* and I . . .”

Come out.

In 10 years, you’ll have a toddler.
You’ll be at the park,
sitting with the other parents
while Sweetness plays in the sandbox.
And another parent will say “how great of you to give your wife a break.”

You’ll say, “Husband. I’m giving my *husband* a break.”

Come out.

Come out.
What’s in it for you?
Maybe nothing.

But that’s not the point.

It is **in** the small things that we do,
the day-to-day things,
that we have the chance to
make the world a better place.

Come out.

Don't do it for you.

Do it for the guy down the hall, who hasn't talked to anyone yet about his gay brother.

Do it for the teenager at church, who hasn't realized that you're gay (and who is figuring out she is, too)

Do it for your grandmother, who has always known but wants your permission to talk about it with her friends.

Come out.

Last fall, I sent an email in the wake of the Tyler Clementi suicide.

It went viral.

I suspect you all have seen it.

I didn't set out to write something that was going to go viral

I just set out to send a note of encouragement to my students.

But that note made a difference.

It is **in** the small things that we do,
the day-to-day things,
that we have the chance to
make the world a better place.

Come out.

My partner Esther is a Baptist minister.

(I like to let that just set there

“Really? You can do that? Be a lesbian Baptist minister?”)

That sentence alone – my partner Esther is a Baptist minister –
 is sometimes enough to make a difference.
 Nearly 20 years ago,
 I mentioned this in a conversation with a summer school student
 who was visiting from Wellesley, a women’s college in Massachusetts.
 Her best friend, also a woman from Wellesley, wanted to go to seminary.
 But had never met a lesbian Baptist.
 So we got names exchanged,
 and ultimately Bronwyn talked with Esther
 and then came to Berkeley to go to seminary.
 And attended our church.
 And gradually realized she wasn’t a lesbian woman
 . . . she was a transgendered man.
 Who was called to the ministry.
 So Bronwyn became Bran, and is a church pastor in the south bay.
 Opportunities a co-ed from Wellesley
 who became a man from Berkeley
 might not have had
 if I hadn’t said “my partner Esther is a Baptist minister.”

Come out.

Make the world a better place.

Come out.

You never know whose life you’ll change.

Come out.

Become a Golden Bear.

Come out.

And, *go Bears!*

This is the October 1, 2010 email I sent to students in the wake of Tyler Clementi's suicide.

Subject: [econ 100b] Who you are is OK

Hi everyone,

This one's a little off-topic from Econ 100B.

Unless you've been under a rock (hm, or surviving midterms), you've probably heard about the freshman at Rutgers, Tyler Clementi, who committed suicide after his dorm roommate surreptitiously web-cammed him making out with another guy and posted it on the web.

In September, five young gay people -- that we know of -- committed suicide in the U.S.

There are many things I could say to you right now, but let me stick with the most important: who you are is OK.

Gay or straight or not yet sure. Ok. Republican or Democrat or Green or not yet sure. Ok. Tall or short or fat or thin or anywhere in between. Ok. Angry or sad or happy or silly or scared or somewhere in between. Ok. Californian or Texan or Brit or Indonesian or something else. Ok. Male or female or transitioning. Ok. Smart or not so smart or feeling not as smart as you used to. Ok. Religious or not or questioning. Ok. Loved by your family or not getting along with them right now or not even sure what's going on. Ok. Hanging out with friends on a Friday night or alone again in your room. Ok.

Life is full of challenges. Some seem insurmountable, especially when you're 17 or 18 or 19 or 20 years old. (heck, or 53). But you *can* survive those challenges. Please choose to survive.

If you or someone you know is feeling there's no way out but death, please, please talk with someone. Talk with a friend. Call your pastor. Go down to Tang. Contact your parents. Someone. If you're feeling all alone -- which is clearly how Tyler was feeling when he posted his intention on his FB -- call a suicide hotline 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or 800-309-2131, or call the Tang center at (510) 643-7197 and ask to speak with a counselor.

If you ever bullied someone for being different than you (or, so much like you that it jarred you into bullying), figure out a way to make up for that bad karma. Best idea: stop a friend/buddy when they start to do the same thing. Just imagine, what if Tyler's roommate had found not a willing accomplice in the next dorm room, but a friend who said "Man, what are you doing? That's just cruel. Let's go to the gym." It's a start.

Here's the take away: You are normal. You are ok. You are loved. You, just the way you are.

Prof. Olney