

[print this page](#)[close window](#)

'Be Not Afraid'

None of what you've learned in college means anything without the courage to use it in the world.

By Anna Quindlen

Adapted from the commencement address delivered May 17, 2005 to Barnard College.

Reprinted with permission from Barnard College.



Here are the bookends of my first full year as chair of the board at Barnard. In August I asked the entering [first-year students], channeling my 18-year-old self, "Aren't you terrified?"

But today the "first-years" of four years ago are leaving this campus, and from the vantage point of 30 years gone by since I sat where you sit, my message to you is exactly the opposite:

Be not afraid.

It is a simple directive and an old and honorable one, found in both the Old and New Testaments. That is because it is truly the secret of life. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point."

Fear not.

Oh, I have enough of a memory to know that at some level it's preposterous to say that at this moment. You are afraid: of leaving what you know, of seeking what you want, of taking the wrong path, of failing the right one. Your closest friends are going in one direction, you in another. From this small, serene, safe pond you go through that iron estuary to the ocean. And often the current is harsh and the riptides are rough.

But you leave here today with a bedrock you may not even recognize. Some of you know all there is to know about DNA, others the undistributed middle or the form of the sonnet, others the meaning of the shadows in Vermeer or the holes in Freud's theories.

With due deference to the finest faculty in the country, none of that means anything without courage.

This is a college in which the business management directive "Drive Out Fear" might be carved in cast iron over those gates. You must refuse to be cowed by the opinions of others. You must have the strength to say no to the wrong things and to embrace the right ones, even if you are the only one who seems to know the difference. And if my experience serves, in the not-so-distant future you will realize that courage is the central attribute that you took from this place, a place in which timidity is rarely tolerated and audacity is all around you, tempting you with its brio.

It took fearlessness to found this college by a Columbia president named Frederick A.P. Barnard who defied the tenor of his time to stand firm in his belief that young women were as capable of higher learning as their male counterparts.

And it took similar courage for the trustees of this college to conclude, while institutions like us were being absorbed by others or changing their essential natures, that we must and would stand firm, that the level playing field was still a utopian ideal and that a college for women still had, not just a place, but a preeminent place, in modern America.

But all of that would just be the stuff of history if we did not have at our disposal living examples of commonplace courage in the person of the women who are our graduates, whose sisterhood you join today.

Make no mistake about it: you are going to need to work hard not to let fear rule your lives. It takes courage to prevail in arenas that are unaccustomed to the full participation of women, to wield the scalpel, to wear the badge, to run for the Presidency. And it takes courage to be a supremely educated woman and to eschew those arenas, to embrace the teaching of fourth graders or the care of small children.

The world has changed in remarkable ways for women in your lifetime. But we still live with the pinched expectations of a culture of conformity. If you decide at some point in your life that your vocation is to raise your own children full time, you will surely be criticized by those who think you're wasting your intellect. And if you decide to combine full-time work outside your home with a family within it, you will be criticized for not juggling as well as a circus performer. We live in a country that trashes poor women who will not leave their children to go out to work, and trashes well-to-do women who will.

Only a principled refusal to be terrorized by these stingy standards will save you from a Frankenstein life made up of others' outside expectations grafted together into a poor semblance of existence. You can't afford to do that. It is what has poisoned our culture, our community, and our national character. No one does the right thing from fear. And so many of the wrong things are done in its long shadow. Homophobia, sexism, racism, religious bigotry, xenophobia: they are all bricks in a wall that divides us, bricks cast of the clay of fear, fear of that which is different or unknown.

Our political atmosphere today is so dispiriting because so many of our leaders are leaders in name only. They are terrorized by polls and focus groups, by the need to be all things to all people, which means that they are nothing at all.

Our workplaces are full of fear: fear of innovation, fear of difference. The most widely used cliché in management today is to think outside the box. The box is not only stale custom. It is terrified paralysis. It is not only that we need to think outside it. We need to flatten it and put it outside for the recyclers.

In my own business, fear is the ultimate enemy. It accounts for censorship, obfuscation, the homogenization of the news when sharp, free, fearless news is more necessary than ever before.

Without fear or favor the news business must provide readers and viewers with stories even if those are stories the powerful do not want you to hear or believe.

And, as important, when we've gotten it wrong we must say so fearlessly in the public square, with full and frank disclosure.

I hope some day all institutions, particularly government ones, will vow to do the same.

Too often our public discourse fears real engagement or intellectual intercourse; it pitches itself at the lowest possible level of homogenization, always preaching to the choir, so that no one will be angry. Which usually means that no one will be interested.

What is the point of free speech if we are always afraid to speak freely? Not long ago I asked professor of religion Elizabeth Castelli what she did to suit the comfort level of the diverse group of students in her class. "It is not my job to make people comfortable," she said. "It is to educate them." I nearly stood up and cheered. If we fear competing viewpoints, if we fail to state the unpopular because of some sense of plain-vanilla civility, it is not civility at all. It is the denigration of the human capacity for thought, the suggestion that we are fragile flowers

incapable of disagreement, argument, or civil intellectual combat.

There are no fragile flowers seated before me today. We are smart and sure and strong enough to overcome the condescending notion that opposing viewpoints are too much for us to bear--in politics, in journalism, in business, in the academy.

Open your mouths. Speak your piece. Fear not.

You understood this message in your marrow even four years ago. You had to have some essential bravery to even choose Barnard. It is not the easy choice; many of you have had to explain yourselves--the university, the city, the single-sex institution. At its core it must have spoken to something within you that was daring, that was confident, that knew that you knew best what was best for you.

And it was not an easy time, when most of you began here. Two weeks in and the golden city was bombed and bereaved and burst into flames and then smoked for weeks after, so that the smell of something burning even reached this far north. Dean Denburg remembers being downtown less than a week afterwards, on Fifth Avenue, and coming upon a group of students wearing Barnard tee shirts, passing out leaflets calling for tolerance for people of all backgrounds and all religions at a time when tolerance was the last thing on most Americans minds.

What a brave thing to do. What a Barnard thing to do.

I have a Barnard tee shirt, too. Many of them actually, but the one I like best is the one I wore this winter to midnight breakfast. It says: Barnard: you got a problem with that?

There is a wealth of subtext behind the slogan, but the most elemental is this: don't mess with me. I am a woman who was educated at the epicenter of education for women, a woman who grew to adulthood in a place that told her, every day, that her opinion was not only important, that it was absolutely required.

People write all the time to my places of employment with the suggestion that someone should have put a stop to my declarations long ago. They have dismissive words for a woman who does the job I do. Opinionated--a word used only for women, usually meaning having strong opinions when one ought not to have them. Bossy--taking charge, but without benefit of a Y chromosome. Feisty. Ooh, it makes my skin crawl. It's a word that suggests the petite who argue, perhaps in very high voices.

All three are apologetic terms. I'm so sorry I have strong opinions. I'm so sorry I take the lead. I'm so sorry I refuse to take no for an answer.

I say to you today: No apologies. Graduating from Barnard means never having to say you're sorry.

There is plenty to fear out there. Last year I gave into it myself, writing a column at just this time called "An Apology to the Graduates," telling the class of 2004 how sorry I was about the unremitting stress they have been under all their lives.

In part I wrote:

There's an honorable tradition of starving students; it's just that, between outsourcing of jobs and a boom market in real estate, your generation envisions becoming starving adults. Caught in our peculiar modern nexus of prosperity and insolvency, easy credit and epidemic bankruptcy, you also get toxic messages from the culture about what achievement means. It is no longer enough to make it; you must make it BIG. You all will live longer than any generation in history, yet you were kicked into high gear earlier as well. Your college

applications looked like the resumes for middle-level executives. How exhausted you must be.

Here is what awaits you: you will be offered the option of now becoming exhausted adults, convinced that no achievement is large enough, with resumes as long as short stories. But what if that feels like a betrayal of self, a forced march down a road trodden by other feet, at the end of which is--nothing you truly care for?

Fear not. Remember Pinocchio? There is a Jiminy Cricket on your shoulder. It is you, your best self, the one you can trust. The only problem is that it is sometimes hard to hear what it says because all the external voices and messages are so loud, so insistent, so adamant. Voices that loud are always meant to bully.

Do not be bullied.

Earlier this year I attended a session of Dennis Dalton's Political Theory class. The students were studying the Tao. Professor Dalton graciously gave me my own pocket-sized copy. I now read it every day, especially this passage. It makes me despair of ever saying anything original. And it keeps me honest.

It says:

In dwelling, live close to the ground.

In thinking, keep to the simple.

In conflict, be fair and generous.

In governing, don't try to control.

In work, do what you enjoy.

In family life, be completely present.

When you are content to be simply yourself,

And don't compare or compete,

Everybody will respect you.

We live in a world in which the simple, the generous, the enjoyable, the completely present, above all the "simply yourself" sometimes seem as out of reach as the moon. Do not be fooled. That is not because anyone has found a better way in the millennia since the Tao was written. It is because too often we are people shadowed by fear. The ultimate act of bravery does not take place on a battlefield. It takes place in your heart, when you have the courage to honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations and yes, your soul by listening to its clean, clear voice of direction instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world.

That voice is strong now. Go take a leap of faith and fearlessness into the arms of the great adventure of an authentic life. Courage, and congratulations. Bless you all.

Anna Quindlen, best-selling author and columnist for Newsweek, is a graduate of Barnard's Class of 1974 and chair of the board of trustees. Her recent book, 'Being Perfect,' was published by Random House in April 2005.