

## Jeffrey Brown, Senior Class President, Oxford 2007

Distinguished fellows; honored guests; you remarkable, supportive, understanding relatives and loved ones; and my dear, dear Bread Loaf family – what a glorious day today is! Before I really get where I want to go, I must take a moment to say a personal thanks to a man who has literally transformed my life in ways he will never know – and that’s our director, Peter McCullough.

I could never have imagined that it was possible to get an entire two-hour class out of the very first line of Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, which, as you know, goes “A gentle knight was pricking on the plain”, but we did it. I remember thinking that, at that rate, in a few days some hapless scout would find our dead bodies, one hand clutching our books while the lifeless fingers of our other hands were pointing, frozen in time, to line six. And yet, what I actually learned from Peter was that interacting with a text is a far richer experience than I had ever imagined possible; that I would actually be dismayed at how quickly we would come to the end of Book One. Any tutor who is able to animate and enrich a dense, complex text like Spenser’s in a way that makes his pupils hungry for the next slice is a special tutor, indeed, and I must admit to a slight disappointment upon walking into Peter’s study each day to find him not wearing his superhero’s cape. If Bread Loaf had been Dr. McCullough’s class alone, it would have been worth the cost times two. Thanks to you, Peter.

I must say that Bread Loaf has been an experience that has far surpassed my hopes and expectations. I have found eternal friendships during my four brief summers. I have been surrounded by great books and great thoughts – some of them **outside** of the 16<sup>th</sup> century! I have grown in immeasurable ways.

It has been an especial privilege to have studied in this place, this City of Spires. This city stands with one ancient foot in the present, with the other planted

firmly in the continuum of the past. Whether you have finished your third summer here, as I have, or you have just arrived here yesterday for the first time, you have certainly encountered this city's legendary ghosts, walked among them, paid homage to them, heard their voices in the very streets and trees. These are the ghosts that Larkin heard, and Auden, and Hardy's Jude the Obscure, who found himself "encircled as it were with the breath and sentiment of [this] venerable city."

It is the ghosts of Oxford – its spirits – who define the city's spirit – its soul. There were many nights when I sat reading in my rooms here, enrapt in Shakespeare, or Marlowe, or John Donne, struck by beautiful thoughts from minds dead four hundred years, only to raise my eyes and realize that the rooms I studied in were two hundred years older than the thoughts I'd just read. This is the soul of Oxford, this timeless connection to labor of the mind and of the hand, that we are all now a part of. Somehow the horrible high school commencement cliché that "we will leave this place, but it will never leave us" rings with crystal fidelity when it comes to Oxford.

In my real life at home in Virginia, I spend a great deal of time traveling around the country to various colleges and universities, many with storied and prestigious reputations. I always take the admissions tour. I've been struck over the years by the consistent and persistent use of the second person pronoun when college representatives talk to potential students. The pitch is always about you: "when you come here, you can design your own major and eat whatever you want whenever you want. If you don't like your roommate or your professor or your dorm room, you can always get another one you like better. You don't have to go to class on days you don't want to. You can play ultimate Frisbee and study abroad and do independent research and play in a rock band. The main thing is that college is all about you."

Of course American colleges are all trying to attract students from a diminishing pool of the best and the brightest, and to a certain extent these

institutions must play to students' well-honed feelings of self-importance. But academic life in America – and nearly every other aspect of American life – is obsessed with the individual: what I want, what I like. I want my fifteen minutes and I want it now! But how can we, most of us teachers, train our students to obsess about themselves and then ask them to contribute to a larger society? How can we be surprised when we encourage students to design their own curricula, only to discover that they haven't chosen to include any Shakespeare or Virgil or Dickens? After telling them for their entire lives that the things they want are the most important things, how can we possibly make any sense when we ask them what they plan to leave behind for future generations?

It is for this that I thank God there are still places like this timeless city. When one comes to Oxford, one gets a palpable sense of what Lancelot Andrewes would have called “an unfeigned humble acknowledgement, both of our own unworthiness to receive any of [its] graces, and unableness when we receive them to make right use of them.” It is a very un-American concession, but Oxford asks us to put ourselves aside long enough to become better than we are.

While we are here, we must be still and listen. We must acknowledge what Matthew Arnold knew about Oxford when he wrote that “her ineffable charm keeps ever calling us to the true goal of all of us, to the ideal, to perfection.” While Arnold's “perfection” may elude us, it is the occasion Oxford gives us to strive for perfection that changes us. To find a place for ourselves among the stones and spires, the books and gardens, we must first acknowledge them, acquiesce to them, embrace them. It is at this moment that we hear the spirits of this place and feel their invitation to rise and meet them with what is best in ourselves.

This is, after all, why we came to Bread Loaf, isn't it? This is why we put our families and our friends and our bank accounts through everything. It's more than our myopic obsession with words and books and stories; it's our desire to contribute something of value to the body of human experience and thought. It's our desire not

only to get a glimpse of another perspective, but to understand it, to touch it with our hands and with our minds, to look at ourselves from a different angle. We didn't come to Oxford to celebrate ourselves; we came to brush up against the best of human experience with the hope that a bit would rub off onto us. If you have spent your time here without being humbled and edified, challenged and enlightened, broadened beyond yourself in immeasurable ways, then I meekly submit that you have not experienced Oxford.

And, of course, this most English of English cities has also been so many other sorts of experiences. It's been cream sauce on everything; a naked woman emerging from the Isis like a grotesque water nymph; not bringing into the Library or kindling therein any fire or flame; hours of cricket in the JCR – not all of it on television; the brilliant Margaret Kean in her Converse sneakers and Argyle socks; vintage port, gallons of Pimm's, and good friends. It is these experiences – now treasured memories – that are hardest to leave behind.

Seniors, in a few moments we will slip a piece of cloth over our heads and clutch a piece of parchment in our hands, artifacts of the countless words we've written and read, the pints of sweat and blood we've spilt, the tears and the laughter we've shared. But we are also among the lucky few who will take a personal, private piece of Oxford with us, too; an indelible smudge from "this blessed plot" that will remain with us wherever we go and whatever we do from this moment on. For me, this experience has been one of the best I've ever had, and I will always cherish the fact that I've shared it with each of you. Congratulations to all of us, fair winds, and following seas. Thank you.