

"Sorry, Not Sorry,"
Senior English Address,

by Joshua Brian Campbell '16

Sorry, Not Sorry

When I was four years old, I whacked my brother hard in the forearm with a red, plastic wiffleball bat and I was really, really sorry. He is thirteen years my senior, eighteen at the time, so we didn't roughhouse that much. But it still surprised me that he took the hit so hard. As the pain grew, first a couple days, then a week or two, his insistence that something was wrong won out against mama's intuition that it was just a bad bruise. None of us knew that trauma could aggravate a rare cancer called osteosarcoma enough that it became noticeable, trauma like a fall or a swing from a 4-year-old's toy. What we all thought was just child's play had awakened a tumor in my brother's arm that was already there. The memories are faint now, but I must have thought, "Wow, I've really gone and done it. I'm so sorry."

It's coming up on two decades later, and besides my brief stint at t-ball, I've given up bats for good. Also, after treatment and recovery, my brother has been cancer-free for well over a decade. I learned many years ago that the cancer wasn't my fault. I'll never forget that day mama told me, "Joshuah, what you did was a blessing in disguise," which I, with my fledgling vocabulary, misunderstood as "a blessing in the skies:" that somehow I had been God's little helper in making sure my big brother was ok. In a way, both turns of phrase mean the same thing. I believe that I happened to be in just the right place at the right time, and that everything had played out as a set of the best possible circumstances. I didn't need to feel sorry anymore.

But, in the time that has passed, I have learned new ways to be 'sorry,' new ways to worry that I might be making mistakes. I disguise the truest version of myself behind apology after apology—I'm sorry for being annoying, I'm sorry for taking up too much space, I'm sorry if this speech is boring you. We all do it. Here at Harvard, where everyone seems to be a straight-A, type-A student, I believe our biggest struggle often becomes finding ways to feel inadequate. So unused to being among people who are—in all their differences—still so similar to ourselves, we constantly play the game of throwing ourselves into relief

of one another. We assume a need to be apologetic up front to save ourselves from vulnerability. Incessantly teasing out our strengths and weaknesses, we forget that we are whole people, with complexities that interact mellifluously like lines of musical counterpoint.

I sing quite a bit, and in the same way that I beat myself up over singing a wrong note that destabilizes a harmony, we obsess over whether or not every fiber of our being is ringing in tune. I have a fear. I fear that I don't know how to live life authentically because I've spent so much time trying to be a perfect version of myself. I won't say that it was time wasted; that drive for perfection helped me grow as a musician, and it also helped me turn in something that looks like a thesis. But I will say that now, looking out inspired by your presence here today, it's high time I learned how to live without apology. Being authentic requires it; it means not apologizing for the imperfections, because those imperfections make up our beautiful differences.

In the classroom, as a student of music and French, I spent a lot of time thinking about authenticity and difference, and about how those things make us human. I also think a lot about how to navigate my subjectivity as an artist. I struggle with the conundrum of how to be my true self when a big part of my life is framed by performance. I struggle more with the ways I must perform as a person of color in a too-often hostile world. But I have discovered that the relationship between performing and living authentically can be a helpful space of self-exploration. In fact, the two are not so different for me. I have begun to feel the most like myself on stage. When the lights go up, I feel the need to apologize fly away. Why is it so hard to find this strength in every day life? What is this force that keeps human beings—creative and adaptive beings—moving and living?

Prof. Alice Jardine, my advisor and my academic mom, once gave an answer to that question. Her hair curling in the heat of the Parisian summer, she said, "It's play. You lose that play, and you're fried. You're done." I think that's a good warning for all of us, artists or not. When I am on stage, I am at play.

But I want to be at play all the time—not just because play has served humankind well—but because it feels right. It feels like *me*, the ‘me’ that I don’t have to be sorry for. We have to take ourselves less seriously and our beneficial relationship to the world around us more seriously. We have something to give to this world, something that being a cookie-cutter human being can’t give it. In turn the world has many things store to offer us; gifts and opportunities that we cannot accept if we are preoccupied with perfection and not with play. When we play, we learn how being vulnerable can lead to meaningful collaboration. When we play, we reach upward and outward, hands open to receive both life’s pleasures and its necessary pains.

I haven’t done the statistical analysis on how many speeches have borrowed these words, but frankly, I don’t care: Today you are you, it’s truer than true, there’s no one alive who is youer than you! I don’t have to be sorry for my poorness, my privileges, or my prowess. I must only know that they are a part of me, and that the mystic order of the skies has allowed it to be just so. I want to invite all of us to find the courage to walk in that truth. I have begun to find it in friends who are constantly pushing me out from shadows of self-doubt. I have found it even in correcting myself out loud: sometimes, when I begin to say, “I’m sorry,” I stop myself and announce to those around me, “no, wait, I’m not sorry!” Or course, I will be remorseful if I do something wrong or if I am hurtful to others. But from now on I will stop apologizing for *me*, and I won’t stop playing—whether that play is musical expression, or tinkering in things I don’t understand, or finding more places where I have room to grow. I will play with the ferocity and abandon of my four year old self and I will laugh at myself as the world watches or doesn’t watch. Because play is essential. Because life could turn out far worse if you hold on to the red bat and never take the swing.