Molly Bryant: Quit being so polite!!

“It’s time for women to stop being politely angry.” - Leymah Gbowee, Nobel Peace Prize Winner

My voice shook, my knees rattled, and I may have even blacked out for a few seconds. I was at a national nonprofit leadership conference in front of 500 strangers asking the CEO of the CraigsList Foundation what he thought his responsibility was in removing content from the sales website that exploited women and young girls and contributed to an ever-increasing problem with human trafficking. I was 23 and wanted to push myself to ask the questions that are always streaming through my mind as I listen to panelists or speakers. I thought this would be a good opportunity to improve my advocacy and public speaking skills. I also thought that it would lead me down a road that allowed me to speak with ease and confidence, to call out injustices without batting an eye, and to walk away with my head held high.

Cut to last week when I asked a pretty basic question to a state senator in front of 60 people at my own university surrounded by several of my friends. My voice shook, my knees rattled, and I definitely blacked out for a second or two. I asked a question about his vote last year to kick off 111,000 individuals - mostly single mothers - from Medicaid last year. I wanted him to recognize the hypocrisy of his earlier statements that his top priority for the year was “maintaining the social safety net for vulnerable people.” Turns out he stood by his vote and did not see the hypocrisy, but my hope was that the audience would pick up on his apparent cognitive dissonance. I was proud of myself for a split second, and then the doubt and darkness seeped into my being for the rest of the evening.

No matter how many times I go against the strong, unyielding Midwestern current of politeness and niceties, I emerge feeling like a horrible, no good, very bad person. But I try to give myself the same advice that I’d give any of my other social work classmates: Don’t doubt yourself. Stand up for what is right. If you don’t, who will?

Now is not the time to be polite. In fact, it was never the time to be polite. Our politeness contributed to our current political and social situation. My politeness allowed public servants to run uncontested over and over without accountability. My politeness let idiots at the grocery store look me up and down without anything more than an eye roll. My politeness is the death of justice. And so I choose to speak up and speak out with a shaky voice, let my knees rattle, black out for a few seconds, and repeat.