

**Naila Baloch**

**Commencement Speech**

**Lyndon State College, Lyndonville VT**

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President Bertolino, respected faculty, staff, parents and family, esteemed guests, students and my very dear graduates, I thank you from my heart for this honor of speaking to you today. May peace fill your hearts on this very special day.

When I was invited to speak at Commencement, I was at a loss as to what words I might offer you that might be meaningful to you in this moment of your life. I finally decided to share some of my own life, with the hope that my story will touch and intersect with some of your own stories and spark meaning and hope.

My grandmother was a strong woman. I wasn't even close to her. She it was who tried to force me into wearing a veil at age 7, planned my wedding to a cousin a decade older when I hadn't even started speaking, and who openly favored my brother over me and my sisters and female cousins in her affections—only by virtue of his biological being. You could say I resented her. She was a strong woman.

She had borne six children, and lived her life alone with her 3 daughters in the village, managing the household and the fields, forced into the position of a matriarch when my grandfather decided to migrate to the city for a brighter, more 'illuminated' future for his 3 sons. He was a man of letters, my grandfather, the first one in his village. He never forgave my grandmother for being illiterate.

When we were young, my grandmother would buy a she-goat in each of our names, and raise it, then save money for us from the sale of its milk and its kids. In a few years, she found that the only ones that seemed to thrive were in the names of my cousin Sana, and

I, so she replaced my brother's name with ours. She was nothing, if not a good business woman.

The soil I sprung from carries seeds of strong, determined women who have faced life with a ferocious kind of dignity in times of great fragility and turmoil, and men who have the most expansive hearts I have come across, and yet were either unable to love, or be loved. My grandmother was remarkable. Before she died amidst songs of water freezing on sugarcane fields in a wild, grey, shiny dawn in the December of 1998, she was boasting to everybody in the village about how I would make it all the way to America to study, just they wait and see, and inviting me to come stay with her, telling me I could wear my jeans if I wanted (a thorn in her side since I'd reached puberty), and go wherever I liked just on my own. These were not words of a dying woman, they were the voice of the timeless, ageless human spirit, spoken in the tongue of someone who knows suffering and absurdity and inexplicability in life yet sees hope and dignity at the same time. She knew. My grandmother knew.

I was the first one in my family to leave the fires of home and hearth, to walk away from well-worn pathways and well-carved expectations, and cross two oceans to come to a wooded corner of what they call the land of the free and the home of the brave. While I was born and raised in the teeming metropolis of Karachi, Pakistan, I had one foot in the small village in Punjab where my father's family had been poor farmers for generations. Education was not valued much, and certainly not for women.

My grandfather taught me to read. In his younger days, he experimented with mysticism, undertook stringent spiritual disciplines until one day he had a dream and was turned away from the path (he wasn't ready) by Ali, the Prophet's cousin, and a central figure in Shia Islam. At his knee, I fed on Urdu and Persian poetry and literature, philosophy, and an appreciation of the unexplained...

We did not belong to the social class where people could dream dreams of foreign lands and make it a reality. And yet, my mother cared that we receive education, just as her

mother had fought for the same for her children, and my father opened his heart and his mind when it was time to let me go, being my sole advocate and supporter besides my grandfather. All this to say that being the first one to venture forth can be hard. There is no precedent. True, this opens the door for those who come after, but the dream has not been concrete before and you have to forge your way.

When I graduated from college in 2003, the US was undergoing one of the first national Economic crises in recent history. All of a sudden, a college degree no longer guaranteed a job once you graduated. As I was an international student, I had the added complications of work visas, resulting in fewer opportunities than most of my peers. In the words of my college career counselor, if I was not going to pursue a job in investment banking or consulting (which I was not), I might as well give up and not bother applying for any jobs at all! I had learned a lot in college, but no one had taught me how to navigate the rough seas of disappointment and lack of opportunity that the real world presented.

So what was it, besides sheer grit and determination that helped me get through? Some of these things they don't teach you in college. One thing I wish someone had told me was to have compassion.

When life brings disappointment and difficulties, we begin to doubt ourselves. We question what we have struggled for, and we forget to see that precious core of beauty and radiance that we all carry, the special qualities that make us unique and enable us to serve the world in our own particular way, that place that no one else can fill but us, and how right and perfect and beautiful we are in it. When life brings challenges and disappointments, we may be devastated, and we may not know how to deal with this dismay. For some of us, failure is a new experience, for others, it is an old friend and companion. But we all shy from it. We all feel shame in our encounter with it. We forget that we are just human. Precious, fragile and sublime all at the same time, and we look at ourselves with harsh, critical eyes. In doing so, we distort our vision. We put ourselves down and make ourselves something we are not. We are not small, faulty, or worthless.

We are just human beings, who do not, as a rule, have complete and absolute control over our circumstances and surroundings. We do not determine in its entirety what life brings to us, or throws at us. But we can authentically live the questions life asks of us, and to answer them with the blooming and development of our own being. And compassion, self-compassion in particular, is a lifeskill that can help us navigate life's intricacies.

I learned about compassion from my father. We were not rich, sometimes it seemed like we could barely make do. When we were children, he had a small red Suzuki Fx car, and every time he had to run an errand, the kids wanted to go with him for a ride. When my cousins were over, as they often were, there would be too many kids who wished to go, four of us and four of them, and there would be tension around who could go. I resented it very much. One day, as we were piling up in the car with my cousins, I said to him, 'Why do they have to come, abu? There is not enough space in the car. It creates a problem.' He smiled and said, 'Betay, they are kids and they wish to go. It does not actually matter whether there is enough space in the car, what really matters is whether you have space in your heart for them.' It stuck with me, this big-heartedness that is beyond material resources, this penchant for including everyone.

My second childhood teacher of compassion was the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, the teacher and guide of the Islamic faith. I knew him from stories, and I loved him for his gentleness, kindness and humility. I wished to be just like him when I grew up. They said the secret quality of his heart is *hilm*, what someone called the 9-11 of Mercy, a compassion so deep, a mercy so encompassing that while it understood right and wrong in human behavior, it treated each person with a gentleness that understood and eliminated the need to ask forgiveness for making mistakes. One such story that made a strong impression on me was one of the lady with the garbage. When he first started giving people the message of unity, justice and human rights, there was much opposition from his community. Where once he was esteemed and admired for his good character and manners, he was looked upon with dislike and contempt, for daring to go against cultural norms. People went out of their way to make their dislike of him visible. One such was an old lady who lived down the street. She dumped her garbage at his doorstep

everyday so that it would be waiting for him when he left home. Each day, he would continue on his way without saying anything. Then one day, there was no garbage on his doorstep. The Prophet, peace be upon him, walked down the street and gently knocked on her door. When she asked who it was, he identified himself, and expressed that when he did not see the garbage, he was concerned about her. He wondered if anything was wrong, and if she might need some assistance. The lady had fallen sick, and had been unable to throw her trash in his way that day. Instead of being happy that he did not have trash dumped on him that day, the first thing the Prophet's heart felt was concern for the one who had been persecuting him. His response moved her so much that it changed her behavior and feelings towards him. This was the kind of life-changing compassion I wished to have, that felt not just for those whose suffering it is easy to identify with, but for those who move against us, and may actively make our lives difficult.

But compassion is not limited to feeling for others. In fact, it starts with the self. In essence, all humanity is one, and to feel for others is to feel for oneself. Just as compassion towards others gives them ease, and alleviates their suffering, it is the same with ourselves. Self-compassion is the quality of being able to see oneself with gentleness and mercy, to be soft in one's gaze when one looks at oneself. To know oneself as only human, capable of making mistakes, of being kind to oneself when one suffers. This compassion I learned much later, after struggling with addiction in my family, making a living as a single woman in a society where there was no space for it, and going back to school so that I could more skillfully help others. A man from Jerusalem opened the door for me. And I found out that to save others, I had to first save myself.

First we have mercy for ourselves, and then we may extend it to others. Knowing that we, too, are in need of compassion levels the playing field. When we help others, it is not from a place of superiority, or privilege, but through our common humanity and the capacity to suffer and rise above it that we offer a helping hand to our brothers and sisters. When we can hold ourselves gently, we can then extend that softness to others. In my own life, it is through acknowledging and responding to my own pain and suffering that I find the raw material of rising above it, and to connect to others in service.

I am still learning. We continue to develop compassion as we go through life. When you have kids, when you marry someone, when a parent passes away, when you cannot help someone you love, when someone you love does not understand you... in all these instances you need to have compassion for yourself and for others. Mercy is a bridge, a connector. Sometimes this bridge is within oneself, and protects us from bad habits and downward spirals in our despair. Sometimes it unites us across differences with others. It is how I connect to my two homes, Pakistan and America, and my two peoples, one of whom I was born amidst, and the ones I have adopted and who have adopted me.

So, these are the questions I ask you to ponder: How can you give yourselves the water of the mercy as you face life after graduation? How will you care for yourself, body, heart, mind and spirit? How will you nourish your relationships? And how, then, when your cup is full, will this mercy overflow into all your interactions so that you may give this world a gift of service?

I leave you with the wise words of the Bard, William Shakespeare, from some four hundred years ago,

“The quality of mercy is not strain’d  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”

So when you are going through trials and difficulties, let yourself feel the gentle rain of mercy and compassion, and let it ease your difficulty. Turn to what nourishes you, like the rain nourishes the earth, to sustain yourself. Do not lose sight of your inner radiance and beauty. And bless yourself and others with this most precious of qualities.

I congratulate you on your accomplishments, and wish you health, happiness and every success in the future. May light surround you every step of your journey. May we live in

a world where the message of love, peace, mercy, freedom and justice for all people without separation is a truth and a reality, and may you help make it so. Amin.

Peace be with you.