

Jim Obergefell
Commencement Speech
Spring 2015 Commencement, May 24, 2015

Thank you, Dr. Underwood. It's an honor to have been asked to be part of this ceremony. Before I start my commencement speech, I'd like to tell you what a privilege it is for me to be on Guam for the first time. Yesterday I visited the War in the Pacific National Historical Park, and I had the honor of leaving a wreath in memory of my father. My father was a Navy Seabee, and he was stationed here on Guam during and after World War II.

What I've learned during my visit on Guam is that you – as a people, a culture – honor and respect the sacrifices made by so many. You also value family, and from my perspective, those who fought to liberate this island have become part of your family. Although I'm not Guamanian, I truly feel as if I've been welcomed as part of your family because of that connection. Not only that, Guamanians protect family; I believe another reason I've been welcomed so warmly is because my story, my fight, is all about protecting family. You relate to that. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for doing me this great honor.

It's exciting to finally see a place I knew only through my father; being here on Guam gives me a chance to remember and reconnect with my Dad, and that's truly a gift, especially this Memorial day weekend.

My Dad, like many veterans, and I imagine even Chamorro survivors from the war and occupation here on Guam, didn't talk much about his experiences during the war, but I do know a bit about it.

He spent a fair amount of time guarding Japanese prisoners, and his experience guarding them had an unexpected impact on how he viewed the world and other people.

I remember my Dad saying how surprised he was to discover that the prisoners weren't so very different from him. Guarding them gave him the opportunity to realize that, no matter what pre-conceived notions he might have, people really are more similar than different.

I believe that experience, that realization, informed his outlook for the rest of his life; I can't ever remember my Dad talking about "them vs. us", "those people", or any of those things that indicated he was making a judgment or thinking of someone as less than, or different than, he was. I like to think I learned that from him.

He was the kind of person who treated others with dignity, something I have come to know that Chamorros did not receive during occupation. So I am grateful to my dad and all servicemembers who helped liberate Guam.

I was fortunate enough to be able to come out to my Dad a few years before he died. His response? "Jim, all I've ever wanted was for you to be happy."

I believe his response is rooted in what he discovered about people - even people who seemed so different, even enemies at war - while he served here on Guam. I feel it's something that I see embodied in Guam culture as well. A deep spirit of welcome and joy for and with others. It's certainly what I have experienced so far during my time on Guam.

Okay now, let's talk about Commencement.

Twenty-five years ago I was sitting at my commencement ceremony, just like you are today, feeling many of the same things you're likely feeling right now.

Happy to be finished with classes, papers and exams.

Uncertain about what came next because I still didn't have a "real" job lined up.

Excited about the possibilities life now held for me.

Impatient with the commencement speakers because all I wanted was to receive my diploma, go celebrate, and start my life.

Go on, you can admit you wish I were already finished!

Most of all, I remember feeling certain that I was going to make a difference in the world. My degree was in Secondary Education and German, and I knew, I just knew, I would find a teaching job and be one of those teachers who inspired his students. I was going to be that teacher, that one teacher, many students named when asked who made a difference in their lives.

I taught high school German for two years. Yes, I did make a difference in some of my students' lives, and I've since become friends with several of them; however, being a high school teacher wasn't the best fit for me. Looking back and being honest with myself, I know it's mainly because I wasn't mature enough at that point in my life. I still had things to learn about myself, so teaching others wasn't really the best thing for me to be doing.

Things don't always turn out the way we expect, and it can take time to find your way, your place in the world. The one certainty I can tell you is this: your path in this world doesn't always take the direction you planned on or expected. Life is a journey, and like any trip, you have to be open to unexpected experiences, side trips, and making the most of what happens.

Be open to learning new things about yourself after you leave here; you might feel like you know everything you need to know, but I promise you, there's still more to discover.

I know that's been my experience.

I left teaching and went to graduate school to study College Student Personnel.

Graduate school taught me even more things about myself. For one, I don't like to manage or be responsible for others. As the Director of Student Activities at a small university - my graduate assistantship - it became clear to me that managing other people isn't for me.

The most important thing graduate school did for me was provide a safe, welcoming environment for me to accept who I am - a gay man. After years of avoiding that scary, internal discussion - and wasting so much energy pretending to be someone I wasn't - I could finally admit it not only to myself but to the people I cared about.

For the first time in my life, I was truly open to myself and to others, and within a few short months, my journey took yet another unexpected turn.

I fell in love.

John and I met once. At a bar. Nothing happened. We met again. At the same bar. Still, nothing happened. We met a third time, when one of his housemates invited me to John's house for a New Years Eve party. I went to that party, and I never left.

I realize "we" happened so quickly and easily because I was open to it. I was on my journey, and open to possibilities. Finding love wasn't what I expected to happen, but it did.

John and I built a life together. We made friends, we bought a home, we traveled, we worked together, we loved each other.

I learned even more about myself in 2011 after John and I had been together for 18 years. That spring, John was diagnosed with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. ALS is a fatal, progressive neurological disease; most patients die within 2-5 years of diagnosis; that was also common here on Guam and is known as litiku.

Think about how you might react if the love of your life were diagnosed with a fatal, incurable disease.

Would you do everything in your power to help that person, to make the end of his or her life as meaningful, enjoyable, and comfortable as possible?

Or would you decide you couldn't deal with it and kick that person out, end that relationship?

I made what, to me, was the only possible decision; I did everything in my power to care for John, and to make the last few years of his life - our life together - as normal and happy as possible.

I realize it wasn't really a decision; a decision implies I considered more than one possibility. For me, there was no question about how I would respond. John and I had been together for almost 20 years, and although we weren't legally married, we were committed to each other in every other way. I simply did what you do for the person you love.

People congratulated me on staying with John and caring for him.

People told me how brave I was.

I really couldn't understand why anyone would say things like that to me. I just did what was right. I just did what anyone would do for someone they loved.

Then John's father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and his father's girlfriend immediately kicked him out and ended their relationship.

Oh. Now I get it. Not everyone reacts the same way in situations like this. I learned something more about myself; I had always thought of myself as someone who lives up to his commitments, and when the situation called for it, I did. I lived up to my own opinion of myself by honoring my commitments to John.

In February, 2013, John started hospice care at home. Two times a week, two nurses visited our home to check on John and provide care. John was bedridden because he had lost almost all ability to move the left side of his body and most of the ability to move his right side. He could speak, but only haltingly, a sentence or two at a time. He was dependent on others for everything - absolutely everything.

The nurses spent two hours each visit, for total of 4 hours each week. I was privileged to care for John the rest of the time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It wasn't easy. It wasn't fun. But there was nothing I would rather do than care for my love.

What I never imagined at that time, though, was that life would take yet another unexpected turn because I loved someone, because I was willing to take a risk, and because I was open to learning more about myself.

On June 26, 2013, the United States Supreme Court released its decision on the Windsor case, ruling that part of the Defense of Marriage Act was unconstitutional. At the moment the ruling was shared on the news, I leaned over to John, hugged and kissed him, and said "Let's get married." For the first time, marriage could be something more than symbolic for us - it could carry legal weight and be recognized by our government.

Of course, it wasn't as easy as taking John six blocks in his wheelchair to get a marriage license and then marrying at home where he was safe and comfortable. Ohio had passed a constitutional amendment in 2004 that banned same-sex marriage and recognition of same-sex marriages. That meant we needed to go to a different state in order to get a marriage license and to marry. With John's health rapidly deteriorating, our only option was to charter a medical jet. We decided to marry on the grounds of Baltimore Washington International Airport in Maryland.

So we did. We finally made our commitment to each other public and legal. After more than 20 years together, we were lucky enough to say "I thee wed." We felt different. Better. More complete.

A few days after we married, a civil rights attorney - the friend of a friend - pulled out a blank death certificate and explained that, when John died, Ohio would list him as single and leave the Surviving Spouse field blank on his death certificate. John's last official record as a person would be incorrect. We were devastated.

This was the moment, the decision, that point when we could take a stand that would define who we were, what we believed in, what we were willing to fight for.

John and I decided to sue the State of Ohio, to demand that our lawful out-of-state marriage be recognized on John's death certificate at the time he died.

Looking back, I know now that this was the moment we finally realized those ideals so many of us hold at commencement: the ideals of doing something bigger than ourselves, of standing up for what's right, of having a positive impact on others.

It took me 23 years to get there. It might take you that long, or even longer. You might get to that point more quickly than I did. There's no right way and no wrong way to find your purpose, your place in this world. Life is a journey, and journeys take time.

My journey to this place started on July 15, 2013 when we decided to no longer accept being treated as second-class citizens. We filed suit in federal court just four days later, on July 19, 2013. We won three days after that, on July 22, 2013, when Federal District Judge Timothy Black issued a temporary injunction that forced the State of Ohio to recognize our marriage on John's death certificate at the time he died.

John died on October 22, 2013, just three months after we won. His death certificate accurately lists him as married at the time of death, and my name appears as his Surviving Spouse. This simple piece of paper, this last record of John as a person, represents what I was willing to fight for - respect for my husband and for our marriage.

Unfortunately, the State of Ohio refuses to show us respect, and appealed to the Sixth District Court of Appeals. The Sixth District Court of Appeals ruled against us, as well as five other cases from Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee and Michigan.

I had the opportunity to give up the fight then, to take a step back and return to living a quiet life.

I couldn't do it. I realized that my decision to fight for my husband, our marriage, and our rights was one I would make again without reservation - even knowing now that John would live for only three months after we married and decided to file suit.

So I appealed. My journey continued on to the United States Supreme Court in late April of this year, and sometime this June, we'll learn whether or not marriage equality becomes the law across the United States.

It's humbling - and more than a bit surreal - to have my name forever tied with the fight for marriage equality, to know that the Supreme Court case "Obergefell v. Hodges" will be considered a landmark case in American civil rights history.

I reflect back to my commencement 25 years ago, and the things my 23 year-old self wanted, the things I dreamed about. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of my future students. I wanted to have a positive impact on them. I wanted to make my mark on the world within the confines of a high school classroom.

My younger self would be surprised at what I've done, and the fact that I've had an impact far beyond a high school classroom. I'm pretty sure my younger self would be proud of the man I've become.

That's my wish for you: that your older self surprises the you of today, that you'll be proud of the man or woman you become. Embrace the journey you start today, and be open to the unexpected turns that journey will take. Take the values you learned early in life and in education like those taught to me by my father and his experience. Be true to yourself, be open to learning more about yourself, and find that person to love with all your heart.

Sometimes you find your path in life and sometimes the path finds you. May your path lead to being the person you were meant to be.

Congratulations, class of 2015 - go make your mark on the world!