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Thank You, Iowa!

It's been a week since I spent a day at Iowa State University where I spoke to several classes, held a reading for my memoir, *Getting to Ellen*, gave a radio interview, and met many wonderful people. The day culminated with a [keynote address](#) to commemorate Transgender Day of Remembrance, where I spoke to a crowd of 300. My speech was titled "*Living as Transgender: Compassion for One's Self and for Others*," and I took the occasion to honor trans people who have died violently simply because they wanted to live as their true selves. However, I went one step further and focused on the many transgender persons who attempt suicide and those who succeed. (I also didn't limit my approach simply to the T's; I also highlighted suicide's impact on the L's, G's and B's from the queer person alphabet, and just plain humans without a letter attached to them.)

I asked the audience:

Why do we hate ourselves so very much that death—the utter nothingness of death—seems the only viable option? Why do we feel that we have no choice about whether to live or die? How is it that we have a society that nurtures pets—cats, dogs and exotic fish—to the tune of billions of dollars a year but yet can't find within its collective self to nurture humans who are simply seeking to live their lives authentically and genuinely?

At one point in my speech, I asked for a show of hands from those who had been touched by the suicide of loved ones, family members or friends. I watched as 50 or so hands crept upward. "Look around," I said. "See those who know firsthand the price that we pay for being human."

The reality is that suicide is a real risk for many trans people and for many others in today's society. We live in a world that's a huge paradox: on the one hand, lesbian and gay people are becoming more accepted (Illinois--the 16th state--legalized same sex marriage just last week!); on the other hand, there's a huge backlash against people who challenge the status quo. Trans people happen to be the most frequent target of that backlash. Just watch Fox News; many of its leading personalities aren't hesitant to engage in trans bashing as a way of making ratings.

The net result?

For some, it's hard to believe in one's self when society at large is calling us freaks or even worse. We're marginalized to an extraordinary degree and it becomes extraordinarily easier to permanently check out when you think you don't matter.

My Iowa State address was aimed at instilling in listeners the idea that we need to love ourselves. Key to that love is recognizing that one's gender isn't a *choice*. Just like sexuality, gender is something that simply shows up. There's no choosing whatsoever. For trans people like me, our brains and spirits just won't cooperate with our birth bodies. *Memo to Self: Someone made a big mistake!*

Which brings me to *compassion*. It's an under-used phrase if you ask me. Not enough people talk about the need to be compassionate for others. Or ourselves.

My formula for living a compassionate life--both for one's self and others?

Three words: honesty, kindness, and gratitude. Each can lead to an awakening of the human spirit. And to the strength needed to live an authentic life.

By the time I was done at Iowa State, I'd been in Ames for more than 12 hours. The high point--better than all of the rock star treatment I received the entire day--came after I had put my coat on as I was readying to go to my car. A student--maybe 20 years old--came up to me. He/she told me that she was "trans;" my impression was that this person had been assigned a male gender at birth and had not yet started transitioning to her true gender, female.

"Thank you for all that you said tonight," this person said. "It meant a lot to me."

The words were genuine and heartfelt. That much was very obvious.

The words also warmed my heart. I am sticking around in this world to do one thing: change it for the better.

It appeared that my stint at Iowa State may have done just that, if in an ever so small way.

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Iowa State Keynote Address[/caption]