

Hello! Wow. Thank you.

Thank you Chad, for those kind words and for the even kinder work that you and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation do every day—especially on behalf of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people here and across America.

It's such an honor to be here at the inaugural Time to THRIVE conference. But it's a little weird, too. Here I am, in this room because of an organization whose work I deeply admire. And I'm surrounded by people who make it their life's work to make other people's lives better—profoundly better. Some of you teach young people—people like me. Some of you help young people heal and to find their voice. Some of you listen. Some of you take action. Some of you are young people yourselves...in which case, it's even weirder for a person like me to be speaking to you.

It's weird because here I am, an actress, representing—at least in some sense—an industry that places crushing standards on all of us. Not just young people, but everyone. Standards of beauty. Of a good life. Of success. Standards that, I hate to admit, have affected me. You have ideas planted in your head, thoughts you never had before, that tell you how you have to act, how you have to dress and who you have to be. I have been trying to push back, to be authentic, to follow my heart, but it can be hard.

But that's why I'm here. In this room, all of you, all of us, can do so much more together than any one person can do alone. And I hope that thought bolsters you as much as it does me. I hope the workshops you'll go to over the next few days give you strength. Because I can only imagine that there are days—when you've worked longer hours than your boss realizes or cares about, just to help a kid you know can make it. Days where you feel completely alone. Undermined. Or hopeless.

I know there are people in this room who go to school every day and get treated like shit for no reason. Or you go home and you feel like you can't tell your parents the whole truth about yourself. Beyond putting yourself in one box or another, you worry about the future. About college or work or even your physical safety. Trying to create that mental picture of your life—of what on earth is going to happen to you—can crush you a little bit every day. It is toxic and painful and deeply unfair.

Sometimes it's the little, insignificant stuff that can tear you down. I try not to read gossip as a rule, but the other day a website ran an article with a picture of me wearing sweatpants on the way to the gym. The writer asked, "Why does [this] petite beauty insist upon dressing like a massive man?"

\*pause\*

Because I like to be comfortable. There are pervasive stereotypes about masculinity and femininity that define how we are all supposed to act, dress and speak. They serve no one. Anyone who defies these so-called 'norms' becomes worthy of comment and scrutiny. The LGBT

community knows this all too well.

Yet there is courage all around us. The football hero, Michael Sam. The actress, Laverne Cox. The musicians Tegan and Sara Quinn. The family that supports their daughter or son who has come out. And there is courage in this room. All of you.

I'm inspired to be in this room because every single one of you is here for the same reason. **You're here because you've adopted as a core motivation the simple fact that this world would be a whole lot better if we just made an effort to be less horrible to one another.** If we took just 5 minutes to recognize each other's beauty, instead of attacking each other for our differences. That's not hard. It's really an easier and better way to live. And ultimately, it saves lives.

Then again, it's not easy at all. It can be the hardest thing, because loving other people starts with loving ourselves and accepting ourselves. I know many of you have struggled with this. I draw upon your strength and your support, and have, in ways you will never know.

I'm here today because I am gay. And because... maybe I can make a difference. To help others have an easier and more hopeful time. Regardless, for me, I feel a personal obligation and a social responsibility.

I also do it selfishly, because I am tired of hiding and I am tired of lying by omission. I suffered for years because I was scared to be out. My spirit suffered, my mental health suffered and my relationships suffered. And I'm standing here today, with all of you, on the other side of all that pain. I am young, yes, but what I have learned is that love, the beauty of it, the joy of it and yes, even the pain of it, is the most incredible gift to give and to receive as a human being. And we deserve to experience love fully, equally, without shame and without compromise.

There are too many kids out there suffering from bullying, rejection, or simply being mistreated because of who they are. Too many dropouts. Too much abuse. Too many homeless. Too many suicides. You can change that and you **are** changing it.

But you never needed me to tell you that. That's why this was a little bit weird. The only thing I can really say is what I've been building up to for the past five minutes. Thank you. Thank for inspiring me. Thank you for giving me hope, and please keep changing the world for people like me.

Happy Valentine's Day. I love you.