

Isabel Allende
LBJ Lecture April 11, 2007

UNEDITED

LBJ Distinguished Lecture & Common Experience
 Remarks for President Denise Trauth
 Outside in front of Student Center
 Wednesday, April 11, 2007
 7 p.m.

[Student Reagan Pugh will open the program, thank sponsors and introduce you.]

Thank you, Reagan, and good evening.

We are delighted to have all of you with us, but allow me to introduce some special guests:

Our speaker's husband, Willie Gordon...,
 former student member of the Texas State University System Board of Regents,
 Frank Bartley...,
 and a former L.B.J. Lecturer, Liz Carpenter.

Tonight we welcome an ideal speaker for our Lyndon B. Johnson Distinguished Lecture Series and our Common Experience as we approach the close of our year of focus on protest and dissent.

Her writings are a passionate protest and dissent against cultural norms that place women in a secondary status.

But her work can hardly be restricted to one category.

She has written novels, short stories, documentaries, magazine articles, plays, comedies and recipes.

She has written for older adults, younger adults and children.

Her novels have been translated into 27 languages and are bestsellers in Latin America, the United States, Europe and Australia.

She began her career as a journalist in her native Chile and published in the Americas and Europe.

She is well acclaimed for her work, and we are very pleased to have her with us tonight.

Please join me in welcoming to Texas State our speaker, Isabel Allende.

Allende

Thank you very, very much.

Can you see me? Yeah, it's very hard to see me, in general.

Well, thank you very much for this invitation. It is always a pleasure to have a microphone and a captive audience.

It is not often that I get to speak about myself and people listen. In my family, nobody's particularly interested in my stuff. I have been telling them for years that I am a celebrity. Well, maybe not like Oprah, but certainly more of a celebrity than any of our neighbors. Nobody believed me until I carried the Olympic flag in the Winter Olympics in 2006.

I have been writing for over 25 years and I have a few books published here and there. But I have lived in total anonymity. However, it took only four minutes in the Olympic stadium in Turin Italy, and now people recognize me in Macy's. And my grandchildren think that I'm cool.

Allow me to tell you about my four minutes of fame.

I got a call from the organizers of the opening ceremony at the Olympic stadium. She said that I had been selected as one of the flag-bearers. I replied, "But surely this was the case of mistaken identity, because I am as far as you can get from an athlete." Actually, I wasn't even sure that I could go around the stadium without a walker. She replied but this was no laughing matter, it was a huge honor. The candidates had gone through a grueling selection process. Their lives, ideas, their work, everything has been investigated thoroughly. Moreover, this would be the first time that only women would carry the Olympic flag—five women representing five continents and three Olympic gold medal winners.

My question, my first question, was naturally, what was I going to wear?

She explained that it would be a uniform and asked for my measurements...my measurements! I had a vision of myself dressed with fluffy anorak, in some repulsive pastel color, looking like the Michelin Man.

By the middle of February, I found myself in Turin, a beautiful city by international standards, but not so for Italians who were not even impressed by Venice or Florence.

Enthusiastic crowds cheered when any of the eighty Olympic teams, wearing the colors of their flags, was in the street.

Those athletes are the best in the world. They have trained since they were four or five years old. They have sacrificed everything to compete in the Olympics. They all deserve to win. But there is the element of luck. A speck of snow, an inch of ice, or the force of the wind can determine the result of the race, or a game. However, what matters most, more than training or luck, is the heart. Only a fearless and determined heart will get the gold medal. It's all about passion.

The streets of Turin were covered with red posters announcing the slogan of the Olympics, "Passion Lives Here."

Isn't it how life is most of the time, it's the heart that drives us forward and determines our fate.

That is what I want for myself, a passionate heart, and that is what I need for the characters in my books.

I want mavericks, dissidents, outsiders, rebels, adventurers, people who ask questions, who bend the rules, and who take risks. Nice people with common sense do not make interesting characters; they only make good former spouses. [audience laughs]

In the green room of the stadium I met the other flag-bearers, three athletes, and the actresses Susan Sarandon and Sophia Lauren, and two activists, Wangari Maathai from Kenya and Somaly Mam from Cambodia.

I also received my uniform.

It was not the kind of outfit that I usually wear, but it was far from the Michelin Man suit I had anticipated. Not bad really. I looked like a refrigerator, but so did most of the flag-bearers, except Sophia Lauren—the universal symbol of beauty. Sophia is over seventy and she looks great; from a distance. [audience laughs] She’s sexy, slim, and tall, with a deep tan. How can she be tanned and have no wrinkles? When asked in a TV interview how could she look so good, she replied, “posture, my back is always straight, and I don’t make old people’s noises.”

So there you are, some free advice from one of the most beautiful women on earth. No grunting, no coughing, no wheezing, no talking to yourself, no farting. Well, she didn’t say that exactly. [audience laughs]

At some point around midnight, we were summoned to the wings of the stadium. The loud speakers announced the Olympic flag and the music started. Sophia Lauren was right in front of me. She’s a foot taller than I am, not counting the poofy hair. She walked elegantly, like a giraffe on the African savannah, holding the flag on her shoulder. I jogged behind on my tiptoes, holding the damn flag in my extended arms so my head was most of the time under the flag. All the cameras were on Sophia Lauren of course, and that was fortunate for me because in most press photos I appear too, although between Sophia’s legs; the place where most men would love to be.

The best four minutes of my entire life were in the Olympic stadium. My husband is offended when I say this, although I have explained to him that what we do together in private usually takes less than four minutes, so he shouldn’t take it personally. [audience laughs]

I have all the press clippings of those four magnificent minutes, because I don’t want to forget them when old age destroys my brain cells. I want to carry in my heart forever the key word of the Olympics: passion.

Let me tell you about the two activists that I met in Turin, two women that experienced injustice or abuse. They dissented, they protested, and they took action.

Somaly Mam is a young Cambodian woman who has dedicated her life to the fight against child prostitution. When she was fourteen years old, her grandfather sold her to a brothel. Her life as a child prostitute was hell for years until she was able to escape by marrying. Eventually the marriage ended because, as she says, she could not stand the sight of the man near her. She told me of children, four or five years old, sold into prostitution. Little girls raped because men believe that having sex with very young virgins may cure them of AIDS. She spoke of brothels, where children as young as nine or ten years old are forced to receive fifteen clients a day, and if they rebel, they are tortured with electricity. I will not give you more details because I will make you sick to your stomach, but you can imagine them.

Somaly Mam created a NGO to fight against sex-trafficking of children in Asia. Of course, she has been threatened innumerable times by the mafias and her life is constantly in danger, but she keeps fighting.

Wangari Maathai is an extraordinary lady. In 2004, she became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting sustainable development,

democracy, and peace. She stood bravely against the former oppressive government of Kenya; dissent, protest, take action.

So goes to a village and asks the women what their problems are. “Food” they say. “We have no food because the government does not help us.” “Why don’t you plant,” asked Wangari. “Because the land is barren, there are no trees, no shade, very little rain, almost no water,” they complained. “But you got the forest and sold it, you are part of the problem, so you have to be part of the solution,” explains Wangari.

And then she helps them plant trees.

She says that everything grows fast in that part of Africa, and in a matter of four or five years, there is a forest. The trees attract the rain, and the land is enriched, so people can grow their own food.

Wangari founded the Green Belt Movement and she has mobilized women to plant more than thirty million trees, and her methods have been adopted in several other countries.

Many rural societies in developing countries forget their tradition and imitate the social and economic patterns of the western world. They destroy their environment so that we can have growth. Then they end up either in abject poverty or employed in subhuman conditions to produce goods for the west. Often they have to buy back the same goods that they have made.

Wangari Maathai and a few other visionaries are trying to promote good living conditions at a grassroots level in order to save the planet from destruction and promote peace.

When I first saw Wangari Maathai in the green room, shining like a magic lamp, I felt an irresistible impulse to hug her. I do have those impulses sometimes, but mostly with younger men. [audience laughs]

I did hug her and I could not let go of her.

She was a little scared and started, like, sort of pushing me away gently, while I clung to her like a crab.

She’s warm, strong, solid, quiet, and content. It was like hugging a tree.

Those extraordinary women inspired me. I have a foundation, which I created to honor my daughter Paula, whose premature death broke my heart. The stories of Wangari Maathai and Somaly Mam reinforce my belief that it is through women that we can make a difference in the world.

Women can change the culture.

We need at least fifty percent of women in every level of management because women want a world where the resources that are spent in war are spent in bringing comfort, health, and education to everybody. [applause]

Where dialogue, compromise, negotiation, and arbitration replace aggression.

Where diversity’s celebrated, where everyone is included.

In one sentence, women want to preserve life, and enrich the quality of life for everybody, not only for the privileged.

And let me remind you that this is not a fantasy; this is happening today in Chile, where we have elected a woman president, Michelle Bachelet.

She is agnostic, a single mother, and a socialist, and she has become president of one of the most socially conservative and Catholic nations in the world.

Chile is more Catholic than Ireland and certainly more than the Vatican.
[audience laughs]

Yet the first law of the new government was that starting at age fourteen, years old, any person can have free contraception, including the pill of the day after, without parental consent.

How I wish that this would have been available when I was seventeen and madly in love.

You can imagine the uproar of the church, but what can a bunch of old and celibate cardinals know about the temptations of love and the perilous of an unwanted pregnancy. They have never changed diapers.

Michelle Bachelet started her political career very young, protesting and dissenting against the dictatorship of General Pinochet.

She also rebelled against the patriarchy. She has appointed women in every level of government, half women and half men. The captions of the press photographs of her cabinet say, "count the women."

A couple of weeks ago I was in Mexico with Michelle Bachelet in an official visit. I was very impressed by her. She's an example of how women can hold power without acting like men. She's calm, unassuming, honest, attentive, conclusive, and compassionate. She has no great evil, no personal ambition. She's trained to serve. She reminded me of so many other Chilean women that I know, women that are strong and loving wives.

Have I mentioned my foundation?

I should tell you how it got started.

In 1991, my daughter Paula fell fatally ill and she died a year later in my arms. She was 28 years old.

During those months of agony, in which she was in a coma, and the following years of grieving, everything stopped for me. There was nothing to do, just cry and remember.

Her illness gave me an opportunity to reflect upon my journey and the principles that hold it together.

I discovered that there is consistency in my beliefs, my writing, and the way I have led my life. Inside me still lives the same rebellious girl I was at fifteen, and the same young woman I was in the seventies. I still lust for life. I'm still ferociously independent. I still crave justice and may fall madly in love.

My daughter Paula was a wise soul. I trusted her judgment, and when in doubt I would go to her for advice. She would listen attentively and often her advice came in the form of one single question.

"What is the most generous thing to do in this case mother?"

And the most generous thing to do is the best course of action in most situations. Paralyzed and silent in her bed, Paula taught me a lesson that is now my mantra. You only have what you give. It is by spending yourself that you become rich. Paula led a life of service.

She worked helping destitute women and children, eight hours a day, six days a week. She never had any money, but she needed very little. And when she died, she had nothing, and she needed nothing.

The pain of losing my child was a cleansing experience.

I had to throw overboard all excess baggage, and keep only what is essential. Because of Paula, I don't cling to anything anymore.

Now I like to give much more than I like to receive; to love, and to be loved. I adore my husband, my son, my grandchildren, my parents and my dog. But frankly, I don't know if I even like me.

Who cares?

Loving them is my joy.

Give.

What is the point of having experience, stories, or money if you don't share it with others. I can't be cremated with any of it.

It is in giving, but I feel the spirit of my daughter comforting presence.

And that is why after her death I created a foundation to continue the work that she was doing. And the work was empowering women.

Women do two-thirds of the world labor, and yet they own less than one percent of the assets.

In any modern war, many more civilians than soldiers die, and of those civilians, eighty percent are women and children; they are collateral damage.

If a woman is empowered, her children will not starve, and her family will be better off.

If families prosper, than the village prospers, and eventually so does the whole country.

The poorest and most backward societies are always those that put women down.

Yet, this obvious truth is ignored by governments and also by philanthropy.

For every dollar given to women's programs, twenty dollars are given to men's programs.

Women are fifty-one percent of humankind.

Empowering them will change everything. I can promise you that.

Women working together, linked, informed, and educated can bring peace and prosperity to this forsaken land.

In my own life, I have been empowered by education, reproductive rights, and economic independence.

I know that a woman who is illiterate and has no skills, who is not in control of her own body and fertility, who cannot work to feed herself and her children, is usually destitute and victimized.

So for me right now, the most generous thing to do, as Paula would say, is to try to improve the lives of those women.

I have also been empowered by imagination.

Word by word, I have learned about myself and I have been able to touch some readers.

Book by book, I have created a universe of my own. My grandchildren say that I have a *pueblo en mi cabeza*, a village in my head, and that I live there, and that is really empowering.

I spend half of my life alone, in silence, writing.

Mine is the best job in the world.

The blank pages, like a theater, where I place my characters and allow them to find their own voices, and act out their own lives.

I start all my books on January 8th and usually on that day I only have the time and the place of the story, but I have no idea who the characters are or what will happen to them.

In the daily exercise of writing, I enter into a magic song where things occur in spite of myself, and where the characters surprise me over and over. I don't even know how or when the story will end. However, that was not exactly the case in my latest novel *Ines of My Soul*.

I knew that the story was placed in Chile in 1540 at the time of the Spanish conquest.

I had researched for several years and I had a clear idea of the period and the events of the conquest.

But I also had the characters and I knew very well what was going to happen to them, because they were all real people that existed then. In a historical novel, you have to stick to the facts as much as possible. My protagonist, Ines Suarez, was so appealing that I could not resist the impulse to tell her life and to tell her in her own voice.

Ines Suarez was the only Spanish woman that accompanied a hundred and ten Spanish soldiers that conquered Chile, which was considered at the time the cemetery of Spaniards; a remote and dangerous land that offered no riches and was defended by the bravest Indian warriors of the new world, the Mapuche.

Ines did not follow the soldiers for fame, glory or gold. She went for love.

She was Captain Pedro de Valdivia's mistress. She was a passionate and courageous woman, very practical, earthy, hardworking. I suppose that she must have been attractive too because a couple of men lost their lives for her, and very healthy because she lived to be seventy-three in a time when life expectancy was thirty-five, and very smart because she became the second richest person in the country, the first one being the Catholic bishop of course.

Ines Suarez was one of those women who have extraordinary destinies by bending the rules of the patriarchy. Very few complacent and submissive females make it into the history books. She accomplished what no other woman of her time would have dreamed of.

In Spain during the sixteenth century, women had no education, very few rights, and almost no freedom.

Women worked of course. Women have always worked.

But they did not control their income. They could not inherit or own property, and whatever they had belonged to the husband when they married. Moreover, the law, or God, did not protect them if a father, a husband, a brother, or a son decided to punish them for some real or imaginary disobedience or offense to their honor.

The honor of the family was represented by the virtue of the woman.

Let me tell you, millions of women live like this today. The most vulnerable and abused individuals in the world are girls. I'm talking today.

Ines Suarez rebelled against the king, the law, the church, and the customs of her time. She was willing to take all the risks, anything, but not stay imprisoned in the walls of her home under a widow's black veil.

She did things that only men could do without renouncing to her feminine condition, of which she was proud.

She crossed the ocean and traveled through Latin America alone.

She supported herself, fought battles in full armor, founding the city of Santiago, and helping conquering Chile.

She built churches, hospitals, and shelters, started several industries, and took care of the land.

For forty years she was one of the most influential political figures in the colony. And all this she did in love, first with Valdivia, and then when he betrayed her, with someone else, a much better man actually, a much younger.

Isn't that an irresistible character?

I wish I was like her.

Once, when my daughter Paula was in her twenties, she said to me that feminism was dated, that I should move on.

We had a memorable fight.

Feminism dated?

Yes, for privileged women like my daughter and all of you here, but not for most of our sisters in the rest of the world, who are still forced into premature marriage, prostitution, forced labor.

They have children that they don't want or that they cannot feed. They have no control over their bodies or their lives. They have no education and no freedom. They are raped, beaten up, and sometimes killed with total impunity.

For most western young women of today, being called a feminist is an insult.

Feminism has never been sexy, but let me assure you that it never stopped me from flirting and I have seldom suffered from lack of men.

Feminism is not dead, by no means.

It has evolved.

If you don't like the term, change the name.

Call it Aphrodite, or Venus, or bimbo if you want—it doesn't matter.

The name doesn't matter at all as long as we understand what it is about and support it.

So, young women here, protest, dissent against every form of injustice, and most of all against gender injustice.

The patriarchy is dated. [applause]

Once a journalist asked me in an interview what I feared most.

And I answered without hesitation, "power with impunity."

I fear those who abuse power and have the power to abuse.

They can violate the law, lie, manipulate, practice corruption, even torture and kill with no accountability.

I know what I'm talking about.

It started on a memorable day, Tuesday, September 11th 1973 in Chile.

On that day we had a military coup that ended a century and a half of democracy in my country. On that Tuesday, September 11th, the power of an illegitimate government with total impunity began, and it lasted seventeen long years.

It wounded the society so deeply that the scars are visible more than thirty years later.

It has happened over and over in the world, even in the most civilized nations.

Nazis in Germany, fascists in Italy and Spain, communists in Russia, Taliban in Afghanistan, not to mention eastern Europe, Africa, and so many places in Latin America.

It can happen anywhere.

This kind of power takes over all branches of government, including the fourth branch, the press.

It has an excuse of course.

It is protecting an ethnic or religious group, or the fatherland.

It is protecting you, the citizens, from a terrible enemy, your own fear.

This kind of power only works with fear.

Fear paralyzes and isolates people so they become easy to control, and nobody dares to dissent or protest.

Power with impunity's very clever.

It chips away your rights one by one.

And every time you think, "well it's not so bad, I can live without this." And then the next day it's something else, and you say, "well, it doesn't affect me directly. I can live without this too. It is only a temporary situation. It is for my own safety." And soon you have lost a way of life that before you took for granted, because you did not protest, you did not take action, you were afraid, or simply complacent.

In Chile, the military government terrorized the population with the excuse of protecting it from the threat of communism.

The military were defending the Christian western culture, as they called it. *La cultura cristiana occidental*.

In the name of national security, habeas corpus, the right to have a hearing, was taken away. People were arrested indefinitely, and they had no right to defend themselves. Torture became a common practice. Even children were tortured in front of their parents. Prisoners died in captivity and their bodies were destroyed. They were called *desaparecidos*, "disappeared ones." Legally they were not dead, they have never existed. There were secret prisons, secret torture centers, secret burials.

First, the enemies were foreigners, Cubans and Russians.

Then the enemies were within the country, they could be hiding anywhere. They were the leftists, the artists, dissidents, journalists, etc.

And finally total paranoia took over. Those who were not with the government were against the government. They were un-Chilean, unpatriotic, traitors of the fatherland.

Very few dared to protest because they could pay with their lives. But those who protested eventually destroyed the dictatorship and brought back democracy. It took a long time, but they did it.

The power to abuse not only is practiced by the government or by the military. It also happens in the workplace, the street, or the home.

In our species, the alpha males define reality and force the rest of the pack to accept that reality and follow their rules. The rules change all time, but they always benefit them. And in this case the trickle-down effect, which doesn't work in economics, works perfectly. Abuse trickles down from the top of the ladder to the bottom. Women and children, especially the poor, are on the bottom. Even the most destitute of men have

someone they can abuse, a woman or a child. Men run the world and look at the mess we have. [applause]

What kind of world do we want?

This is a fundamental question that many young people are asking today.

Does it make sense to participate in the existing world order?

We want a world where life is preserved, and the quality of life is enriched for everybody.

How much longer are we going to accept the power that a few exert over the many, through gender, income, race, and class?

Isn't the time right to make fundamental changes in our civilization.

We Americans are part of the most powerful and influential empire in history.

We can start the changes, knowing that they will rapidly extend to every corner of the planet, as it happens with everything else that we export, from technology, to science, to music, movies, fashion, and other aspects of culture.

For real change, we need feminine energy in the management of the world.

Feminine energy is the most underused renewable and sustainable natural resource in this planet. [applause]

Yes, I would love to have Sophia Lauren's long legs and legendary breasts.

But given a choice, I would rather have the warrior heart of Wangari Maathai or Somaly Mam.

I want to make this world good, not better, but to make it good.

Why not? It's possible.

Look around; all this knowledge, energy, talent, and technology.

Lets get off our fannies, roll up our sleeves, and get to work passionately in creating a perfect world.

Thank you very much.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08