

Remarks for Robert Coles Award event Nov 8, 2024 Judy Norsigian

Thank you so much for this honor, which I am choosing to receive on behalf of all the founders, and both current and past board members, at Our Bodies Ourselves, because our most important achievements were all the result of impressive collective effort. I am so pleased that two of my sister co-founders – Miriam Hawley and Wendy Sanford – have joined Diana, our board chair, and me. Do meet them afterwards if you can.

As you've already heard, this is a moment when being in community with others who share our values can be healing, inspiring, and fortifying. How the consequences of this current election will play out is not yet clear, but we certainly have lessons to learn about what just took place, and we will need to take time to figure out how best to switch gears in response to the longstanding problems many of us have worked on for years and even decades. These problems persist whatever the political landscape, though some among us will be far more vulnerable in the coming few years, so our collective efforts to protect human rights are essential.

As we face new and formidable challenges, we are lucky here at Harvard to have a home base like PBHA, which has a rich history of fostering engagement and collective action that seeks to alleviate human suffering and create better conditions for all. Now in my second year as an Elected Director of the Harvard Alumni Association, I hope to encourage more alumni involvement like that of my 1970 classmate, Myles Lynk, who is the current PBHA-A Association president-elect. His brilliance and compassion are enormous assets to both PBHA and the wider community, and I know that there are other Harvard alums like him.

I never met Robert Coles while an undergraduate here in the late 60s, but his courses were legendary, and at the age of 95, he must be so gratified to see how his legacy has motivated countless others to think about using their skills and talents in the service of reducing disparities and enhancing everyone's access to necessary resources that help both individuals and the larger community flourish. My late husband, Irving Kenneth Zola, class of Harvard 1956 and a sociology professor at Brandeis for more than 35 years, played a similar role especially in the disability rights and medical sociology fields. As an important mentor to me personally, to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (now simply called Our Bodies Ourselves), and to the thousands of students who studied with him until his death in 1994, he was a master at choosing the right words for any given situation, and at holding up that special mirror to our aspirations that could reflect back exactly what we needed to realize our goals.

People with that kind of insight and generosity are not always easy to find, so grab the opportunities when you see them. Seek out times to be both mentor and mentee, as those relationships can be key in identifying "what to do next." When I was an undergraduate here, I got a work-study job at the Cambridge Arts Center, which served both Newtowne Court and Washington Elms, two federal housing projects near Central Square. For several years, I created art projects for young kids both during the school year and at summer

campus, and that was certainly great fun to see the kids' creativity blossom. But what I learned from their parents and community leaders about the challenges of making ends meet with such limited incomes was so meaningful as well. Coupling that with a first-year independent study with the late Beatrice Whiting, an anthropologist who studied cross-cultural child-rearing practices, I began to deepen my understanding of the critical role played by community support systems. It all seems so obvious now, but that mentoring both inside and outside academia helped shape my understanding.

I was also lucky to have a father who had escaped the Armenian Genocide at the age of 5, came to Boston after more than a decade in Marseille, France, and was later willing to share with me his own experiences with discrimination as a young immigrant in this country. He was somewhat sympathetic to those involved with the Harvard Strike in 1970, but on graduation day, after we returned to our home in Watertown, he expressed doubts about how long students with middle class privilege would stay involved with their protests. In his mind, none were true revolutionaries like the Black Panthers. Later, my father would give me books by George Santayana, John Dewey, and Bertrand Russell to read. I also grew up listening to the many philosophical and political debates he had with one of his close friends, a conservative head of Romance Languages at Wellesley College. I now look back and appreciate the kind of mentoring he offered. By example, he showed me how friends with deep political differences could remain both civil and respectful, even when voices might rise in anger.

So now, here we are after a deeply disappointing election for so many of us. And I am glad to see so many older PBHA alums still involved as public advocates and activists. After five and half decades as a women's health activist, I learned some things about sustaining advocacy and social change movements that I continue to believe hold true for solving problems of all sorts. You've likely heard these before, but they're worth repeating:

First, don't go it alone. It's not always easy, but finding good allies along the way can make a huge difference. Then, if we don't succeed, at least we find solace commiserating with our colleagues and friends. Collaboration will sometimes mean that our individual efforts and contributions won't always be recognized or appreciated, but in many ways celebrating the success of a group effort rather than an individual achievement offers us the best path forward for effective and sustainable efforts. There will always be setbacks; our ability to regroup and stay engaged will depend upon sharing that "pep talk" role that is so essential for the long haul.

I believe that one of the reasons Our Bodies Ourselves had such staying power over the past 55 years was because the founders, as well as the staff and board members who joined the organization along the way, recognized the value of such collaboration and collective effort. Tough at times? For sure, and we certainly had our share of conflict.

Second, sometimes consider working with allies who might also appear as strange bedfellows. It's important to avoid cooptation and distortions of one's core beliefs, but sometimes these unlikely allies can help amplify our efforts in useful ways. About 20 years

ago, when OBOS became a more vocal critic of a small subset of embryonic stem cell research – something called somatic cell nuclear transfer – because it posed what we saw as unjustifiable risks to the health of young women egg providers, we initially found that only Republicans in Congress were receptive to our position. But since they were opposed to ALL embryonic stem cell research, not just this particular type of research, it was risky to testify in Congress at the invitation of Republican chairs of key committees. In the end, we were able to convey our positions clearly, without cooptation by anti-choice” organizations, but it required constant messaging about important distinctions.

Third, keep joy and good humor in all you do. Make time for things that bring you pleasure whether that be music, playing sports, cooking, taking walks with friends, playing games, and even new activities you’ve never tried before. Do this both in your organizations and with friends and family. Remember the activist Emma Goldman, who was imprisoned in 1916 for distributing birth control information. She may have never said the quote so often attributed to her on buttons and stickers - "If I cannot dance, I want no part in your revolution.” But in her 1931 autobiography *Living My Life*, she did say this: “I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal...should demand the denial of life and joy....I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things." Emma understood the value of keeping our souls nourished with friends, culture, and the arts.

Fourth, when you start brainstorming about a particular problem, make sure all key stakeholders are at the table. If you are going to be advocating policy changes, then those affected most by those policies need to be part of the initial conversations that lead to proposed solutions. When we first started fighting the practice of shackling incarcerated women during labor and birth – and yes, this practice still continues in most parts of our country – the initial input from prison guards, women who endured this treatment, and prison advocacy organizations was all invaluable. Ultimately, we learned that legislative intervention would be necessary for permanent change.

Fifth, be mindful of conflicts of interest and how sources of funding might compromise the integrity of what you do. Ultimately, most of us won’t bite the hand that feeds us and that is one reason why OBOS has paid such careful attention to corporate funding sources over the past 55 years. It was easier for the public to trust the quality of what we produced, when our funding sources were primarily foundations and individuals.

Sixth, stop and think about WHY and HOW you do the things you do – whether in your professional or personal lives. When the second-wave women’s movement got going in the late 60s and early 70s, many women who participated in consciousness-raising groups began to look more closely at the particulars of their lives and started to ask critical questions about why they were excluded from certain educational and professional opportunities, why their spouses didn’t participate in doing household chores or caring for their children, why they were not allowed any leadership roles within organizations seeking peace or racial justice, why there was so much silence surrounding the reality of rape and

violence in their communities, and why there was no information or attention to their own sexual pleasure as women. Looking more closely at the power dynamics – between lovers, between spouses, between doctors and patients, between lawyers and clients, between clergy and laity – and doing this together, as a group consciousness-raising effort – led directly to the organizing within the women’s movement that sought for changes both inside legislative halls as well as inside bedroom walls.

A great way to learn about this era of the women’s movement is to watch the funny, fascinating, and eye-opening documentary “She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry,” or read the new book by Clara Bingham titled “The Movement: How Women’s Liberation Transformed America 1963-1973.” Clara, a 1985 Harvard graduate, spent many years gathering oral histories from more than 100 feminist activists from this era and tells an amazing story mostly using their very own words. Unlike so many other White feminist writers, she traces the central role of Black women as feminist leaders and highlights how they were amongst the first to advance intersectional thinking in our struggles for change.

As I imagine setbacks and new assaults on the health and human rights of those living both in the US and elsewhere, I want to start new conversations about how best to spend my energies. Many people my age are now retired and have the resources to volunteer for causes they care about. I am one of them and want to mention tonight a few of the causes and organizations I care about. I also believe that intergenerational advocacy has enormous potential, so it excites me to see so many older PBHA alums continue their involvement as public advocates and activists.

Now, before I give a shout-out to some of the folks representing co-sponsoring organizations for today’s event, I want to mention an effort created by some 1970 classmates in response to the Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery Initiative and the long report commissioned by Harvard President Larry Bacow a few years ago. Initially a letter addressed to the Harvard Alumni Association signed by 175 Harvard/Radcliffe classmates from 1970, this is now an online petition calling for Harvard to allocate 1.5 billion dollars of its more than 50-billion-dollar endowment to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Any Harvard alum can sign this petition, and if any of you with social media skills would like to help with outreach to other alums, please get in touch with me later. Harvard is considering multiple ways to address its legacy of slavery, and we have learned that many alums would prefer institutional solutions like this one rather than the vastly more complex and difficult path of reparations paid directly to the descendants of enslaved people.

So now I’d like to take this platform to highlight a few important local projects and groups represented here tonight. They are all doing great work that might pique your own interest and involvement, and I am honored to have them in my circle of friends. You are welcome to join these folks here up front during the informal mingling afterwards:

Carline Desire has been the executive director of AFAB, the Association of Haitian Women in Boston, for several decades. AFAB's initiatives around many issues, including housing and domestic violence, advance the well-being of Haitian women, many of whom also struggle to support family members currently living in Haiti. AFAB has provided economic opportunities for women in an environment of dwindling resources and would always appreciate the creative support of PBHA folks.

Cierra Brown, the Program Coordinator at the Resilient Sisterhood Project (RSP), is also with us. If you didn't get to see their amazing "Foremothers of Gynecology" exhibit at Harvard's Hutchins Center earlier this year, do go online to see the paintings and read about the history of Dr. J. Marion Sims, the surgeon who experimented on enslaved women during the 1800s and whose statue in Central Park was finally taken down in 2018. One of my own dreams is to see this exhibit travel to universities across the country over the next decade, and both Cierra and I would welcome speaking to any of you about this idea. Special thanks to Leslie "Skip" Gates and Lilly Marcelin, the executive director at RSP, for making this exhibit a reality.

The Bay State Birth Coalition, led by the talented Emily Anesta, is well known to Senator Liz Miranda, whom you've already heard from. Senator Miranda, Representative Decker from Cambridge, Representative Khan from Newton, and other legislators joined with dozens of advocacy groups represented by this Coalition to achieve a major legislative victory this year for birthing families. After more than two decades of hard work, we have laid the groundwork for greater access to midwifery care and freestanding birth centers, both of which will likely reduce the racial disparities in maternity care that remain one of our biggest public health challenges. And when the new Neighborhood Birth Center opens next year in Roxbury under the leadership of Nashira Baril, Boston will finally have an independent, community-controlled freestanding birth center that has been a dream for decades. PBHA talent will likely be welcome in other Massachusetts communities now seeking to establish similar centers.

For any men interested in preventing gender-based violence, please consider involvement in MenEngage or similar organizations. My partner Craig Norberg-Bohm, who is the current coordinator for North American Men Engage (NAMEN) and Merge for Equality, which runs trainings for early childhood educators, is a longtime activist in this space and would be happy to chat with you. I've also brought along some copies of Voice Male magazine, now published by Next Gen Men in Canada and of course available online. For decades, this magazine was produced in Amherst, MA, and remains one of the few places to read about men's activism in this arena.

We are also joined by Zela Astarjian, the vice-president of AIWA, the Armenian International Women's Association. It is because of this organization that I have become more deeply involved with feminists and social justice activists in Armenia, as has my partner, Craig. Even with corrupt oligarchs throwing up countless obstacles, activists there have sustained elements of civil society and mostly non-violent resistance in a small

country faced constantly with existential threats from much more powerful actors. It is in many ways a wonder that any fledgling democracy in the South Caucasus region can even exist at this point.

Susan Yanow is here from the MAP (the Massachusetts Medication Abortion Access Project), whereby Mass-based health care providers use a telemedicine platform to provide medication abortion pills to thousands across the country. Our state's shield law makes this possible.

And of course, there is Our Bodies Ourselves. You've already heard from our extraordinary board chair Diana Namumbejja Abwoye, who focused on OBOS' early history and the global reach of our organization. We are also excited about OUR BODIES OURSELVES TODAY, the newly redesigned website now managed out of Suffolk University under the director of Amy Agigian, a sociology professor and head of the Center for Women's Health and Human Rights there. In the coming years, we envision more opportunities for student internships and advocacy involvement at Suffolk, so stay tuned.

As you think about the challenges ahead, please remember our librarians, many under attack and losing their jobs. During the 1980s, we were so fortunate to have librarians and physicians defend "Our Bodies, Ourselves" against dozens of censorship attempts by people like Jerry Fallwell and Phyllis Schlafly. Called "humanistic garbage" and "obscene trash," the book's notoriety made it even to U.S. Senate hearings.

Local conservative groups are already trying to exclude valuable books from their school and public libraries, and we can expect more such efforts. The ACLU and groups like the National Coalition Against Censorship will be key to protecting freedom of expression, and I hope some of you will choose to work on this challenge.

So, there is a bit of meandering through my personal journey. My own life's work has been largely around women and health, often trying to find common ground with other movements for change. More recently, I have joined efforts for climate change advocacy, especially with Mothers Out Front, and I wish that climate activism could become a part of every organization's focus.

Learning to listen better was probably the most important skill I had to develop – and coming from a loud Armenian family where constant interruptions were the norm, this did not come easy. Often scattered in my own thinking process, I have needed the centering role of colleagues and friends. For each of us, the challenges we face will be different, and it's important to find allies who complement our skills and talents. I am grateful that PBHA exists, a home for activists where we can be bold, sensitive, and playful in the pursuit of a better world for all.