

Bread Loaf Commencement Address
August 2005
Professor Alan MacVey

President Liebowitz, distinguished guests, Jim, colleagues, friends, family and graduates,

It's a great honor to be selected by this class to speak today. There are years when I've watched the graduates walking across the stage and I've been amazed how few I've known. This year I know at least half of you. To you, and to those I haven't had the pleasure of getting to know, thank you for asking me to join you today.

This little talk has three parts. They're bound together by a single stretch of road, the one that runs between the Inn and Earthworm Manor, where I live with Carol, and Jim and Lucy Maddox. It was there, walking back and forth, that I thought about what I might say tonight. I've been walking this same journey three times a day, seven weeks a summer, for nineteen years. Imagine you added up that distance and put it all in a row. How far do you think it would stretch? Traveling from here down to interstate 90, then heading west, I'm almost to Cheyenne Wyoming. A hundred miles a summer, I figure, will get me to San Francisco about 2016. And Lucy Maddox is right behind me.

I've always been interested in how little things add up. Those of you who run or walk up and down route 125 may have seen, the past several summers, small white rocks lined up on the side of the road. Joy, Lucy and I, and anyone else who wants to, add a rock or two each time we pass and the result is a line – I don't know – maybe 50 feet long, or this year a strange white stone snake, twisting its way up toward the Inn. I sometimes wonder if anyone else finds this fascinating. How one tiny thing leads to another, how moment leads to moment and somehow you find that you've walked 1,900 miles or spent five years at Bread Loaf, or ten, or 30. How can that be? Wasn't it only yesterday that we first stepped out of a car and said, wow, this is a weird place.

Well, I promised a short talk so I'd better get on to part one. It springs naturally from the journey back and forth to Earthworm, because it's about Jim Maddox, who lives there. For families and friends who don't know, Jim has served as director of the Bread Loaf School of English for 18 years. For 10 years before that he was on the faculty. I wish you could have seen in him those days. For one thing he had a lot of hair. There was a period of several years when he and Lucy, Michael Cadden, Carol and I all lived on the third floor of Maple. Have you ever been inside Maple? Isn't it odd? I used to live there and even for me walking inside it feels like walking into a monastery. But when we were young, ah yesterday (that's Beckett), Lucy had long curling locks, Carol and I had a dog named Edith, and Jim, well Jim was the messiest guy you ever saw. His room looked like it had exploded. His chair was a raft in a sea of papers. One summer his room was so fat he had to sit like a gargoyle in the third floor porch reading really long books. But my favorite memory of that time was the elephant stampede, when Jim led a group of faculty and actors from Treman at 11:00 one night, stomping and blowing their trunks – you know what I mean – like this – out into the night and into Frothingham next door where Dick Broadhead,

who is now President of Duke University – was trying to read – then back out into the field. Picture it. That was Jim in those days.

Since then Jim Maddox has raised more than ten and a half million dollars for Bread Loaf. He has founded three new campuses and has his sights set on Tuscany and Provence, and who knows, Tahiti maybe. He has brought diversity to the faculty and the student body in a way no one thought possible. He has supported and expanded the writing program and the theatre program, and grew the literature program so it offers something for everyone. Most important, he has established an atmosphere where everyone feels free, where nobody intrudes but where everybody knows you have someone to go to if you need help. And he did it all in a way that was so unassuming it was as if Bread Loaf was simply growing by itself, organically, a living and breathing being discovering who it is. Jim is a model for everyone who takes on a leadership role. Energy, vision, ambition *for the institution*, together with respect for those he works with and those he serves. Every year Jim takes time to thank the staff and the faculty for their contributions to this school, and every year I want to stand up and say Jim it's you we should thank. This is my opportunity to say it, and to ask you to join me. Thank you, Jim.

Part 2 is about art. It's stimulated by that stone snake on the road which is actually a little work of art made from nature. Many of you are teachers and are more or less required to teach art – usually literature -- as if it were mathematics, as if it were a problem to be solved and had answers – a whole set of answers about themes and language and morals and things that can be tested. As if art existed in order to ask questions like: To what extent does *The Merchant of Venice* support or call into question the claims of friendship set forth in Montaigne and in Bacon? This is a perfectly good question, but it is not the first thing we should be teaching our students to think about when they read a play or a book. What is the first thing that they should be thinking about? Whatever it makes them think about. Here –

Somebody gave me a great bit of advice about watching opera, which I sometimes find boring. She said opera is wonderful because it gives you time to let your mind float away, as if in a dream where you can make surprising connections or simply enjoy your own visions. Then after awhile the recitative turns into an aria and you can join in again. Enjoy the trip.

It is the trip that's important in art, wherever it takes you. Try this: after students read a story or poem or play, simply ask them: What did this story make you think about? Then talk about whatever that was. Over the course of a year everything will come up, and it will come up organically, because the works of art will have stimulated your students' imaginations so they want to talk about it – or about something equally important. In addition, your students will learn that reading is not about underlining and making margin notes but about entering imaginatively into the world of the book, participating, living a different life for awhile and seeing where the trip takes them.

There is certainly a place for learning about works of art – I just finished teaching a whole course about one of them – but that shouldn't be first. First should be a personal response. That's where the artist began, from an impulse, an intuition, a feeling. For this reason art is messy, it's full of intuitive choices that make no rational sense; as Picasso says, it is *the product of discarded finds*. Works of art are mysterious. They don't have answers – to anything. They may pose questions, or they may not. They may simply be astonishingly beautiful, or truly entertaining, or so unbearably vivid that all of life seems to open up and for just a moment you see – you see – and the fog rolls in and you're lost again. That's Eugene O'Neill.

To intellectualize such moments is sometimes the perfect thing but sometimes it's destructive because it sends responses that should live in the imagination to the crowded closet of the intellect. So I'm here to encourage you to be open – yourself -- to art, and if you are a teacher to teach your students first to let the work of art happen to them. Let it make them dream – and you can ratify that dream by acknowledging it and giving it importance. I know you have to prepare them for the tests -- but do it second, after they've secretly experienced what really matters.

Part three of this talk takes place at night. I've left rehearsal and walked back to Earthworm more than 600 times at night. I walk straight down the middle of the road, right on the double yellow line. Overhead in front of me is the big dipper. Its simple, clear shape is extremely beautiful. I try to position myself on the earth and imagine what direction I'd be facing in Iowa City to see the same constellation, or in California where I grew up. I sometimes picture my bed at home and think: my head would be that way.

On the clearest nights, though, as you all know, the big dipper is surrounded by a billion stars of the Milky Way. On these nights, when I get to Earthworm, I always stop in the center of the road, turn back toward campus, and look up. How can it be? How can we live in this astonishing universe and forget, as we all do all the time, how mysterious everything is? What miracle set it all in motion fourteen billion years ago? What miracle created each of us? And how amazing it is that we are the universe thinking about itself.

Do you know about string theory? As I understand it, string theorists think it's likely that all the elementary particles we've discovered – electrons, protons, quarks – all of them are actually composed of infinitesimally small strings. The difference in the particles isn't created by the size or weight or number of the strings, because all the strings are the same. The difference is created by vibration. The strings vibrate one way and create a proton; they vibrate different way and they make a quark; a third way they become a neutron. The universe is literally constructed of vibration, it is made out of – music, and Shakespeare had it right all along:

There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest

Lorenzo says to Jessica, looking up into the night sky in Merchant of Venice

*But in his motion like an angel sings,
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.*

I turn from the sky and look toward Earthworm Manor. A warm yellow light shines from the upstairs window. What can I do, I think, what can I do in this muddy vesture of decay to hear the harmony that is in every particle of existence? And what can I do to help others whose night skies are not as clear as mine here at Bread Loaf? The second question in particular is troubling because it has two answers. The first is both a challenge but also a comfort: do everything you do with generosity and integrity; teach your classes and direct your plays to bring joy and clarity to others; bring to every human interaction sensitivity, appreciation for others, and love. This is an impossible task, but it is one I can imagine.

The second answer to the question of how to help others is much harder to face. It demands everything we have to give. It asks us to be saints or revolutionaries, artists of the soul.

Well, what do we do with that? I don't know. We all have our lives going. But I guess the one thing we can do is to engage that second answer wherever we encounter it. And those of us teaching great literature encounter it often. It's in *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Anna Karenina*, in *Ulysses* and *Walt Whitman*. We are blessed and cursed to live our lives surrounded by works of art and their blinding visions. When we meet them, when we teach them, we do well to do so with humility.

What a night, huh? What a summer, and what a place this is, Bread Loaf. It gets us thinking, doesn't it?

Tomorrow we'll all pack up and head out. Soon the fall will come and the winter. The little white stone snake between Earthworm and the Inn will be scraped off the road with the snow, just as all our previous efforts have been. It will remain in my imagination for a long time, though. I hope that Bread Loaf, an infinitely richer work of art, will remain in yours, a comfort and a challenge, a bright white vision on the long road of life.