

# TRANSCRIPT OF KEYNOTE ADDRESS

*Andrew Tobias\**

Thank you for the introduction, Walter. This is so much fun for me. I was so flattered to get this invitation. When I got the invitation, I said to myself, “Of course, I remember Tom [Stoddard] tremendously well—I think I have a photograph of twenty years ago when we had a little cocktail party to raise money for this fellowship and this program.” And, sure enough, there it was! [*Gestures to photograph.*<sup>1</sup>] It was framed, no less! Because Tom was a very important guy and way more visionary than I ever was or ever will be. In 1989, he wrote about [same-sex marriage].<sup>2</sup> When I first heard about marriage as something that we should maybe pursue, I thought, “Are you crazy? I’ve been to Harvard Business School. I’ve taken marketing courses. This isn’t how to market us.” So, Tom was way more visionary, but he had this amazing vitality and energy and just good cheer. If you look at the picture, you will see his smile is brighter than anybody else’s, and this was twenty years ago and it has gone like that [*snaps fingers*]. And, he would be so gratified to see the progress we’ve made.

So, first of all, it’s very meaningful to me to be able to share this with you. I’m not a lawyer. I am not a deep thinker. All the work is going to be done after me. You have two panels with amazing people—many of whom I know and certainly respect—and that will be the hard work and the thinking. I’ve never been much for hard work or deep thinking, but I am one for celebrating. Not that you all don’t know this, but I’m the oldest person in the room—I’m sorry Norman couldn’t make it—but now I am allowed to say that I actually have a little bit more perspective than some of you may. You all know how far we’ve come. But if you were ten years old in 1957, when your father walked through the den while you were watching black-and-white television and he was in mid-conversation with one of his army buddies, and he said something about *homosexuals*, with such disgust, not even dislike but disgust, you instantly turned red and you some-

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1. This photograph is reproduced with permission of Mr. Tobias on page 467.

2. Thomas B. Stoddard, *Why Gay People Should Seek the Right to Marry*, *OUT/LOOK: NAT’L GAY & LESBIAN Q.*, Fall 1989, at 9.

how knew—and I don't know quite how I knew—but you somehow knew that he was talking about you.

It's still tough. Even in 2015, if you're ten years old and you live in Mississippi, let alone in some other countries, it's tough. But people have some role models and it's changed some. So I knew when I was ten—that's a long time to keep a secret—because I knew from that moment on [after my father's comment] that no one should ever, ever, ever know that. I was a normal little kid, just mis-wired. Everything was minus one multiplied by minus one. Everything that I was interested in was backwards of what I was supposed to be interested in. So I went to school up in the Bronx at Horace Mann, and I was the only one like me in the school. I was on all sorts of teams at school. It's a very small school, as you may know, and a Jewish school. (Except for the teachers' sons, which is not to say that Jews don't make great athletes—we do! Just not me, and none of my classmates.) So I got all these varsity letters because even though I had no talent, I was very repressed and I had a lot of energy. And I was always the first one to swim in the morning before classes and the last one to leave after wrestling and track and soccer and all of that stuff.

And I remember going to my locker at age sixteen, with almost nobody left on campus. It was already dark—because that's what usually happens here on campus during the winter, which is why I now spend the winters in Miami—and I remember thinking to myself, “How is this going to work? I really haven't done anything wrong. I'm getting good grades. Even though the teams were terrible and it's a small school, I'm getting my little varsity letters and stuff. But how can I keep this secret?” (Of course, Horace Mann was all boys at the time, I should mention that; though it isn't now. When Renée Richards, as Richard Raskind, went to Horace Mann a few years before me, and was the captain of the tennis team, Horace Mann was all boys. When she went on to Yale, it was all young men. And when I went to the other school, the one in Cambridge, it was all guys, so I figured I could perhaps get through that.) But I remember going to the locker—and I had this internal monologue endlessly, but this particular moment sticks in my head—and I'm thinking, “You know, what I feel for Neil Landau, there's nothing wrong with this. He may not want it. He may not like it. But oh my God, if only. . .”

And I imagined talking to the whole school and shocking everybody, because this was the worst, most shocking, horrible thing you could be. And, of course, you would be an idiot if you told anybody. And I wasn't an idiot, so I never would have had the courage to do it. (And when my book first came out, it was released “surreptitiously”—

as Walter put it—because I wrote it under a pen name.<sup>3</sup> That’s how brave I am. I mean, you’ve got a lot of courage right here.) Anyway, I imagined talking to the whole school. Well, cut to 1997 and I was speaking to the whole student body of Horace Mann—at the second, no less; not the first, but the *second*—Annual Gay and Lesbian Student Assembly and telling six hundred Horace Mann kids and the whole faculty my story. This was in 1997, the year, actually, that we lost Tom. And *after that*, they made me a trustee of the school; not before that but after knowing all that, they made me a trustee of Horace Mann. That’s how much the world had changed.

When I was in college, I was—and this may surprise some of you who’ve been to college, and I think everyone here has been to college—the *only one* in my college of five thousand undergraduates who was wired the way I was. There was nobody else like me at Harvard. [*Laughter from audience.*] There might have, statistically. Theoretically, there is life on other planets throughout the universe—and we know that, mathematically—but as a practical matter, it’s probably not really going to affect our lives. I knew that mathematically, there were probably other people like me. But they would be—because they were like me—doing everything they could, including being a little homophobic and a little dick-ish. This isn’t being recorded, is it? [*Laughter from audience.*] They were doing everything they could, as I was, to make sure that nobody would ever know, so I would never meet them. And I even thought of elaborate, ridiculous things, like Soc. Rel. 10 things,<sup>4</sup> those anonymous surveys: they’d be completely anonymous, completely anonymous, but they wouldn’t really be anonymous. I would have a special way to tell, and if anybody checked off that they had these same feelings, etc.

There was one person. Around, I guess, sophomore year, I realized that one of the resident tutors in Winthrop House—out of three hundred guys in the house and four resident tutors—one of them, enormously popular but old. He was twenty-seven or something; my view of twenty-seven-year-olds has changed a little bit since then. [*Laughter from audience.*] So I was eighteen or nineteen, and there was this resident tutor who was very popular, very nice, but I noticed, “Oh my God, he’s looking at the same guys I am. There *is* somebody else.” We never talked about it, but there was one other person, not an

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3. See ANDREW TOBIAS WRITING AS JOHN REID, *THE BEST LITTLE BOY IN THE WORLD* (Random House 25th anniversary ed. 1998) (1973).

4. See HARRISON C. WHITE, *IDENTITY AND CONTROL: A STRUCTURAL THEORY OF SOCIAL ACTION XV* (1992) (referencing Soc. Rel. 10 and its role in the development of White’s theories).

undergraduate—he was a teaching assistant or something [similar] who lived in the dorms—but I always remember that. But other than that guy, I was the only one.

Cut to July 7, 2012. You probably don't know what that date was, but that guy—whom I didn't talk to at Harvard, but who was looking at the same people I was—was actually getting married. That was Barney Frank, my one other person at Harvard, in my dorm, whom I was friends with from 1966 on. I was in his wedding. He was getting married to my friend, Jim Ready.<sup>5</sup> Nancy Pelosi was there. John Kerry was there. A whole lot of surfers on Jim Ready's side of the family were there. This guy was getting married. And the ceremony was being presided over by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> And it's hard for me to get that story out without getting choked up a little bit, because of the arc of his not being able to talk to anybody—*my* not being able to talk to anybody—and the arc of progress in this great country, thanks to many of the people in this room and those of you who are just students, who will take us the next step. This is the most amazing thing. It was the worst thing you could be! It was horrible. People killed themselves. (And, of course, some still do, which is awful; but there are fewer.)<sup>7</sup> It was horrible. And here is Barney Frank getting married to his surfer boyfriend Jim Ready, presided over by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

And now, fast forward another six months, to January 21, 2013. And the President of the United States in his second inaugural address, is saying—in his second inaugural address! I mean, this is American history—that our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are afforded equal rights under the law. “[F]or if we are truly created equal,” he said, in front of all those people around the world, “if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.”<sup>8</sup>

And later that night—oh I should tell you, on the left [in that photograph] is Norman Dorsen, who we wish was here. (I know him,

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5. See Michael M. Grynbaum, *Barney Frank and Jim Ready*, N.Y. TIMES, July 8, 2012, at A14.

6. See *id.*

7. See generally Ann P. Haas, *Suicide and Suicide Risk in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations: Review and Recommendations*, 58 J. HOMOSEXUALITY 10 (2011).

8. President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address (Jan. 21, 2013), in Press Release, Office of the White House Press Sec'y, Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama (Jan. 21, 2013), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>.

and he's such a wonderful man.) Then there's Tom Stoddard. Then there's me. And on the other end is Virginia (or Ginny) Apuzzo, who is one of the pioneering heroes. She's still with us; she's great. But in between me and Ginny was my partner of seventeen years, Charles Nolan, who is no longer with us. (Sorry, he was not there, because we had lost him. He was there in the Clinton administration. We got to dance in the White House! Charles and I got to dance in the White House in 1999.)

But, after President Obama's second inaugural, where he said that—and the inauguration itself was amazing—my friend at the time and I got to dance at the White House on inauguration night with a bunch of other gay couples, lots of straight couples, some cabinet secretaries and their spouses, the first family, and a trans friend or two and their significant others. This progress is unbelievable. It does make a few people crazy still in this country, but fewer and fewer. In fact, only four of the nine Supreme Court Justices are made crazy by this now. [*Laughter from audience.*] And so we're making a lot of progress.

So now, fast forward a little bit further to November of 2013, I guess eleven months after the inauguration, and I found myself—and this is how far we've come—in a private jet. But this private jet was owned by Ross Perot, Jr., and it was a 737 with twelve seats in it that was going to China. I had never been to China; I had never been to Alaska! (We stopped to refuel in Alaska. I thought, "This is so cool." I got to see Alaska; I was there for only about half an hour, but it's really nice. It was beautiful. It was just at noon, so there was some sunshine.) I got to go to China with what was called the High Party, rather the high-level, party-to-party dialogue. Three Democrats on the plane, three Republicans on the plane, and we flew over—this was the sixth time it had been done—to meet with the top Communist party officials. And I'm thinking, "What am I doing on this plane? Don't they know how I know nothing about China? I don't speak Chinese; I've never been to China; I am so not supposed to be here." But, they wanted three Democrats, so it was me, and the former head of the Foreign Relations Committee, and a wonderful business guy, and three Republicans: Nixon's grandson; another business guy, who was very good; and the third one, who was my counterpart. (For the last seventeen years, I've been treasurer of one of the two national party committees; and by coincidence, the treasurer of the other national party committee—that would be the Republican National Committee—is my classmate, Tony Parker.)

So, there we are in China, and they had asked me if I would give the first speech, the first thing, which was, by the way, not relaxed like this: I wrote every word out, and there was going to be consecutive translation and the whole thing. And I was supposed to talk about—they had a fancy title for it, but basically, [the topic was] gridlock in the American government.<sup>9</sup> (And there’s a lot to talk about, and out of respect for NYU’s 501(c)(3) designation, I think I may spare you that. But I had a good time putting my hand on my friend Tony Parker’s shoulder and saying, “Well, if all Republicans were like this, it would be great, but . . . .”) Anyway, I had showed my speech to one of the people on the plane, one of our real experts who was organizing the trip, who had done this before. I said, “Well, you asked me to do this. Here’s what I’m planning to say. I’d like you take a look. Can I do this?” And he read it, and he said, “Huh, yeah I think you should,” for reasons you’ll see in a second. He said, “I think you should. I don’t know how they’re going to react. I don’t think they’ll say anything. I think they will ignore it, or at least pretend to ignore it, but I think you should.”

So after I finish the part about gridlock and how it’s not equivalent and all the reasons, using my friend Tony as a prop, I said, “And if I might, as a point of personal privilege, as we call it in America, I’d just like to thank you, and congratulate you, for the remarkable progress you’re making. In, I think it was 2001, you decriminalized—I forget the exact numbers and dates—but you decriminalized homosexuality and took it off the mental illness list,<sup>10</sup> and just this past summer you had your second conference on LGBT equality.”<sup>11</sup> (We should actually say “LGBTQQIAJ.” When I saw the notes for today—I know about LGBT, of course; and I thought that “Q” stood for “questioning,” but I see it stands for “queer.” And then there’s “I” for “intersex,” and “A” for “asexual,” which I hadn’t realized was part of it. So actually, it should be LGBTQQIAJ: the second “Q” is for “questioning” since the first is for “queer,” and the “J” is for

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9. See generally Andrew Tobias, *China IV—Thank You for Making My iPhone*, by the Way, ANDREW TOBIAS: MONEY & OTHER SUBJECTS (Dec. 6, 2013), <http://andrewtobias.com/column/china-iv-thank-you-for-making-my-iphone-by-the-way/>.

10. See Tabitha Speelman, *Tiptoeing Out of the Closet: The History and Future of LGBT Rights in China*, ATLANTIC, Aug. 21, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/08/tiptoeing-out-of-the-closet-the-history-and-future-of-lgbt-rights-in-china/278869/> (discussing, inter alia, China’s decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and the removal of homosexuality from the country’s official list of mental illnesses in 2001).

11. See Alessia Valenza, *Second China National LGBT Community Leader Conference*, ILGA ASIA (Aug. 25, 2013, 4:30 AM), <http://ilga.org/second-china-national-lgbt-community-leader-conference/>.

me, which is “just not all that good at it,” frankly. [*Laughter from audience.*] Anyhow, but I didn’t tell the Chinese that. Ask Charles; if Charles were still around, he could explain the “J.”)

So I congratulated them on the progress they’re making, and I said, “You know, actually, it’s interesting: of the nine elected officers of the Democratic National Committee, three of us are openly gay, and of the fifty or sixty members of the Executive Committee I think it’s ten or twelve who are openly LGBT, and one is trans. And here in China, you know, in a way, you have an easier row to hoe, because one of the big reasons in America that it’s been so tough to reach equality and let people just pursue their happiness is religion. And as I understand it, religion isn’t as big here as it is in the United States.<sup>12</sup> And also, one of the reasons religion and the Bible and all that [are so emphasized in America] is probably because of procreation, because the whole thing is we’ve got to have more kids and more babies and more people. And as I understand it, that’s not China’s first priority right now. So actually, for you, this should be a piece of cake, basically.” (I tried to do it a little bit better than that.)

So, at the end of it I finished—all of this with a consecutive translation and all that stuff. I waited, and I was prepared for them not to react. But the Vice Chair of the something-or-another, in this enormously elaborate, astonishing hall with people on both sides and microphones and folks serving tea—it was amazing—took his time. And then he basically said, “Well, thank you for your remarks. Here in China, we believe that people should do whatever they want as long as they’re not hurting anybody else.” And everyone applauded politely and . . . it was over. And I said to my American handler, “Wow, that was OK, right?”

He said, “Yeah, that was great.”

I said, “I should cool it from now on, right? In each of these successive meetings in the next four days. I’ve done it. Enough, right?”

“No, no, no,” he said, “First of all, everybody you see from now on is going to know what you said, including probably President Xi.”

We never met President Xi, but we spent two hours with Vice President Li and others along the way. So each time I just figured, “Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.” So, I got to tell Vice President Li about our transgender person on the Executive Committee and that

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12. See, e.g., PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUB. LIFE, PEW RESEARCH CTR., THE GLOBAL RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE 45, 46, 50 tbl. (2012) (providing statistics on religious affiliations in countries around the globe).

there was actually a Chairman on the Republican National Committee, my friend Tony's committee, who at the time, as Chairman was not out, but, so on and so forth. I mention this because, as good as things are getting in the United States, certainly in major parts of the United States, there's so much around the world. I asked him, I asked the Vice President of China, "You have a hundred million LGBT people in China, roughly.<sup>13</sup> Right, a billion three people times six percent, give or take. How many of those one hundred million are in your leadership and how many of them are in the Communist Party?" They didn't know, but it was interesting to try to get them thinking about it a little bit. There are probably a hundred million, maybe a hundred forty million LGBTQQIAJ Muslims. And, oh my God, what a nightmare that must be, or is, for such a high proportion of those people.

So, first of all, I want to kind of wind down by recommending two films to you that I have been lucky enough to have a little part in helping with. One is a film about Barney Frank that some of you may have seen. It's on Showtime, I think, this month still. It's called *Compared to What?* His famous line about—well you'll see it in the film, but he quotes Henny Youngman: "How's your wife?" "Compared to what?" But, *Compared to What?: The Improbable Journey of Barney Frank*.<sup>14</sup> It's really good. And it's on Showtime, and if you don't get Showtime, it's on all those On Demand, however we get these things now.

And the other one is called *A Sinner in Mecca*,<sup>15</sup> which has just come out by a wonderful filmmaker named Parvez Sharma, who did a film called *A Jihad for Love*,<sup>16</sup> and about seven years ago won a lot of awards. I think *A Sinner in Mecca* was broadcast on Canadian broadcasting; it's been at some festivals; it's won awards and sold out and all that stuff. But now you can get it on Netflix and on YouTube, so you can watch it tonight if you're interested. Parvez lives with his husband, about six miles north from where we're sitting, and has a nice, happy, New York, American, gay life. His husband is an atheist, but he is a Muslim. And what Parvez did was go to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to Mecca, to do his Hajj. Because as you know, every good Muslim must do a Hajj before he or she dies.

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13. See Kathy Chu & Calum MacLeod, *Gay Life in China Is Legal but Remains Hidden*, USA TODAY (Feb. 22, 2010, 1:12 PM), [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-02-21-gays-China-closeted\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-02-21-gays-China-closeted_N.htm).

14. COMPARED TO WHAT?: THE IMPROBABLE JOURNEY OF BARNEY FRANK (Pack Creek Productions 2015).

15. A SINNER IN MECCA (Haram Films 2015).

16. A JIHAD FOR LOVE (Channel Four Films 2007).



And Parvez went, even though presumably they knew he was gay. You can Google him and up comes *A Jihad for Love*, and so he's a rather famous gay Muslim. I said, "What did you think is going to happen when you get off the plane in Riyadh or wherever you get off the plane?" He said, "Well, I was hoping there would be so many people, millions of people, going for the Hajj that I would be ok." And so he went, but—maybe worse than that—he filmed it secretly. You're not supposed to film this whole very sacred thing. And it's pretty amazing footage and it's a pretty amazing thing. His hope is: he doesn't really care how many people see it in the United States, that's fine; but maybe some of these hundred million people around the world—as with *A Jihad for Love*, in underground ways, in basements, in living rooms, and quietly—will see it, and it will give them a little hope. For moderate Muslims, it may give them a little understanding. So, I don't know what impact it will make. It's an interesting film.

And as a beacon for the rest of the world, which we sometimes are, and always strive to be: whatever you're working out this afternoon for our progress in Mississippi and Alabama, keep in mind that you're also probably going to be helping to plot some progress in other parts of this planet that we all share. So my hat is off to all of you for being involved in this, and I'm so flattered and so happy to be able—twenty years after that picture was taken—to be back here with Tom, and with Walter, and with you guys. And have a great afternoon. Thank you.



From left to right: Norman Dorsen, Tom Stoddard, Andrew Tobias, Charles Nolan, and Virginia Apuzzo.

