

## Commencement Speech

The University of Texas, School of Social Work

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By Paula Buls.

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On behalf of the graduating class of two thousand ten, I want to thank Dean White, the illustrious professors, esteemed faculty, and the dedicated staff of The University of Texas, School of Social Work for getting us here today. You are the best.

I want to thank also, the parents, families and loved ones of our graduates. There is something very special about the calling of social work; a desire to make a difference in the world, to alleviate suffering and address injustice. These qualities and values do not spring forth from a vacuum. They are the product of those who inspire us. Thank you all for being our inspiration. On a personal note, I want to thank my partner, Phaedra. She believed in me when I wasn't sure I believed in myself. Without her support, encouragement and patience, I am sure I would not be here today. Thank you sweetie.

I am especially honored, as a transgender woman to be asked to represent my class. I am both honored and humbled. Sir Isaac Newton once said that “If I have seen a little further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.” Each of us here today, stand on the shoulders of giants; giants such as, Mary Harris Jones (who was once denounced as the “grandmother of all agitators” and who replied, “I hope to live long enough to be the Great-grandmother of all agitators”), Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House and often referred to as the mother of modern social work, Saul Alinsky, the father of community organizing, the reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and the educator Paulo Freire (Pa-oo-loh Fray-reh). The list goes on. And each of these giants stood upon the shoulders of those who went before them.

Many years ago, I attended a lecture by a recovering drug addict. He had been told that as part of his recovery, it was henceforth to be his job, to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. This precept stuck with me. It resonated in my heart. At that time in my life, I had no idea what a social worker was, but I believed that this was an ideal worth striving for.

As I was preparing this speech, I decided to research the origins of this phrase. I learned that it had been used in a slightly different form as an

exhortation to ministers to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”. I traced the phrase to the writer Finley Peter Dunne, a muckraking journalist, writing about the role of the newspaper.

I think these words are a good summation of the role of Social Workers. We seek to provide comfort to those in distress; emotional and mental illness, bereavement, social marginalization. But we also seek (in the words of Peter Hennessey) “to speak truth to power”. We work for social justice and to help marginalized communities find their voice. We advocate for change at individual, organizational, national and global levels. And so I ask you to consider this in your lives and in your careers as Social Workers; to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

We have been taught during our time at the School of Social Work, that change must begin within ourselves. Therefore, I extol you to practice this dictum not just with those we might impact, but in our personal lives. As social workers we must often bear witness to human tragedy, suffering and anguish. Be sure then, to be aware of those times when we must comfort ourselves and allow those around us to comfort us. Take care of yourselves that you may better continue the work we have been called to do.

At the same time, be willing to see when we may have become complacent in our privilege and knowledge and to always strive to be more inquisitive and challenge our own assumptions. Never stop being curious about our own perspectives and motives and continue being willing to partake in self-examination.

And finally, lest we hesitate to add our names to the aforementioned list of giants, I ask you to consider Beethoven's nursery school music teacher. Perhaps their name is recorded somewhere but if it is, few people know it. But where would the world be today if the young Beethoven had not had someone offering him encouragement, hope and inspiration. None of us can be fully aware of what seed we are planting, and what fruit will be born out of each seemingly minor intervention of which we are a part; a fruit that may only ripen years after we have long forgotten the original intervention. History remembers the names of only a few select individuals but we are all giants.