

WELLESLEY COLLEGE

FREE EXPRESSION:  
BEYOND RIGHTS,  
BEYOND WORDS

PRESIDENT PAULA A. JOHNSON  
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# FREE EXPRESSION: BEYOND RIGHTS, BEYOND WORDS

## WELLESLEY CLUB

Thank you, Suzy, for that kind introduction. Rev. Cole, thank you for your invocation. Our students are fortunate to have you as chaplain

It is wonderful to be here. Thank you so much for having me. The Club has such a long history and plays such a vital role in Wellesley's civic and cultural life, that it is a pleasure to speak with you this evening. Thank you, to your leadership and to all of you here tonight, for the multitude of ways you add to our shared community.

Suzy, let me just say also that we are proud to claim you as a Wellesley alumna. Your commitment to this community and its schools and all the work you do—this is what we mean when we talk about Wellesley alumnae making a difference. Speaking of which, I want to acknowledge all the other Wellesley alumnae in the room. I thank you very much for being here tonight.

**I WANT TO START** my remarks tonight by sharing with you a little about how I came to Wellesley.

In 2016 I left my position as chief of the Division of Women's Health at Harvard Medical School and Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, where I had founded the Connors Center for Women's Health and Gender Biology, the Division of Women's Health, to become the

14th president of Wellesley College.

I saw this new role as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to carry my lifelong commitment to help women thrive onto a broader stage through a focus on education and developing women's leadership. At the same time, I fully recognized that this marked a major transition.

This it has certainly been. But it has also been even more exhilarating than I could have imagined. And I have been happily surprised by how my previous experiences, as a physician and in the field of women's health, prepared me for this new role. I think especially of how my years in medicine taught me to lead with questions—and to listen intently to their answers.

The good physician approaches each patient with a sense of humility, profoundly aware of the limits of their knowledge. Good physicians also recognize that how they talk to patients is as important as what they say. We need to talk in ways that encourage patients to speak openly—that give them a sense of security and confidence they will be heard. And we need to hear what patients say, even when their words are unclear or halting. Even when they have no words.

In this way, medicine shares a great deal with both education and civic service. It is no coincidence that Wellesley's Latin motto is *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare*, which translates as

“Not to be ministered unto, but to minister.”

The idea that college exists apart from the so-called real world has always been a myth, but never more so than now. The outside world does not stay outside—and I mean that quite literally.

The chaos over immigration policy, the travel ban, the end of temporary protected status for certain groups of people, and the endangerment of the DACA policy are some obvious examples. These issues have become deeply personal for me, as I talk to Wellesley students worried about what these will mean both for them and for members of their families. I have watched them go about their lives with a thrumming anxiety, even as they try to carry on as ordinary college students.

Equally distressing is the seeming normalization of casually disrespectful treatment of women, laid bare by the “#MeToo” movement, and in efforts to restrict reproductive health care and other rights. These have hit women students hard.

They also tap in to larger anxieties—the same fears that are no doubt fueled by the success of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Emmy-winning TV series based on Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel.

Emotions run high these days, and have for some time now. This is true across the country and across the political spectrum. So many people continue to feel under threat, at risk of imminent harm. And no one feels this more than people who already felt vulnerable—perhaps because they are. Women, people of color, people who love the “wrong” person or worship the “wrong” God. People who struggle to make a living in dying industries. People who fear that cherished rights and traditions are fading into history.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” But it is not fear alone that should worry us. The real danger is where fear leads us. Too often

fear pushes us to action before we think things through. Our heart rate and blood pressure spike. Our breathing quickens. We tend toward fight or flight, not open-ended conversation.

Which leads us to the topic that I want to focus on today: The ongoing battles on college campuses around the issue of free expression.

You have no doubt heard about at least some of these. Yale, Middlebury, Berkeley—and yes, Wellesley—are a few of the campuses where conflicts have made national news. There is a sense that these incidents have implications far beyond campuses.

While the facts of these incidents vary, all of them raise the same fundamental questions: If we value free expression—and we do—what should that look like on a college campus? Where do we draw the line? To what extent should we welcome perspectives that some—or many—find dangerous or offensive?

I have been thinking a lot about these questions. Beyond the issue of what we say, is how we *talk about* what we say—how we even have this conversation. There is something of an irony here: We struggle to find a way to talk about what we should talk about.

On both sides of this debate, I see people of good will. Yet we have made little progress. If anything, the rift is growing.

So great is the concern around campus speech that it is now included in a bill to rewrite the Higher Education Act, which the House Education Committee said, just this past Friday, it is eager to bring to a floor vote as soon as possible.

The more I read, the more people I talk to, the more I am struck by how polarized this debate has become. Caricatures proliferate, with the opposition portrayed as dangerous extremists.

Such caricatures are rarely accurate. Never are they helpful. In a memorable TED talk, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie talked about the dangers of the single story—the narrative that flattens and reduces, that oversimplifies.

When we see others in this way, it is hard to talk to them. I mean, come on. What is the point? We are right. They are wrong. End of story.

But of course, it is not the end of the story. It never is. We must find ways to live with each other. Where do we go from here?

You know that famous line in the movie *Jaws*, “You’re gonna need a bigger boat”? Well, with freedom of expression, I have come to think that we could use a bigger perspective. And, for that, we would do well to look to our moral and spiritual convictions.

Last summer, some of the world’s most prominent religious leaders—the Dalai Lama, the Pope, and many others—made a remarkable joint appeal urging people to befriend members of other faiths. Watching this video—it is available on YouTube—I was reminded of the values shared by the world’s great religions. Love. Kindness. Compassion. These principles are universal.

I grew up in the Episcopal Church. My husband is Jewish. Both of us were taught the importance of caring for other people, especially those who are suffering, especially those in need. The same is true for my friends of other faith traditions—Islam, Buddhism, and the increasingly common “spiritual but not religious.”

You may be starting to wonder where I am going with this. How does any of this relate to speech on college campuses? My point is simply this: Freedom of expression is a value—but it is not our only value.

Today’s debates over free expression have tended to focus on “rights”—What do I have the *right* to say?

This is an important question—but it is not the only question. We would also do well to ask ourselves: What do I *want* to say?

This question is powerful. It calls on us to think about what we say in the context of *who we want to be*. To consider how our words align with our beliefs about what it means to be a good person. The two are connected, inextricably so.

In the words of former New York poet laureate Marie Howe: “The moral life is lived out in what we say more often than what we do.”

Let’s be clear. There is no question that freedom of speech—free expression—has helped to pave the way to a better world, that it is essential to human progress and a healthy democracy. Martin Luther King Jr.’s last speech, delivered the day before his assassination, is widely remembered for its soaring language—“I’ve been to the mountaintop”—and its terribly prescient conclusion, as King recognized that “I may not get there with you.” But earlier, he spoke, too, of the First Amendment rights of Memphis sanitation workers and their supporters to protest injustice.

Freedom of expression has a special role for colleges and universities, institutions that strive to push forward the frontiers of knowledge. Intellectual openness is central to this endeavor. Progress happens when the clash of ideas gives rise to new insights. It happens when we turn toward new ideas and grapple with their implications.

All of this is indisputably true.

But also: There is more.

As deeply as we value free expression, we must also acknowledge its costs—costs that are often borne by the most vulnerable among us. Internet trolling, sexual harassment, hate speech, bullying—all these have a measure of First Amendment protection despite extensive evidence of the harm they cause.

Remember the old childhood saying: “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me”? As a physician, I can tell you that this is simply not true. Depression, anxiety, suicide risk—these are physical health issues that we know can be caused or made worse by repetitive hostile or intemperate words.

Stress is not simply a state of mind. It is also in our bodies. Researchers have coined the term “allostatic load” to describe the ways stress creates wear and tear on our physical selves. I am reminded of these words from the great Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel lecture: “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.” There is truth in these words.

Those of us who head institutions of higher education have a great privilege—and a great responsibility. Today’s students are tomorrow’s leaders. How well we prepare them will go far to determine what the future looks like.

A big part of this preparation is the capacity to talk across difference—to navigate a world that is jam-packed with people with whom we disagree. No amount of education can make up for the absence of such “soft skills,” which I would argue are not “soft” at all, but essential. Without them, students will never live up to their full potential—and the world will be the poorer for it. There are no more important skills to nurture, no more useful skills to hone.

The college years are both precious and formative. They offer a chance to take chances, succeed or fail, and try again. They are not only preparation. They are also practice for life, which happens to be the title of a book co-authored by two of our professors. “Practice for life.” I love that phrase. Because, really, who among us could not do with a bit more practice?

This is especially true when it comes to how we talk to each other, how we manage difficult conversations. One thing I know: We must find ways to move beyond either/or thinking. We can be fully committed to freedom of expression and at the same time deeply concerned with the impact of our words on other people.

In fact, we must be. Love, kindness, compassion, generosity—these are not values we can check at the campus gates. Yes, we must open minds, but we must also open hearts.

Colleges such as Wellesley have a dual role. We are both a place of learning—a place of rigorous inquiry—and a home for our students. Both safety and challenge have their roles. As any number of psychologists will tell you, we grow through challenges that stretch us, not through those that break us.

This is what I want for Wellesley students—these stretch-but-not-break challenges. I want them to have the safety they need to grow as strong as they can. Indeed, this is what I want for all young people—not just at Wellesley but everywhere.

But I do not believe that students are best served when we replicate the harshest aspects of the so-called real world. To the contrary, the very fact that Wellesley is a women’s school reflects a conviction that removing certain obstacles from college students’ lives may benefit them in the long run. The lives and careers of Wellesley women certainly bear this out.

Students are not being “snowflakes” when they take their own feelings and beliefs seriously and act accordingly. We can question a student’s choice and still respect the thoughts and feelings that gave rise to it. If we truly want to help students grow, we need to be thoughtful in our presentation of highly charged ideas. As a college, our role should go beyond issuing an invitation and providing a podium. We must find ways to draw in students who feel alienated, angry, or afraid—to set up the conversation in ways that will bring them to the table. That is our responsibility.

In closing, I want to share a story. It is one that I carry with me, one that both inspires me and gives me hope.

Last spring, as the academic year wound to a close, a group of student activists created a video to spotlight what they considered to be critical shortcomings on Wellesley’s campus—our failure to do more to address the needs of students from marginalized communities, whether their status stems from race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any number of other attributes.

It was not an easy thing for me to watch. I was reminded yet again of how painful it is to feel “other.” It reminded me that, for all our progress, much remains to be done.

To be sure, there were a few factual errors. But that in no way undermined these students’ real concern. They called me and others to task in uncompromising terms.

Then I received a remarkable letter. It came from the student leader behind the video project. Here, in relevant part, is what she said:

*President Johnson,*

*I just wanted to reach out and say thank you for all that you do for the Wellesley community. I know my work this semester...didn't exactly make your job any easier, but my hope is that this work and the work of student activists across campus propel conversation and college policy to be more inclusive and just...*

*While I am quick to point out the ways Wellesley can improve, I also know that the support network I gained through my time here, and the deep understanding of myself and my voice, are things I will carry with me throughout the rest of my life....*

By any measure this is a beautiful note.

But what moved me most—what filled me with hope and not a little pride—was this student’s capacity to step beyond the single story. She refused to let her very real concerns blind her to what is good. She could fight—and fight hard—yet still see through eyes of love.

Thank you.

