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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I analyze the commencement speech given by Ellen DeGeneres at Tulane University in 2009. I argue that through identifying with her audience and employing a rhetorical style consisting of a careful balance between humor and tragedy as an additional factor to her use of the commencement genre style presented in Margaret LaWare's essay, "Redefining The 'Good Life': Life Lessons And Virtues In Commencement Speeches By Women," DeGeneres is able to establish enough ethos to be seen as a highly credible source on the subject of life, and is able to resonate with her audience and make a point they perceive to be widely reasonable and sound.

## **Keywords**

Ellen DeGeneres, Commencement speech, epideictic rhetoric, commencement genre, humor, tragedy, constraints, identification, ethos

## Ellen DeGeneres' Tulane Commencement Speech: Is She Getting Through to Anybody?

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In this paper, I analyze the commencement speech given by Ellen DeGeneres at Tulane University in 2009. I argue that through identifying with her audience and employing a rhetorical style consisting of a careful balance between humor and tragedy as an additional factor to her use of the commencement genre style presented in Margaret LaWare's essay, "Redefining The 'Good Life': Life Lessons And Virtues In Commencement Speeches By Women," DeGeneres is able to establish enough ethos to be seen as a highly credible source on the subject of life, and is able to resonate with her audience and make a point they perceive to be widely reasonable and sound.

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Ellen DeGeneres is my all-time favorite comedian; that being said, it seems somewhat odd that I'd never watched any of her work until I was in college. Before, all I knew about her was that she was supposedly funny and, well... gay. The first time I ever watched her talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, I thought it was somewhat entertaining, but not enough to make a habit out of watching the show. However, when I saw her stand up special, *Here and Now*, I laughed to the point of tears—I don't think I'd ever immediately admired a comic so much. DeGeneres became my favorite comic within one hour of her stand up special, and I found the reasons why were quite easy to pinpoint: first of all, for every topic, from technology to pickles, I felt I could relate to her—she had an easy way of making intimate and seemingly isolated experiences and opinions come across as normal everyday occurrences. Second, DeGeneres' performance seemed to have an underlying theme that was quite impressive: she seemed to be suggesting that with all of our differences in preferences and cultures, deep down, we're really all the same—we all just want to laugh.

When tasked with finding an orator to write a fifteen page research paper on, DeGeneres was the furthest from my mind. I thought about protest speeches, humanitarian speeches, black power speeches, feminist speeches, and other activist rhetoric. However, when I heard some other students in the class propose the analysis of speeches given from people I'd heard of but never heard a speech from, I started pondering about the possibilities of doing my analysis on a speech that I found funny as opposed to a speech pushing for movement. Why not analyze something that made me laugh? While trying to think of

someone funny who has given a speech I could write on, I found myself searching through countless standup comedians, and somehow ended up watching an hour long special of Ellen DeGeneres—this was the first time I'd ever watched her do stand up. I researched if she'd given any addresses to the public, and I was pleasantly surprised. In 2009, DeGeneres gave the commencement speech to the graduating class of Tulane University. Once again, she not only had me laughing all throughout and feeling like I could really relate to her, but also, there was another underlying theme; as Shakespeare would say, "To thine own self be true."

Throughout the years, there have been many profound commencement speeches, of which, it is my argument, Ellen DeGeneres's commencement speech to the 2009 graduating class of Tulane University should be included. In her speech, DeGeneres discusses many of her achievements; becoming the first female comedian to be asked to sit on Johnny Carson's couch on *The Tonight Show*, getting her own sitcom, her own talk show, becoming a "huge celebrity," etc. Throughout these topics, DeGeneres, in accordance with her usual rhetorical style, employs a healthy dose of comedy. However, DeGeneres also discusses her heartbreaking trials and tribulations in the speech, using a less-like-her style of rhetoric, and furthermore, seems to somewhat conform to the commencement speech genre. Through her exploration of her more tragic experiences, DeGeneres is able to connect with her immediate audience on an unusually deep level, and, in doing so, able her conclusion to be seen as more sound and reasonable than expected. Also, in her speech, DeGeneres makes a strong appeal to her audience that

she is “one of them” in that she grew up in the place from which they are graduating and has experienced many of the same things they are going through, enabling her to further identify with her audience. Through identifying with her audience and employing a rhetorical style consisting of a careful balance between humor and tragedy as an additional factor to her use of the commencement genre style, DeGeneres is able to establish enough ethos to be seen as a highly credible source on the subject of life, and is able to resonate with her audience and make a point they perceive to be widely reasonable and sound.

## BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Lee DeGeneres was born to Elliot and Elizabeth (Betty) DeGeneres on the 26th of January, 1958 in Metairie, Louisiana. DeGeneres' parents divorced in 1971 when she was 13 and her mother remarried a man named Roy Gruessendorf. Gruessendorf moved Ellen and her mother to Atlanta, Texas where Betty fought with breast cancer. During Betty's struggle, her husband molested her daughter Ellen, who was a teenager at the time. DeGeneres told *Allure* magazine he once tried to break down her bedroom door and "I had to kick a window out and escape and sleep in a hospital all night long" (Cosgrove-Mather). Although it was a traumatic experience, one which her mother didn't believe and stayed married to the man for several years after, DeGeneres was able to overcome it and graduate high school in 1976. She moved back to New Orleans where she enrolled at a local university. She aspired to be a veterinarian, but after one term at college, gave up on this dream because she found she wasn't "book smart." After that, she worked odd jobs such as selling vacuum cleaners, painting houses, waiting tables, and working as a legal secretary. Reportedly, during an event at which DeGeneres was required to speak publicly, she got very nervous and resorted to humor to get through the experience, after which she began receiving offers to do stand-up comedy ("Ellen DeGeneres").

At the insistence of her mother, DeGeneres began performing stand-up comedy in 1980 at a local coffee shop. In the midst of her comedic start, DeGeneres' partner, Kathy, died tragically in a car accident. This event led to DeGeneres' breakthrough monologue, *phone call to God*. In 1986, she appeared and entertained audiences on *The Tonight Show* as the first female comic on the show, and presented the bit, *phone call to God*. After many other appearances on talk shows such as *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, DeGeneres was in the public eye and, in 1994, starred in her own TV show, *These Friends of Mine*, which was later renamed *Ellen*.

In 1997, while she was on *The Opera Winfrey Show*, DeGeneres publicly came out as a lesbian ("Ellen DeGeneres"). Shortly after, her character on the sitcom *Ellen* became the first lead in sitcom history to openly acknowledge her homosexuality on air and caused major controversy for ABC. Many sponsors of the show, including J.C. Penny and Chrysler, withdrew advertisements, and an ABC affiliate in Birmingham, Alabama refused to air the landmark episode (Hubert). However, with the controversy came huge support from the LGBT community and gay-friendly activists. Although the episode won her an Emmy award, *Ellen* was cancelled in 1998. "Here's how I look at it," DeGeneres says, "I am really proud of *Ellen*, but I tried to do something that didn't work. I tried to incorporate educational things about what people actually go through when they're coming out, and it wasn't funny. Because it's not funny. And that's why it failed" (Green).

Since her public coming out in 1997, DeGeneres has been seen as "the face" of the LGBT community. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center, 32% of the general public claimed Ellen DeGeneres as the first public figure openly gay to come to mind when asked. It should be noted 38% of the population surveyed could not come up with an answer to this question. Another survey, specifically aimed at the LGBT population, asked "Who would you consider an important public figure advancing LGBT rights?" Ellen came in second, having 18% of the vote, to Barack Obama with 23% (Desilver).

Although Ellen's coming out led to major political controversy, DeGeneres claimed "I didn't do it to make a political statement, I did it selfishly for myself and because I thought it was a great thing for the show, which desperately needed a point of view" (Handy). She hasn't had much political involvement, though she has had Republican John McCain on her day time talk show in recent years to discuss their disagreements on the legalization of gay marriage. As DeGeneres puts it, "I'm not a political person, and that may be surprising to hear. I don't know enough about what's going on to say anything" (Ressner). Though she may not have political motivations, that DeGeneres publicly came out as a celebrity and faced the repercussions head-on puts her in the exclusive group of individuals that stayed true to themselves, even when in the public eye.

DeGeneres starred and appeared in several movies from 1996 on, and started her talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, in 2003. Over the years, the day time talk show has been a huge success, in part due to her adaptation of her publicly known sexual orientation into a hybrid form of homo- and hetero- sexuality comparable to the heterosexual expectations of America:

There are a few promising jokes that gesture towards the enactment of her sexual difference throughout the season. But they are not enough to create an actual space for that difference. The very structure of the show absorbs those references into the dominant form of reference: heterosexuality... On the face of it, the show seems to address stay-at-home moms and other people who are at home during the day, and thus is not exactly queer. This then seems to continue DeGeneres' move toward assimilation (Reed 33).

It's difficult to predict whether or not her show will take a different stance in the future, but I will argue that DeGeneres's goal is simply to make people laugh. Perhaps dance a bit as well, but mostly just make people laugh.

In the summer of 2008, DeGeneres married her long time Australian girlfriend, Portia de Rossi, at their house in Los Angeles with only 19 guests present. De Rossi is a television actress and has been on a few shows, including *Arrested Development* and *Nip/Tuck*. The two have been together since 2004, and seem to be not only extraordinarily happy and in love, but also, in being happy, an idolized celebrity couple. They have managed to stay out of the public eye pretty well, a fact de Rossi attributes to their 'normal' and 'boring' lifestyle:

To think that a married gay couple is considered boring and normal is fantastic... Happiness is a choice too. It's a choice to live in a state of gratitude and to fix what makes you unhappy. Being honest with who you are, being able to go out into the world and show people that you can be successful and be happy and be in a good marriage--it's important (Krochmal).

In 2009, Ellen was invited by Tulane University to give the commencement speech to the graduating class. The University is located in her home town of New Orleans and DeGeneres gratefully accepted. Then, in 2010, Ellen took the place of Paula Abdul as a judge on the television show, *American Idol*. Although she only stayed for one season, her appearance on the show was a success. "Her mix of playful banter and serious criticism ("That was crazy, I think...in a bad way") helped the show's ratings surge 12 percent from the previous week (also a 2 percent increase from last year's Hollywood Week episodes)" (Karger).

In addition to her daytime talk show, past sitcoms, and sporadic movie appearances, DeGeneres has hosted the Grammy Awards, the Primetime Emmy Awards, and

the Academy Awards in 2007, for which she received a Primetime Emmy nomination for "Outstanding Individual Performance in a Variety or Music Program." She hosted the Oscars for a second time on March 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year, on which she claimed, prior to the show, "I am so excited to be hosting the Oscars for the second time. You know what they say—the third time's the charm" (Sanjit).

Of course, DeGeneres's life experiences majorly influenced her commencement speech given at Tulane University. As a form of epideictic rhetoric, or ceremonial speeches oriented toward the present, while calling to the past to inform the future, DeGeneres's commencement speech's goal is to give life advice to the graduating class of 2009 that resonates with the audience and rings true. She references her sexual orientation, the death of her partner that led to her persistent pursuit of comedy, the cancellation of her show and temporary loss of her entire career in 1998 due to her coming out publicly, her "celebrity-ness," her wife, and much more in her speech, all of which are very relevant to the last point of her speech: "remember this; you're going to be okay" (DeGeneres).

## GENRE

DeGeneres's commencement speech addressed to the 2009 Tulane University graduating class seems to align with five specific characteristics of the commencement speech genre set forth by Margaret LaWare's essay, "Redefining the 'Good Life': Life Lessons and Virtues in Commencement Speeches by Women." This article is a little too narrow to be an *exact* representation of a commencement genre in which DeGeneres's speech fits, as it focuses solely on commencement speeches to an all-female audience and spends a lot of time on gender-specific rhetoric, which I don't find any evidence of in DeGeneres's speech. However, there are several aspects of the proposed genre in which her speech *does* fit: (1) emphasis of values the orator finds pertinent to a life of success and satisfaction; (2) a reconfiguration of dominant cultural themes through the incorporation of their own life narratives; (3) the orator is a source of inspiration, guidance and courage for their audience; (4) the orator attributes some measure of their success to accidental events; and (5) the orator "calls attention to the rapid changes of society and unpredictability of the future... also reflects on the inevitable straddling of the private and public spheres" (LaWare 6).

The first quality described in LaWare's essay that DeGeneres's speech possesses is "how women [and men] orators use epideictic to foster their own ends in both defining and illuminating values that they feel of significance to an audience of women [and men]" (LaWare

2), and furthermore, “what qualities of character are emphasized for [graduates] to lead successful and satisfying lives” (LaWare 6). DeGeneres both defines and illuminates values in her speech, though the specific value of integrity—of staying “true to yourself”—seems to pull the most weight throughout her speech. On her coming out, DeGeneres says, “I finally decided that I was living with so much shame, and so much fear, that I just couldn’t live that way anymore... I just wanted to be honest” (DeGeneres), suggesting that living a life of secrecy (or without integrity) is in no way satisfying. Furthermore, DeGeneres confirms that her decision to live a life of integrity was the right decision: “Ultimately, that’s what’s gotten me to this place. I don’t live in fear, I’m free, I have no secrets and I know I’ll always be okay, because no matter what, I know who I am” (DeGeneres). This, in addition with her introductory line, “I didn’t go to any college at all... and I’m not saying you wasted your time, or money, but look at me, I’m a huge celebrity” (DeGeneres), shows DeGeneres’s emphasis of the value of integrity as the main characteristic necessary for graduates to find success in life.

Another aspect of this genre in which DeGeneres’s speech fits is “how women have used invention within an epideictic framework to reconfigure dominant cultural themes and values associated with women’s [and men’s] lives and experiences by incorporating their own interpretations of the social and political world and by providing narratives of their own lives and experiences to illuminate new values” (LaWare 2). DeGeneres not only gives a narrative of her life throughout her speech, but also reconfigures dominant cultural themes in her speech, most noticeably so when she redefines the concept of ‘success.’ This is also a great example of contextual reconstruction, a response in which the rhetor attempts to redefine the situation and challenges definitions. DeGeneres argues that the definition of ‘success’ is ever-changing: “when I was younger, I thought success was something different... and as you grow, you’ll realize the definition of success changes... for me, the most important thing in your life is to live your life with integrity and not to give into peer pressure to try to be something that you’re not, to live your life as an honest and compassionate person. To contribute in some way” (DeGeneres). Also, DeGeneres mentions finding a ‘purpose’ during a part of her life where she struggled with her career:

I lost my career... Nobody wanted to touch me at all. Yet, I was getting letters from kids that almost committed suicide, but didn’t because of what I did. And I realized that I had a purpose. And it wasn’t just about me and it wasn’t about celebrity, but I felt like I was being punished and

it was a bad time, I was angry, I was sad (DeGeneres).

By saying she found a purpose in the darkest of times she somewhat challenges the idea that purpose is something we must search for. Instead, DeGeneres seems to propose that purpose is something that is innate when life is lived with integrity. DeGeneres attempts to redefine a life of success, as well as finding a purpose, for her audience in using her own life experiences as evidence.

Thirdly, inside the genre presented in LaWare’s essay, DeGeneres fits into the concept of “a source of inspiration, courage, and guidance” (LaWare 6), in that she, herself, has evidence of a life lived with integrity. Her narrative of her life and the consequences, both positive and negative, she faced due to her practice of integrity shows DeGeneres’s use of enactment, or a rhetor, as themselves, being proof of their claim. Her enactment, in addition to her daring of her audience to do the same—live a life of integrity—makes DeGeneres a source of inspiration and courage. DeGeneres becomes a source of guidance when she proposes a way in which the audience may begin to lead a life of integrity: “life is like one big Mardi Gras. But instead of showing your boobs, show people your brain, and if they like what they see, you’ll have more beads than you’ll know what to do with” (DeGeneres), in effect saying “do what you can and show what you’ve got to offer, for that’s the best chance anyone has got to make it.”

Fourthly, DeGeneres points to her success (in the general sense) as somewhat of an accident (LaWare 9). On her beginning in comedy, she says “the way I ended up on this path was from a very tragic event” and goes on to discuss the death of her girlfriend when she was nineteen and how hitting rock bottom led to her development of her first comedy monologue:

I was living in a basement apartment; I had no money; I had no heat, no air, I had a mattress on the floor and the apartment was infested with fleas. And I was soul-searching, I was like, why is she suddenly gone and there are fleas here... I started writing and what poured out of me was an imaginary conversation with God. (DeGeneres)

DeGeneres then explains how this monologue began her career in stand up and eventually television.

Lastly, DeGeneres “calls attention to the rapid changes of society and unpredictability of the future...[and] also reflects upon the inevitable straddling of the private and public spheres” (LaWare 6). Several times in the speech, DeGeneres references the changing times: “And I



thought, what if they find out I'm gay, then they'll never watch... and this was a long time ago, this was when we just had white presidents," suggesting our acceptance/toleration of people's differences as a society has improved. Also, her reference to the future, "the economy is booming, the job market is wide open, the planet is just fine. It's going to be great." is, in light of the 2009 economic state of our nation, quite sarcastic, and in being so, points to the "unpredictability of the future." That she ends with "you're going to be okay" shows DeGeneres's understanding of the difficult times ahead for the graduates. Furthermore, DeGeneres acknowledges the "inevitable straddling of the private and public spheres" in her narration of her struggle with her own coming out. Although she had already come out in her own private sphere prior to her celebrity career, DeGeneres struggled with the public sphere in that "I thought if people found out they wouldn't like me, they wouldn't laugh at me... if they find out I'm gay, then they'll never watch" (DeGeneres). As we know, DeGeneres conquered this fear, but her internal struggle is a great example of "straddling the private and public spheres."

Although parts of DeGeneres's speech fall under the genre of past commencement speeches of women orators, it extends the genre in several ways. Lois Agnew's essay, *The Day Belongs to Students: Expanding Epideictic's Civic Function*, argues that "although some treatments of genre suggest that it serves as a rigid system of classification that limits discourse to prescribed forms... [g]enres should not be viewed as static forms, but as evolving phenomena" (Agnew 150). DeGeneres extends, or 'evolves,' the commencement genre in one main way: she relies heavily on humor as a way of identifying with her audience, as well as a way of keeping things light.

### HUMOR and TRAGEDY

DeGeneres's signature style of rhetoric—humor—is utilized strategically in her speech to not only capture her audience's attention, but also as a way in which she can break the tension related to her constraints, or issues facing the rhetor that have the power to constrain the way in which a rhetor may address a rhetorical situation. She then transitions into a more tragic style of rhetoric in her life narrative, in addition to her frequent use of humor, as a way to sustain audience attention. Thus making her ultimate conclusion—that integrity is the most important quality to possess in life—resonate soundly with her audience.

Throughout a majority of the speech, DeGeneres sticks to her usual humorous rhetorical style, most noticeably in the introduction and conclusion of her speech. In her introduction, DeGeneres begins with what is expected of a commencement speaker: she thanks the

students and faculty for inviting her to speak. DeGeneres puts her own comical spin on this anticipated gratitude statement by including the "creepy Spanish teacher" (DeGeneres) in her thanks. She goes on to comment on her assumption of the audience's condition based on the exigency of, or reason for, the speech: graduating from college. "I realize most of you are hung-over and have splitting headaches and haven't slept since Fat Tuesday, but you can't graduate 'til I finish, so listen up" (DeGeneres).

DeGeneres goes on to address a few of her constraints to the audience in such a way as to break tensions related to them: first of all, DeGeneres "didn't go to any college at all," which could, in itself, pose as a possible problem in her being able to identify with the audience. Add on to this fact that DeGeneres is rich and famous, and the constraint becomes quite a scary one to face. How can DeGeneres congratulate the graduates without making them feel as though they wasted a bunch of money and time on nothing but a piece of paper? Her approach to this is humor: to simply, and quite bluntly, just state the fact. DeGeneres says "I didn't go to any college at all... and I'm not saying you wasted your time, or money, but look at me, I'm a huge celebrity" (DeGeneres).

Her second constraint she addresses is her publicly known sexual orientation. As "the face" of the LGBT community, what should she say about her own homosexuality? Her approach to this is also humor: as she is giving the narrative of her life, DeGeneres says "I didn't really have a plan, my point is that, by the time I was your age, I really thought I knew who I was but I had no idea. Like for example, when I was your age I was dating men. So what I'm saying is, when you're older, most of you will be gay" (DeGeneres). By saying "most of you will be gay," DeGeneres is being obviously sarcastic in such a way as to break any tension related to her sexual orientation. In Stephen Smith's essay, *Humor as Rhetoric and Cultural Agreement*, he says humor is a complicated part of popular culture in that it enables the common people to "challenge the dominant view of the social order" (Smith 51). By sarcastically claiming most of her audience will one day be gay, DeGeneres is challenging the idea of homosexuality being a choice. If it were a choice, then everyone would have the ability to simply decide to be gay, thus a good portion of people *would* one day be gay. However, by sarcastically suggesting that a majority of her audience becoming gay is a possibility, DeGeneres seems to indirectly suggest homosexuality as a choice is an absurdity, thus "challenging the dominant view" that homosexuality is a choice.

DeGeneres then transitions into a more tragic style of rhetoric in her life narrative. She speaks about how she got started in comedy, "I ended up on this path [due to] a very

tragic event. I was maybe nineteen and my girlfriend at the time was killed in a car accident” (DeGeneres), which is followed by the development of her first monologue that led to her career in comedy. She then speaks about her decision to come out publicly, a decision that led to the loss of her career.

I finally decided that I was living with so much shame and so much fear, that I just couldn't live that way anymore and I decided to come out... I thought, 'What's the worst that could happen? I can lose my career.' I did. I lost my career. The show (*Ellen*) was cancelled... the phone didn't ring for three years... Nobody wanted to touch me at all. Yet, I was getting letters from kids that almost committed suicide, but didn't because of what I did. And I realized that I had a purpose (DeGeneres).

By providing some hope to her tragic situation—that she found a purpose even though she'd lost her career—DeGeneres is beginning her redefinition of success later on in the speech. By strategically incorporating it here, in the tragic part of her speech, DeGeneres is making her claim resonate more soundly with the audience. At this point in the speech, the audience is completely silent as opposed to the parts of the speech in which DeGeneres employs humor. This, the audience's silence, is proof of DeGeneres's ability to sustain audience attention through her use of tragic rhetoric as well as to serve as proof of her own claims, a form of enactment.

### IDENTIFICATION and ETHOS

Another way in which DeGeneres is able to make her claims be seen as sound arguments to her audience is not only her identification, or connection with her audience on a basis of shared interests and characteristics, but also her ethos, or credibility, as a rhetor constructed by the perceived practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill directed to her audience. Also, DeGeneres's attempt to identify with her audience is an attempt to further break any tensions due to her constraints.

DeGeneres attempts to identify with her particular audience, or those actually present for the speech, in several different ways. First, in her introduction, DeGeneres acknowledges her assumed state of the audience, “hung-over and have splitting headaches and haven't slept since Fat Tuesday” (DeGeneres), which is probably somewhat true, being that the audience cheers in response. Cheering can be seen as a form of feedback from the audience to let DeGeneres know she has successfully identified with them or made a point they strongly agree with. DeGeneres also attempts to identify

with her audience by pointing to the fact that she too comes from New Orleans, where Tulane University is located, “I was born and raised here, I spent my formative years here, and like you, when I was living here I only did laundry six times” (DeGeneres). DeGeneres's use of “like you” shows obvious intent to try to identify with her audience. DeGeneres also makes reference to Fat Tuesday/Mardi Gras, a New Orleans festival celebrating the last day before Lent begins, twice in the speech, as well as references Hurricane Katrina a few times throughout the speech as well. DeGeneres also attempts to identify with her young audience through her use of allusions to contemporary music, specifically the Pussycat Dolls and Lady Gaga. By identifying with her audience, DeGeneres is able to make them feel as though she is ‘one of them’ and that she understands what they have accomplished, even though she never attended college. Her use of identification not only further breaks the tension of her constraints, but also, in addition to her ethos, makes her audience feel as though her claims are sound and relatable.

Ethos, as defined by *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, is “the character of a rhetor performed in the rhetorical act and known by the audience because of prior interactions” (Ice 153) and makes reference to Aristotle's description of character consisting of practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill. DeGeneres's ethos is portrayed throughout her speech as a credible source on the matter of life due to her demonstration of these three characteristics throughout her speech.

Practical wisdom can be demonstrated by a rhetor “through the use of common sense and sound reason... conveyed by a rhetor's command of information and ability to make decisions based on sound reasons” (Ice 153). DeGeneres establishes practical wisdom through attributing her success (in a general sense) to her own integrity in life—coming out publicly and suffering the backlash of it—and showing evidence of this attribution through enactment, which leads to her conclusion that “the most important thing in your life is to live a life of integrity and not to give into peer pressure to try to be something that you're not” (DeGeneres).

DeGeneres's virtue, or “sharing the values the audience considers worthy of merit” (Ice 153), is established throughout her speech, mainly in her repetitive emphasis on the value of integrity, but other places as well. DeGeneres's construction of her definition of success is also an example of her virtue. By redefining the word, DeGeneres is indirectly suggesting that perhaps the definitions that have been engraved in our minds by our parents and other sources of influence are not the right definition for us, and that each of us has the potential to create our own definition of success. Also, with her



mentioning of the letters she received just after she lost her career and how those letters gave her a purpose that “wasn’t just about me and it wasn’t about celebrity,” (DeGeneres) she indirectly makes a claim that each of our purposes, as human beings, differs from one person to the next, and it doesn’t have to fall under certain guidelines to be considered a purposeful life. It’s up to us to realize our purposes and do what we can with them. DeGeneres ended up becoming ‘the face’ of the LGBT community without even trying, she was just being honest.

DeGeneres’s goodwill, or “the quality of being motivated by the audience’s best interests” (Ice 154), is demonstrated throughout her speech, as she is giving advice that is, hopefully, based on what she thinks is the audience’s best interest. DeGeneres’s repetition of the importance of integrity reflects her goodwill directed at the audience in that she attributes her success in life and in her career to this value, thus, recommending it to her audience is an expression of her goodwill: she wants them to know the secret to her success so they, too, may be able to become successful. Also, in her redefining the word ‘success,’ she promotes her interest in the audience’s interest of living a successful life.

In identifying with her audience and in her portrayal of her ethos throughout her speech, DeGeneres is able to expose herself to her audience in such a way as to be seen as a credible source on the subject of life. This enables DeGeneres’s claims, mostly that living a life with integrity is the best way to live your life, to be seen as sound and true.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Further research could be done on the underlying themes present in this speech, such as DeGeneres’s emphasis on humor perceived as an indirect suggestion that a humorous perspective on life is, in addition to integrity, the secret to her success. Also, the possibility of any underlying humanitarian claims could be further examined. Another concept for further evaluation could be the rhetor’s delivery of the speech and its impact on the speech’s effectiveness.

DeGeneres’s commencement speech to the 2009 graduating class of Tulane University is easily labeled a fitting response to, or as meeting the expectations of, the exigency of the speech in that she is able to meet her ultimate goal as an orator—to have her claims resonate as reasonable and sound with her audience. She earns this label by carefully aligning her speech to the proposed genre of commencement speakers, her strategically balanced use of humor and tragedy as a rhetorical style, and in identifying with, as well as portraying an ethos perceived as credible by, her audience.

DeGeneres’s speech is perceived as very well-constructed for many reasons, but for me, the largest reason is its claim about the best possible way in which life can be pursued. Although most commencement speeches offer advice, DeGeneres’s is unique in that it makes a recommendation of incorporating a single value into one’s code of conduct to have a successful and satisfying life. And this value—integrity—is not advocated for in a college environment very often. That DeGeneres has so many constraints to begin with, advocating for something as personal and intimate as integrity at a college graduation is quite brave, and gives her speech a whole other level of uniqueness.

Furthermore, DeGeneres’s use of humor makes her commencement speech stand out from others simply by being entertaining. I’ve attended numerous graduations, high school and college alike, and never have I *not* wanted the commencement speaker’s time on the microphone to end prior to my exposure to DeGeneres’s commencement speech. But more than that, her humor is her way to both engage and disarm her audience—perhaps why so many people try for comedy in situations like this.

Lastly, DeGeneres’s speech is significant to me in that she suggests and gives evidence that life is not about doing whatever it takes to become successful, but it’s simply about staying true to yourself. We will never figure out what we are really looking for, let alone find it, if we prescribe to others’ expectations and definitions of a good life. We must write our own code along the way, but keep it adaptable—maintain room for expansion, change, and lessons learned. If we can always live our lives according to this ever-changing, innate compass, and make sure what we’re doing is constantly in line with what we believe is right, we will find a purpose, and we will find true success.

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