

**Bread Loaf Graduate School of English Commencement Address
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President Liebowitz and Trustees of Middlebury College, Director Maddox, colleagues, students, family members, friends, and—especially—this remarkable group of 2006 graduates—you who represent such a fascinating range of experience.

You come from as far away as India and as nearby as a school right up the road. You have hurtled through your degree in three brief summers—and have spread it out for as long as eleven. You teach in or come from three countries and fourteen states--and speak at least ten languages, including Zulu and Mandarin Chinese. You teach in tiny rural hamlets, vast urban centers, and just about everywhere in between, in private and public schools, in every grade from kindergarten through senior year and even as a trainer and writer for an educational software firm. When I look at the sheer talent and breadth of imagination, the intellectual and personal integrity here before me, I am doubly, triply honored by your invitation to deliver this commencement address: thank you, thank you, thank you.

Several weeks ago, still stunned by the news that I was to be this year's speaker, I fell asleep in a kind of a panic—and I dreamt a panicky dream: in my dream, the fabled night had arrived. I rose to speak and opened the folder holding my address, only to see that the first page held one lone and enigmatic word: **linguine**. Attempting to appear calm, I turned the page: **linguine**, it glared up at me. And every page held the same taunting message: **linguine, linguine, linguine**: clearly *my* raven croaked not “nevermore” but “linguine evermore.”

I'm still puzzling over whether this dream signaled the fear that my commencement remarks would have all the gravitas of a wet noodle, or whether "linguine" is just a not-so-Freudian displacement for "I'm a weenie." Whatever the case, you can be sure that I have checked obsessively today to make sure that these pages were not marred by the offending word. I also obsessively came over to inspect the setup here in the Theatre, and especially to locate the microphone—since I remember only too well one of my earliest public addresses, during which I spoke clearly, earnestly, and directly into what I later realized was a small lamp.

I want to talk to you tonight not about my close encounters with strange foods or my ineptitudes with technology, however, but about what I think of as the Bread Loaf promise, which brings with it very great gifts.

But first, come back with me to another time and place. It's Washington, D.C. on July 21, 1896. On that day, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, president of the Women's Era Club of Boston and editor of the first newspaper published by Black women, decided not to get angry but to get even. Reacting to the comment of a white journalist that Black women were "wholly devoid of morality," Ruffin called for "an army of organized women" to consolidate their voices by joining together in one nation-wide organization. Out of her call came the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the oldest African American secular organization in existence today. The group members chose as their motto one simple phrase: "*Lifting as we climb.*"

I first learned of this organization and its motto several decades ago, as I was beginning to fully appreciate the extraordinary contributions African American women—and many other people of color—have made to every aspect of our national life, and on a personal note, I've had many occasions to be grateful for those friends, family members, colleagues, and students who

have—with the greatest generosity—lifted me up even as they were trying to lift themselves. I know that each of you carries similar memories.

Tonight I want to take some time to recognize how much “lifting as we climb” is part of Bread Loaf’s promise to all of us and to all our students. In doing so, it seems fitting to think first of Bread Loaf’s mother ship, Middlebury College, the alma mater of Alexander Lucius Twilight, the first African American known to have graduated from a U.S. college or university—in 1823. Twilight went on to serve as a Presbyterian minister, a school principal and, eventually, a member of the Vermont state legislature, giving back bountifully to the college that had contributed to his education. I could point to many other ways in which Middlebury has upheld the ideals of the NACW motto: I think for instance of May Belle Chellis, first woman graduate of Middlebury (1886) after whom Middlebury’s May Belle Chellis Women’s Resource Center is named. I think of Mary Annette Anderson, the first African American Woman elected to Phi Beta Kappa and a graduate of Middlebury in 1899. And I think of Gladstone Lewis Chandler, a 1926 graduate of Middlebury who went on to teach at Morehouse College in Atlanta where he became a mentor for Martin Luther King, Jr. Chellis, Anderson, and Chandler were all educated at Middlebury College: **lifting as they climbed.**

What I am calling the promise and gift of Bread Loaf are in fact inscribed in the very beginnings of this graduate program. As Jim told us in his opening address just a few short weeks ago, our patron Joseph Battell, was known for something other than penning the execrable lines of *Ellen*. In his opening talk, Jim asked us, for a few moments at least, to “step aside from our leering attitude toward Battell and Ellen [to] notice what Battell is actually doing [in his guise as Old Piney]: he’s offering her an education. Battell was in fact an outspoken champion of women’s education in the late nineteenth

century.” So, Jim concluded, “it’s with a certain shock that we realize that that odd picture, of Old Piney giving his lectures to Ellen, is actually the first image we have of education taking place beneath Bread Loaf Mountain.”

Battell’s commitment to an inclusive education has been realized most fully, however, under the direction of the indefatigable, the inimitable, the inordinately learned, eloquent, witty, and wise Jim Maddox. Working with Dixie Goswami and Emily Bartels—who themselves are not too shabby in terms of learning, eloquence, wit, and wisdom—Jim has worked to quite literally change the face of Bread Loaf, by raising millions upon millions of dollars to provide scholarships for rural teachers, inner-city teachers, and public school teachers from groups underrepresented in the profession. In doing so, Jim--and the many other staff members who work tirelessly alongside him—are acting out not only the impulse of Battell but also the vision and goals of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. These women have handed down a legacy to us, a legacy of believing in human potential, in the possibility of education for African Americans, for women, for people who live in poverty, for *all* human beings. The women of these Clubs believed that all of us are capable of contributing positively to the world and that all of us, therefore, are collectively responsible for nurturing talents and abilities, regardless of whose talents and abilities they happened to be. *Lifting as we climb.*

Surely I can’t invoke Bread Loaf’s many gifts, however, without reflecting on the Bread Loaf faculty. In preparing these remarks, I tried to count the number of Breadnet exchanges that have been mentored by fellow faculty members. Michael Armstrong is without doubt the champion Exchanger: as many of you know, he has worked with Bread Loaf teachers and their students not just for a summer or a term but for *years*, sharing his

extraordinary talent as a reader of young people’s writing. But many other faculty have worked with these exchanges as well, often long after they’ve left the mountain and are deep into their own school years. I think too of score upon score of Independent Reading Projects mentored by Bread Loaf faculty members—not to mention the ways in which the faculty continue to design courses that carry out Cicero’s age-old dictum to “instruct, delight, and persuade,” a point alluded to by both Deidre and Andrew earlier this evening. Every year I stand rapt—along with many of you—at the bookstore, marveling at the readings spread before me, and I never leave without a long list of works that, as I have time to absorb and study them, teach me how much I still have to learn. Perhaps most of all, however, members of the Bread Loaf faculty—at least at our very best—embody a lesson often taught by another Bread Loafer, Jackie Royster, who insists that the consequences of what we do take root in our students and that, therefore, we must be judged by the outcomes of our teaching. As Jackie puts it, when we are teaching the promise and gift of Bread Loaf, our pedagogy and practice “should be in the interest of creating people with the vision, values, and skills that will help them to make a better world.” It goes without saying that such a pedagogy will strive against the overt racism and sexism characteristic of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin’s day and Alexander Twilight’s day as well as, I am sorry to say, throughout almost all of western history. *Lifting as we climb.*

Of course, one of Bread Loaf’s most magical gifts is our theatre, with its director Alan McVey and its magnificent acting ensemble. Earlier this summer we had the privilege of hearing Oskar Eustis, former artistic director of Trinity Rep and current director of the New York Public Theatre. As those of you who were there will remember, Oskar vividly described the moment—in ancient Greece—when the orator or rhapsode turned from directly addressing

the audience to engage in dialogue with another persona on the stage. This birthing moment of western drama, Oskar argued, encapsulates the unique gift that drama brings to us, the gift of intense focus on the perspective of others, on intense and enduring collaboration, on intense engagement with *all* points of view and audiences of all kinds. Oskar also argued, passionately, that this gift of theatre must remain as free and open to all as possible, and Robert Stepto noted, at the conclusion of Oskar's talk, that Bread Loaf theatre is indeed free and open to all who can find a seat. Our ability, summer after summer, to take part in the theatre productions—by auditioning and performing, by attending rehearsals, by talking with Alan and all the staggeringly gifted actors—and to savor during every performance the bringing to life of myriad perspectives and points of view—enriches us beyond measure. *Lifting as we climb.*

I have, of course, saved the best for last, for the promise and gift of Bread Loaf rests most of all in its students. You have your moments, of course: cacophonous karaoke crooning at Angela's, the annual unveiling of suppressed (and not so suppressed) desires, the late-night plunges into Pleiad, the marathon negotiations over your class gift. But even these playful or indecisive moments reflect the robustness of the community that forms every summer on this mountain. Those who arrive here in late June come from many states, countries, and heritages; many have never been here before. Yet seven weeks later, newcomers and oldcomers alike are part of the kind of community Oskar described, one that believes in the power of language, literature, and drama to embody democracy and to better the lives of others, one that engages varying and often contentious perspectives with openness and candor, one that creates knowledge collaboratively, together creating and passing on the promise and the gifts of Bread Loaf.

Among the Bread Loaf community, you, the graduating class of 2006, stand especially tall—resolute in your commitment, as Deidre said earlier tonight, to remember that “the texts you encounter may not be in the places you have tended to look” but all around you in your surroundings and in your students.” And you have no doubt resonated with the question Andrew asked during his banquet address: What [does this idyllic, golden Bread Loaf experience have to do with the reality experienced by the majority of the world? What right had I,” asked Andrew, “to experience such privilege when others struggled to eat?” Andrew provided a moving answer to this question, and I will add my own: This idyllic, golden Bread Loaf experience is precisely the place where you learn to realize the promise and pass on the gifts of Bread Loaf by *Lifting as you climb*.

Tonight, I have tried—by weaving together the words and images of many, many participants in this community—to summon up, to invoke, the very best spirit of the Bread Loaf School of English, its promise and its many, many gifts. Of course, we do not always live up to this spirit: but it is there, ready to be recognized by and reignited in each of us. Because Bread Loaf is not about any one person but rather about all of us and about what we can do, collectively, to *lift* even as we climb.

In the spirit of Bread Loaf community, I’ve asked the seniors to join me in presenting poet Marge Piercy’s meditation on this theme of lifting as we climb. Here is our reading of her poem, “To Be of Use.”

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

To the graduates here tonight, I say you indeed have work that is real, the work of teaching and learning, of reaching out to those whose perspectives and ways of being differ from yours, of realizing the promise and passing on the gifts of Bread Loaf and of always, always, always *lifting as you climb*. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Bread Loaf class of 2006.