

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Graduation

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Hello graduates.

It is such an honor this morning to be able to speak to you, your families, and those you love, all of us brimming over with pride over what you have accomplished and what you want to do with your public health training.

These are difficult times for public health, and you are graduating into a difficult and uncertain world.

I give a lot of speeches, but in a political environment like this one, I've had to think hard about what to say.

What's happening now reminds me of my own graduation from public health school in Berkeley in 1986.

Our speaker was Barbara Ehrenreich, the scientist, feminist, and investigative journalist who wrote Nickel and Dimed about her personal experience doing low-wage work.

What she said has stuck with me.

If we public health professionals were not in trouble every day of our working lives, we were not doing our jobs.

The job of public health is to confront entrenched political power on behalf of those who cannot.

Public health is political because it is about how society distributes resources and who gets to decide about those resources.

For populations to be healthy, everyone, everywhere needs adequate food, clean water, clean air, and decent housing, education, and health care.

I'm guessing you chose this field because you want everyone, everywhere to have such things.

I'm guessing you chose public health because it would give you a life of meaningful work. You want a life in which what you do every day contributes to better lives for everyone, everywhere.

But by this time, you know the political reality. Not everyone shares such goals.

If you want health for all, you will be confronting power.

If those in power do not like what you do, you will be in trouble.

To do public health work, you will need courage, and lots of it.

In my life trajectory, I never thought I was particularly courageous. I was just trying to survive.

I grew up at a time when opportunities for women were limited. We were expected to marry young, have children right away, and support our husbands' careers. I did all of that.

Today's politics reminds me of when that I was a high school student in Los Angeles in the early 1950s.

This was the height of the McCarthy era. This was when being a communist, sympathizing with communist values, or being accused of being a communist or a communist sympathizer was enough to expose you to publicly shaming.

It got you fired from your job. It made you unemployable.

McCarthy was a Republican senator from Wisconsin obsessed with ferreting out communist sympathizers working for the government.

He soon went beyond government employees to go after Hollywood producers and screenwriters, university professors, and ordinary people.

He succeeded. Thousands of people lost their jobs and were unable to work. Hundreds of people were imprisoned. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed.

Those were terrifying times.

In my high school, two teachers were fired.

I had friends whose parents who lost their jobs, were blacklisted, went to prison, or had to go underground and hide out for years.

We were scared. We were afraid of who might be watching us, reporting us to the FBI, or accusing us of disloyalty.

What scared us most was that McCarthy was not acting alone. He had plenty of public support.

His base included people who hated anything international, the United Nations, the social welfare programs of the New Deal, and anything else overtly aimed at reducing social and economic disparities.

Sound familiar?

But by the time I was finishing high school, support for McCarthyism was waning.

McCarthy blundered. When he went after suspected communists in the army, he allowed those hearings to be televised.

People who watched those hearings were appalled by his cruelty, his lack of human decency. He had gone too far.

His power faded, and the McCarthy era came to an end.

McCarthyism left a lot of damage in its wake. But it ended.

And this era too will pass.

As for me, I went on to college, got married, had children, went to graduate school, got a doctorate in molecular biology, and took a job teaching college biology. When I was assigned a nutrition course to teach, my love affair with this field began.

I could see that nutrition was a fabulous way to teach undergraduate biology.

Cell and molecular biology are highly abstract, but everyone eats.

Everyone can relate to how food is handled in the body and how it affects health.

And everyone can see how politics affects food choices.

Not everyone can afford to eat healthfully.

The food industry's job is to sell food products no matter how those products might affect health.

I went on to teach nutrition to medical students and when that job fell apart—OK, I was fired—I was advised to go to public health school and get a nutrition credential.

For me, public health school was life-changing.

The focus on populations, on upstream causes of health problems, made sense.

Billions of people throughout the world suffer from malnutrition; billions more eat too much of the wrong kinds of foods.

The way we produce and consume food has a huge impact on climate and on the environment.

I was lucky enough to be able to do my public health nutrition fieldwork working for the Agency for International Development in southeast Asia.

I was 50 years old when I got the MPH degree, and I was just beginning my career writing and teaching about the politics of food, which is what I have done ever since.

That's my trajectory.

But what about yours?

You are entering the workforce at a time in American history when public health has never been so devalued and so under attack, along with science and expertise in general.

All threaten this particular power structure.

Like all political eras, this one will end.

The question is what to do while waiting this out.

Whatever your interest in public health—whether domestic or international; aimed at improving nutrition, the environment, or health care; focused on mental, family, or reproductive health, or on researching the root causes of health problems—your work will matter.

Your work has never been needed more, challenging as it may be to find a way to do it.

But you will find a way. Whatever you land on, give it your all.

There is much to be learned from any public health job, particularly those serving real people with real needs.

Go do it.

Know your values and priorities. You may find yourself in a position that challenges those values.

This will require strength and courage.

Being strong and courageous can be scary, especially if you are on your own.

It is much easier to be courageous when others are with you. Get to know and care about your colleagues.

They need your help to be courageous, just as you need theirs.

You will be stronger together.

Yes, if you stand up for your values, or advocate for others, you can get into trouble.

And you may have hard decisions to make.

But those decisions will be easier if you are clear about your values, what you think is right, and have friends and colleagues who share those values.

The kind of advocacy I want to do is about food systems.

I want food systems to provide everyone with good food every day. I want them to help reduce chronic disease, to be sustainable, to protect the environment, and to keep climate change from getting worse.

This is an overtly political agenda.

But any public health agenda is political.

Right now, any public health agenda has to be aspirational.

So here's my aspirational list.

Number one: *Get money out of politics.* We need public funding for election campaigns to elect officials who care more about public health than corporate health or making the rich richer.

And how about:

- A universal, single-payer health care system that actually works.
- Getting the rich to pay their fair share of taxes.
- An outstanding public education system for all kids.
- Universal basic income so everyone has enough money to buy healthy food.
- Universal school meals so no child ever goes hungry.

And because I care about food systems, a few more aspirations:

- An agricultural system focused on food for people rather than feed for animals or fuel for automobiles.
- A system that gives farmers and farm workers a decent living.
- Restrictions on food industry marketing, especially to children.

And just for fun,

- Dietary guidelines focused on foods rather than nutrients, with clear advice about which foods are better for health.

Ridiculous? Totally unrealistic?

Sure, but political environments can change.

We need to identify our aspirations so we are ready when the time comes.

Hope for the future is not optional. It is an obligation.

Silence is also not an option.

Speak out. Act. Find a way to advocate that works for you.

Public health is not just about health. It's about democracy in action.

We have never needed it more.

You have never been needed more.

Go make trouble.

If you don't, who will?

I wish you all the courage in the world.

Congratulations!

And thanks for the opportunity to share these thoughts.