

Keynote Address

Delivered by author Alex Kotlowitz

During the Adler School's 31st Annual Commencement Ceremony

Sunday, October 26, 2008

President Crossman, distinguished trustees and faculty, parents, and, of course, graduates. Thank you for this invitation... and for this honor. Also, what a privilege it is to share this stage, this occasion, with Representative Danny Davis, someone who doesn't back down, someone who time and time again has stood up for what he believes to be right and just.

I've had the privilege to learn more about your school in these previous weeks, and all I have to say is: We need more of you. The Adler School of Professional Psychology, it seems to me, is essential in these times – as a place which helps the rest of us acknowledge the fissures in the American landscape – and as a place which helps us figure out how to close those chasms. Adler is here to help us figure out how best we can transform – both ourselves as well as others. It's the uniqueness and power of Adler... it recognizes that in order to strengthen individuals, we must also strengthen community.

Ordinarily, at a moment like this, I'd encourage you to find ways to engage with the world, to spend time with people different from yourself, but of course that's what the Adler School is all about. What Adler knows – and what you know – is that what's most important is to immerse yourself in lives other than your own, to become a part of a civil society – there is no more noble path than that... to maintain our social compact.

So what I'd like to talk about with you today is the importance of finding your moral compass, of being true to your heart, to that which you know is right and just... and in doing so I'd like to talk with you about the importance of story... the importance of telling and listening to stories...

I want to start off in fact by sharing with you a story that was passed along to me by the late Senator Paul Simon. It's a story that I carry around in my back pocket. It's the story of Elijah Lovejoy... Lovejoy was a newspaper publisher in a small, rural Illinois town during the first half of the 19th century. Lovejoy was an abolitionist, and his antislavery editorials so discomfited the good citizens of Alton that they asked him to refrain from his writing because, they wrote Lovejoy, his abolitionist editorials "have a tendency to disturb the quiet of our citizens and neighbors."

Well, that didn't sit well with Lovejoy, and he took on not only his political opponents – he knew where they stood – but rather the decent, honorable people who remained silent. Lovejoy took to task not those who opposed his views... but rather those who had the temerity to question his right to speak to his mind. At a community gathering, Lovejoy told his neighbors and friends...

"I know that I have the right freely to speak and publish my sentiments... What I wish to know of you is whether you will protect me in the exercise of this right..." Three days later, Lovejoy was shot and killed by a mob, as he tried to protect his printing press from being set afire.

In his final days, what so distressed Lovejoy was not those who opposed his abolitionist views... but rather those who refused to take a stand.

Those who take a stand... people like Lovejoy... become our navigators – and, God knows, especially in these difficult times, these treacherous waters, we need people able, willing, eager even to pilot...

Let me state the obvious... This is, indeed, not an easy world to navigate today... These are unsettling, troubled times. We are at war in Iraq... and we of

course are fearful at home... both of those who harm us, from the outside – and from the economic storm from within. Amidst all this, it is not an easy time to be a social critic.

But this may also be the most important time to be heard. This may be the most important time for people like yourselves to find your voice, to take a stand... for whether you believe the recent bailout of Wall Street makes sense or whether you believe that it is ill-advised, what we can all agree upon is that the defense of our nation is paramount... and by that I speak of the defense of our principals, of our values, of our liberties.

When I think of America, I find comfort and succor in its belief in justice, in fairness, in equity. And yet I know – from my time in our schools, from my time climbing the stairwells of our public housing high-rises, from my time listening to our children, from my time talking to new immigrants – that we still need to fight for these things... for justice, for fairness, for equity. And so in some ways, this may be the most critical time for critics to find their voice, to give voice to those whose lives don't measure up to American ideal. It is, after all, what we want to so fiercely defend.

This was all brought home in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina pulled the curtain back... revealing deep and profound fissures in the American landscape... It exposed what many of us knew already: that many in this country – far too many – are left behind... when it clouds over and when the sun's shining...

We seemed to be surprised that a place like New Orleans could house so many poor people, that so many had so little. Where has everyone been? What so unsettled me... and what should unsettle all of us... is that so many Americans were surprised – even stunned – by what they saw. How can we not know? Such neglect, I believe, borders on the willful. We are a nation that too easily turns our collective head from that which discomforts... It is the luxury of apathy, of indifference... a luxury we cannot afford...

Now, all this brings me to a story. So, you ask, what does storytelling have to do with defending our democratic principals; What does storytelling have to do with you?

Well, first let me tell you what it has to do with my work. People ask me what I do for a living. I tell them that I'm an author or a journalist. But the truth of the matter is that I'm a storyteller. I love to tell stories. True stories. Authentic stories. The best stories agitate, provoke, poke, and prod our preconceptions. They affirm our experiences; give credence to our personal and collective histories. And they bring us to distant places. To distant people. Stories... help us find empathy... They put us in the shoes of others; they help us understand the world through the eyes of those whose experiences differ from our own.

They help us to understand what it's like to be a child of undocumented workers in Waukegan or Carpentersville – instructed to call family friends should your parents not come home from work. They help us feel the confusion and anxiety of a 15-year-old boy on the city's west side who has watched a friend shot in a dispute over a girl. They help us contemplate the fortitude of a family who has lost their home and is forced to squat in an abandoned building in Englewood. They help us imagine the humiliation of a Pakistani immigrant detained in various county jails for four years by the Department of Homeland Security... That's what stories do... They help us see what others see, to hear what others hear... to feel what others feel.

One thing that has struck me, spending time in the back alleys of our cities and dusty corners of rural America, is the reluctance, sometimes unwillingness, of people to share their stories. I used to think that it was purely because of distrust of outsiders, (which I certainly understood) but I've come to realize that there's more at work... This notion that if they tell their story they won't be believed... I've been confronted with this time and time again...

When we sold the movie rights to *There Are No Children Here* to Oprah Winfrey, I was a kind of tour guide to the screenwriter, who came out to Chicago

from New York. I introduced him to the neighborhood and to the people I wrote about. He was a quiet, soft-spoken, gentle man, and as we began to spend time together, I got this uneasy feeling that he didn't believe all that I had written. I brought him to the most decrepit high-rises. I pointed out the big-time drug dealers, and I introduced him to the meanest gang members. On our fourth and last day, he and I and two friends of mine, two women who live and work at a neighboring housing complex, went to lunch at a restaurant on the west side. And while we were sitting in our booth, a young boy (maybe 14, 15 years old) walked in and ducked behind the heating grill. And as he did, a group of boys walked by and one of them pulled a pistol out of a brown paper bag and started shooting. Needless to say, we were all scared for our lives and so we ducked under our table. As we lay there curled up on the floor, all I could think to myself was "Now he's going to believe me."

This self-imposed silence is the most painful and destructive kind of silence there is – and it will slowly sap the spirit out of an otherwise spirited people.

And what it says to me is something very, very simple: We've stopped listening. We've stopped believing. What does that suggest? It seems so obvious: We need to start listening, to start believing. Much of my hope in telling stories is that it will do just that – get people to listen, get people to believe.

Elie Wiesel once wrote, of those like himself who survived the Holocaust: They persist in surviving not only to survive, but to testify.

They become witnesses... They tell stories... Stories which may be difficult to hear and to tell... but stories that are essential... Essential to understanding from whence we came and where we are headed. Stories help us make sense of the nonsensical. They help us figure out our place in the world.

So, you ask, what does storytelling have to do with you?

It seems to me that storytelling is essential to those trained in psychology... It's how you deal with your clients... You try to make sense of their stories... For in doing so, it helps you... And it helps them... Make sense of their lives... And of the world around them. Stories capture not only the present... but as Elie Wiesel suggested, helps us understand the past which informs the future...

Many of you through your experiences at Adler have found your way into communities you otherwise might not have ventured into, you have spent time with people who you otherwise might not have met. What could be more honorable, more admirable, more noble than... finding ways to fortify the human spirit?

And here's where storytelling becomes paramount. While out in the world, you will see things, you will hear things, you will be moved by things that most of us have never thought about, have never faced. You will see injustice. You will encounter intolerance. You will find inequities. You will help the rest of us believe... You will, as did Elie Wiesel,... testify... and force the rest of us to bear witness along with you...

Graduates, I urge you to seize this extraordinary moment in your lives... as you cross those rivers, move beyond the familiar, spend time in communities other than your own... listen. Listen to the many varied voices out there.

Listen closely. Listen to people's tales. Hear their dreams – and their fears. Listen to their suffering and share their laughter. Cry with them. Break bread with them. Play with them. Work alongside them. View the world from their perspectives, and most importantly bring us there with you... Help the rest of us see what they see. Help us hear what they hear. Help us feel what they feel. Stories, in the end, are nothing short of... our quest for understanding... our quest for justice... our quest for truth...

A democracy dies without transparency. There can be no freedom, no justice if we operate under false assumptions, if we aren't fully informed, if we aren't fully clued in. Truth is the engine of freedom. And the way to truth is by bearing witness, by telling stories.

And finally find the moral courage to take a stand... Silence, indifference, apathy – as Elijah Lovejoy knew all too well – again is a luxury we cannot afford... In the end it is the everyday, incremental acts of defiance that will right an otherwise tilted world...

I want to end with something a dear friend of mine once said. It's Studs Terkel, the great oral historian who has taught us all to listen – especially to the voices of those he calls the et ceteras of the world. Studs is 96... as sharp as ever...

Here's what Studs once said:

My goal is to survive the day. To survive it with a semblance of grace, curiosity, and a sense I've done something pretty good. I can't survive the day unless everyone else survives it, too. I live in a community, and if the community isn't in good shape, neither am I.

And that's how it should be for all of us...

Congratulations, graduates of 2008. Now go out and shake up the world... but first go out and celebrate a little... The world, I assure you, can wait a day or two...