



alternative
Album
forum

Graduation Speech, Adult Degree Program
Vermont College, Montpelier, Vermont
June 27, 1993

Martha VanderWolk

[The following is a graduation address given at the Adult Degree Program of Vermont College by faculty member, Martha VanderWolk. The Adult Degree Program, now located at Vermont College of Union Institute and University, the oldest external degree program for adults in the United States, celebrating its 40th birthday this year, is based in student-centered independent study. At graduations, a faculty member is asked to give the address and students are handed their diplomas by friends or family members who have supported them during their years as a student.]

What I want to talk about today is not talking: silence. Some of you, particularly among the graduates, have heard this rap before, but I hope you'll bear with me while I try to extend it to a wider audience and, I hope, a wider context.

When I first came to the Adult Degree Program as a student, I was silent. I rarely spoke at all, but certainly never in public, which included school. In high school, which was a very small and comparatively safe one, when I did speak no one understood what I meant. In those days, though, I still had my interpreter. Nancy Lord, my neighbor and lifelong friend—who, by the way, is a graduate of the MFA in Writing Program here and an award-winning short story writer—would usually pop up with “What I think Martha’s trying to say is....” But it was clear to me that I was not quite on everybody else’s wavelength and it would probably be just as well if I kept my mouth shut, so I did.

My case is more extreme than most. I was quiet long before that age when Carol Gilligan says girls begin to silence themselves, to forsake open, genuine relationships for the sake of maintaining social relationships, when they begin to monitor their own behavior and other people’s reactions to it, when they begin to sound “loud” to themselves. And this silencing that is typical of girls is not the only cause of silence—two of my sons are extremely quiet, to the point where one Women’s Studies professor complained that one of them was too quiet in class—after all the complaints of feminists that the sole male in a classroom will dominate conversation and silence the women.

Silence can be intimidating—but that is a different point that I’ll get back to later. For now I want to point out that, while my own silence may have been extreme, and the causes genetic as much as social, my experience with conquering silence is not unique. Indeed it is probably very familiar to many of the ADP students here.

After I handed in my Master’s thesis in Environmental Economics, my second reader exclaimed, “Where did you learn to write?” I knew the obligatory answer was the Adult Degree Program, ADP, but I also knew that that wasn’t true. Writing, like reading, was something I’d always been able to do—I don’t remember how I learned either one. But what I did learn at ADP was how to talk—and to be willing to put my own words out into the world with the assumption that they would be heard, understood and respected.

Most people and institutions cannot fathom the kind of self-silencing many of us have experienced in life, cannot see the role they play in perpetuating it generation after generation, and, even if they recognize it, wouldn't have a clue as to how to help people overcome it. While some forms of early alternative education can prevent it, ADP is the only program—educational or otherwise—that I know of that both addresses the issue head-on and knows how to do something about it after the damage has already been done.

Not long ago I went to a "public participation meeting" on a subject of major economic, social, and political concern to the people of the North Country of Vermont and New Hampshire. It would take too long to detail everything that happened at that meeting that led to my reaction, but I came home *furios!* I immediately sat down and wrote the convening group an angry letter. I thought about waiting until the next day, until I'd cooled off, but I decided that they needed to hear my anger. I told them that, and challenged them not to dismiss my letter on the grounds that it was "emotional." I argued that it is not enough to invite people to speak or even to welcome their voices. People who, through the various circumstances and experiences of their lives, have come to believe that they have nothing valuable to contribute to the discussion and that, even if they did, they would not be heard or understood, will not participate in a public discussion. To invite private participation in writing is ridiculous as well among a barely literate population (or one that, at least, *believes* they are barely literate and certainly not articulate). The letter I got in response was exactly what any of us whose voices are routinely not heard would have expected: the issues I raised clearly never made it to the ears of the commission; the wording was designed to appease my emotions, not respond to the issues; and the writer clearly had totally missed the point—if he had tried at all. My response? I said—to myself—"Well, he just proved my point"....and remained silent; exactly the response he was after. My silence, borne of a sense of helplessness and hopelessness of ever being heard, was, I'm sure, interpreted as acquiescence. The commission was absolved of all responsibility for my lack of participation—and that of all the others that they had spent much of the meeting bemoaning—and for finding ways to truly open up public debate on an issue of vital importance to a whole (though small) population. Their essentially empty words about "public participation" would be heard and believed in Washington while the people who would be most affected by the decisions made there would once again remain unheard.

At ADP we *know* that it is not enough to allow or even invite people to speak. All of us who have been ADP students remember our first study exploration groups. We were terrified. We not only had to speak to a "professor," we had to do it in front of other people, people who had done this

before and were, in our eyes, "experts." The reasons we had come back to school later in life varied, but the fact that we had not finished college at the "proper" time meant that we each, in some way, were not normal. Many of us had had negative experiences in educational institutions and didn't trust that we would be any more successful or acceptable here than at any other school we'd gone to.

But the demand that we both speak in public and state our *own* ideas and desires sent us into panics. Teachers are supposed to tell us what to do, not ask us what we *want* to do. How were we supposed to know what was an acceptable idea? What if we said something stupid or foolish (which we were sure we would)? How could someone who's lounging on a sofa with her feet on the table *knitting*, for crying out loud, possibly really be hearing what we're saying and taking it seriously? (Yes, I *have* learned that my silence and my techniques for coping with my own terrors about speaking are intimidating to students). The *idea* that we could study what we wanted in our own way—which sounded so good before we got here—suddenly felt like a trap. Why won't they just *tell* me what to do?! Silencing ourselves is so habitual and has become so much a part of ourselves and how we function in the world that there is virtually no harder thing for us to do than speak.

But ADP does not *allow* us to speak, it does not *invite* us to speak, it does not *ask* us to speak. It *demand*s that we speak. And it's not enough to open our mouths and babble platitudes or what we think we're supposed to say; that doesn't get us off the hook. Because the person who seems so absorbed in her knitting *is* listening—not to what we say as much as how we say it. She's listening to voices, and she somehow knows, seemingly better than the speakers themselves, which voices are genuine and which are the voices that we use to silence ourselves. And long after the study topic is chosen, the books are sorted, and the study is underway, she keeps badgering us: "This doesn't sound like you." "What did you mean by that?" "Why did you avoid this topic?" "What do you think?" "Why are you doing this study if it's such a chore?"

In ADP you learn all the same things you learn in other colleges. You meet distribution requirements (we call them "degree criteria") in the liberal arts. You learn to write standard English prose and construct analytical essays. You do advanced-level work in your concentration and master academic form. But you also learn about yourself and about how you fit into the world in general and the academic world. Not because we *teach* you, in the same way that I could teach you how to derive the quadratic formula, but because we demand that you pay attention to why and how you are learning—and that you value what *you* know, not what we know.

This is the difference between ADP and most other academic institutions. In those other places, what is valued

by all participants is what the keepers of knowledge—the professors—know. The student is presumed to be a non-knower who has come to be told what should be known. And anything they might think they know is not acceptable as knowledge because it hasn't been stamped with the seal of legitimacy yet. So the student is silenced and silent, and the professor professes.

This is not to say that those of us who teach in ADP don't know things of value to students and do not profess that knowledge on occasion—the culminators can, I'm sure, even remember *me* giving a few lectures. Neither does it mean that every idea that a student puts forth is accepted unconditionally as correct or true. Students' ideas are never merely accepted or rejected—they are challenged, yes; questioned, yes; but always heard, respected, considered and responded to. And it is in these discussions that students begin to hear their own voices, to *really* listen to what they themselves are saying, and to puzzle out which voices are theirs and which are the ones they have been using to silence themselves—the teacher's voice, the preacher's voice, the mother's voice, the sibling's voice. (I still will not venture anywhere I am not specifically invited because of one remark a brother once made in anger.) They stop hearing themselves the way they think others hear them and learn to *listen to themselves*. And, in doing so, learn that they *do* have something to contribute to the conversation.

That is why I can stand up in front of you today. Not because I have authority—so that you all had better be polite and listen because I'm Important. Not because I am an expert—my field is Environmental Studies not Psychology. Not because a string of letters after my name conferred by prestigious universities gives me self-confidence and a sense of self-importance. (Yes, ADP graduates go to prestigious universities—and find them easy, by the way.) But because I think I have something to contribute to the conversation about what higher education is about and about the need for it to contribute to society by producing people who are not *merely* knowledgeable but also are willing and able to use that knowledge to make the world a better place, and who are able to think clearly about the consequences of the use of that knowledge. And they can only do that if they believe in what they know and what they think, and in their own ability to use their words to pass that knowledge on.

As graduates of an alternative program, as people who are perceived to be "past their prime" in terms of being able to have new and creative thoughts, as ADP graduates, you may still not be considered legitimate in certain circles, and the very source of your empowerment may be used in attempts to silence you. But at least now, when you are silenced, you will know that the source of that silencing is external, that the other's inability to hear what you have to say is *their* problem, that it's not because there is something wrong with

you. No little voice will whisper in your ear: "Be quiet, you're too stupid; you don't talk right or write well enough; you aren't educated; you can't do it; you have no right; it's none of your business." You'll say, "Hey, wait a minute. I have something important to say and I expect to be listened to! And if you don't understand what I'm saying, please ask me to explain it until you do."

Someone once said that ADP teaches people how to think. I don't believe that; I think you already know how to think. But what I think we do is try to get students to think about thinking and to trust their own thoughts. Perhaps we teach them to think that they are somebody, that they have something important to say, not because they now have a piece of paper that certifies them as knowledgeable, but because they know that what they know is worth passing on to others. And you thought the hard work was over!

Bio: Martha L. VanderWolk graduated from the Adult Degree Program in 1977, received her M.A. in Environmental Economics from Goddard College in 1983, earned a Masters in Public Policy, specializing in environmental and property tax policy, from the University of California/Berkeley in 1986, and a Ph.D. in Science and Technology Studies from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1996. A former horselogger and middle school teacher, she has been teaching in the Adult Degree Program at Vermont College since 1986, mentoring independent learners in the social sciences, mathematics and the sciences. She is presently constructing a handcrafted log home with alternative energy systems based on principles of thermal mass. She sings because she's happy and she's happy because she sings.