

Bread Loaf Graduation Banquet Addresses, Vermont Campus  
Blythe Coons and Mark Elberfeld, Co-Presidents  
August 11, 2007

**Blythe Coons:**

Good evening. On behalf of the class of 2007, Jim Maddox, Emily Bartels and President Liebowitz, I'd like to welcome family and friend to our humble home in the hills. I'd like to thank everyone else—the faculty and staff—for sticking around, even though you'd rather be at home sleeping in your own beds. We're grateful that you're here to celebrate with us. And, I'd like to extend a special thank you to the wonderful kitchen staff who has worked so hard to bring us this beautiful banquet.

I have a confession to make. I kept waiting this summer for someone to say something profound...about Bread Loaf. Scared you, didn't I? Don't worry, there was plenty of profundity in the classroom, but outside of class I found myself horribly bereft of a thoughtful aphorism or cliché to bring to all of you. So I have come up with my own. I certainly never thought I'd have to pull an all-nighter to do it. But that's just part of the charm of Bread Loaf.

In the wake of the excitement over the seventh and last Harry Potter book, I need to tell you that my time at Bread Loaf has been a little bit like the Harry Potter series. My first summer, I encountered the campus-that-must-not-be-named (Guadalajara for those of you brave enough to face your fears), and faced my fair share of epic battles—reading Toni Morrison and Tennessee Williams in the bathroom because I *couldn't* be far from the porcelain goddess; being awakened in the middle of the night during the height of my illness by a mariachi band playing in the living room; a massive mosquito attack at 1 am that left blood stains on the walls of someone else's house. It was dramatic (a cliff-hanger even), I promise. Furthermore, every time I went to class with both John Elder and Michael Armstrong this year, I felt like I was invited to a private audience with Professor Dumbledore, and I always left feeling as though some great knowledge had been bestowed upon me.

The past four years have been a fairy tale in other ways. After my second summer at BL, but my first here in Vermont, I returned to Columbus, Ohio, a changed person. I had been in that summer's play—*Romeo and Juliet*. I quit teaching and applied to MFA acting programs. It may

sound abrupt, but I had dreamt about acting for most of my life but had been too “sensible” to take the necessary steps. With the encouragement of Carol MacVey and Ensemble member Brian MacEleney, I made my way through the grueling auditions, my equivalent to Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape, and was accepted to a program, which was kind of like winning the Quidditch Cup. Bread Loaf helped me to realize it was time to make my dreams come true, instead of just talking or reading about them. Since that summer, I know a lot of people who have done the same—followed their dreams, that is. They’d have to be crazy to want to be in an MFA program!!! I have Bread Loaf friends currently working on Barack Obama’s campaign in New Hampshire, assistant producing a children’s reading show on PBS, and then there’s Mark, and none of us know what he will be doing in the next year, but it’s sure to be exciting. Maybe he’ll become the next star from America’s Got Talent. If “Boy Shakira” can make it, why can’t Mark? The point is, *my* story isn’t all that unique. Most people aren’t crazy enough to leave everything behind to apply to an acting program, but Bread Loaf has helped a lot of people find their way *to* teaching, from teaching, to new jobs and people. Most importantly, Bread Loaf has helped its students find themselves.

I’m a little concerned at this point that you all think I haven’t learned anything about literature since I’ve been here, so I’ll switch gears a bit. Two summers ago, Arthur Little taught me how the woods in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* behave as a liminal space, which is, “an in-between state within ritual structures in which individuals and groups temporarily lack definition and inscription”, and where the most unbelievable things can and do happen (Jackson 161). That very description allows for each of us to come out of our natural habitats and convene and cohabitate here together under the guise of learning literature, creating an entirely new and unexpected community. Amazingly enough, Bread Loaf is those woods just beyond the borders, where there are boys chasing girls, girls chasing boys, everyone chasing everyone, anyone! Just ask anyone about their Suppressed Desires experience, and I’m sure it won’t take you too long to find an embarrassing story. If only the logging truck drivers (lubb, lubb, lubb) knew what they were missing when they cruised at high speeds along Route 125 between Hancock and Ripton... You blink, and you’ll miss it. And that’s intentional.

A more formal definition of “liminal” appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process,” which reminds me of Tony Kushner’s

*Angels in America*. My first summer at Bread Loaf, the initial stage of *my* process, I sat in a dark, very hot room in Guadalajara talking about Harper, a depressed Mormon having drug-induced hallucinations. Harper attributes her extreme clarity during these times to being at the “threshold of revelation.” Here at Bread Loaf, we come to this point too, this threshold, without hallucination, as we sit in classrooms, absorbing information, seeking enlightenment, waiting to be “struck” by this or that. And each of us is here because we woke up one morning, or turned around to face a classroom full of students, or came home one night, tired from work, and knew we needed more. We need a place to dream and discover as well.

In the end, this liminal space not only allows us to dream, but it allows us to pursue our dreams—intellectual and otherwise. We are at our most creative, our most productive, our most inspired here amidst the cream yellow buildings and the green treed hills. Tucked away in our little hamlet, we are provided with everything we need to be our best selves. We are well sustained by Chef Jim and his crew, we are instructed by the best professors in the country, we are provided the space to talk and think and *be* on the “threshold of revelation”. We are not given *too* much time, so as not to take it for granted, but the threat of our imminent return to the rest of the world weighs on us, and makes us appreciate all the more what we have while we are here. Eventually, however, we have to wake up from our dream. And that’s “oh, very nasty.” And sometimes we find it was *all* a dream, even though the residual effects will stay with us forever.

My point is this (because it might not be clear due to the lack of topic sentences and thesis statements—I guess it’s a good thing I’m graduating!)—Bread Loaf changes lives. When I mentioned to some friends a few days ago this as a possible theme to my speech, they guffawed as if I had just made the understatement of the year. You’d be hard pressed to find a person in this room who hasn’t been affected, and infected, by this program. The change could be as simple as learning the first eighteen lines of the *Canterbury Tales* in John Fyler’s class (Whan that aprille with the shoures soote...), finding a chipmunk has left its mark on your project, spotting a moose on the side of the road or as big as discovering a mentor, love, passion, wisdom. I found a quarter the other day, and boy did it make a difference. I could do my laundry without getting change at the front desk!

If nothing else, this place allows us to be who we are at the very core of our beings—what elsewhere people may call nerds! Except that here, amongst the wise, we aren’t nerds, we’re just

loafers. That's the best part. There's always someone to trump your nerdiness. For heaven's sake, even the bathroom graffiti is literature related. I have it on good authority that a wall in the men's inn toilet says, "Pan! Bacchus cried." I mean, couldn't that guy just have written, "For a good time, call the Annex porch"?

Let me be serious for a moment now. Bread Loaf *does* allow us to be who we are at the very core of our beings. In fact, the people here expect and insist upon it. There is no pretense. And this is what creates a community that draws us from all over the world to these four (sniff!) amazing campuses year after year and keeps us coming back. No matter what may have changed in our lives during the rest of the year, Bread Loaf becomes a constant, a beacon.

In times requiring inspiration, I return to my favorite childhood book, *Miss Rumphius*, by Barbara Cooney. Alice's grandfather tells her when she grows up, there are three things she must do: Travel to far away places, live beside the sea, and do something to make the world more beautiful. As for the first, Bread Loaf has led me to Mexico, England and Vermont—check! The second I still have time to accomplish, and perhaps once I finish my *other* degree, I will find myself living on the cliffs of Malibu next to all those celebrities we are too ashamed to name. The third, Alice's grandfather says, is the most difficult to achieve. This summer at Bread Loaf, the senior class has attempted number three by donating this photograph of the place so many of us call our summer home. Personally, I don't yet know what my gift of beauty to the world will be, but I know for certain that Bread Loaf has set me on the path towards reaching this goal. And as the Bapa Raja said to Miss Rumphius as she left the tropical isle, "you will always remain in my heart." And so, for all of us graduating here today, Bread Loaf will always remain in our hearts, and we will always remain on the "threshold of revelation." Sorry Emily, we didn't come for the giraffe.

Thank you.

Cooney, Barbara. *Miss Rumphius*. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

Jackson, Shannon. *Professing Performance : theatre in the academy from philology to performativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004.

Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.

**Mark Elberfeld:**

Honored guests, families, and friends, thank you for sharing this magical evening with us. It is an honor to speak before you tonight. This is a story of stories; it is an ending and a beginning. You have probably heard many tales about Bread Loaf over the course of five or even ten years, and you have probably formed the following conclusion, that your spouse, partner, friend, or loved one has hoodwinked you into believing that he or she has been rigorously working towards an M.A. or M. Litt. You might be thinking about our Pavlovian response to the dinner bell and our running out of the dining hall when the flickering lights signal the end of the meal, or about the square dance where every man sets out to “swing his corner upside down.” Or about our costume party in which we embody our most inwardly suppressed desires for all our classmates and professors to see: a hot-air balloon, an entire pond, Isobel Armstrong. In short, you’ve decided that we’re at summer camp. And if I didn’t know this place, I might see your point. But tonight I will gently show you where you may have the wrong idea about our mountain retreat. It isn’t just a series of lawn games, tennis matches, and do-si-dos.

For starters, I didn’t know exactly where embodying a rosebud for my first suppressed desires dance five years ago would lead. But I see now that it has provided a handy metaphor for reflecting upon five summers here in Vermont. OK, it wasn’t just my green body paint, pink face, and t-shirt that said “pluck me” that led me to contemplation, it was actually someone a little more dignified, Virginia Woolf. Towards the end of her experimental novel *The Waves*, in which six friends gather at a restaurant and mourn the death of their friend, Percival, a flower stands in a vase on the table, stirring the memory of Bernard, one of the novel’s six narrators. Bernard says:

The flower, the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives...a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower. Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out. (229)

I will now mix my flower metaphors and move swiftly away from death back to life. In the center of every Bread Loaf classroom is a many-sided rose. It grows by the day, for there are as many petals as there are perceivers in the room. Each of us through our own perceptions, interpretations, and imaginations, contributes a petal, shaping the class into a series of Woolfian “Moments of

Being,” into what she elusively calls “the thing itself.” The thing is a rose, it is an idea, it is a mode of thinking. It is a yellow Morgan Horse barn in which learning sustains us every day. Last week, as my cohort Blythe mentioned, it was a chipmunk relieving himself on my final project. Sorry, Michael, I’m afraid those weren’t errant commas on the page. For senior Mimi Morimura, it is “standing at the ‘universal cataract’ not of death, but of discovery.” In facing graduation she adds, “as I have discovered immense knowledge in literature, I found there is more to be found.”

We have unearthed so much here. Personally speaking I think I’ve taken my Bread Loaf experience a little too literally. My first summer I read Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo and, palette whetted, eventually found myself on a plane bound for Ghana. While there I visited Elmina Castle and stood at the “Door of No Return”—the site of the embarkation of slaves bound for the New World. I stood simultaneously at the origins of colonialism and in Margery Sabin’s post-colonial literature class.

Then there was the time I read James Baldwin’s *Another Country* in Arthur Little’s class and two weeks later moved to Hungary. Over the three years I spent there, I identified with main character Eric’s sustained period of self-inflicted sojourn and exile. I cheated, though. I flew to Vermont from Budapest, hoarded up my baubles over the course of six precious weeks, and then returned again to a country where, until recently, intellectual freedom and imaginative expression could not be taken for granted. Individualism is still new, and chatter is still suspect. I came back to Vermont every year to breathe again, to chatter, and to be an individual.

But it’s not just all talk here. We become performers, actors, spectators, and audience members, a community of watchers and listeners. While I wouldn’t say I’m MFA material like Blythe, I did get to play Renee Lewin’s awkward college love interest in a steamy on-stage love scene. I cleaned up my act for last summer’s role as thirteen-year-old Phoebe’s groom in the bombastically fun production of *Big Love*. Little did I know she was going to suffocate me with our wedding cake. After a miraculous resuscitation I transformed into Puck, traipsing from tennis court to woodsy bower as agent of change for our class reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. And you should have seen what happened when I read *Where the Wild Things Are*. The Wild Rumpus continues, although someone really should have told me to stop wearing that wolf

costume and paper crown, and thank goodness someone told me it wouldn't look good against a sea of black gowns and blue and white commencement hoods.

And when we write our narratives cut to the quick and catch one's breath too short. Just ask any member of either Jonathan Strong's or Patricia Powell's fiction courses. In Pat's class this summer we laughed so hard we cried, and we cried so hard we had to hold hands. We come here, quite simply, to be wowed. For wowing us we thank our outstanding cadre of faculty, the Acting Ensemble, staff and administration. This eclectic and marvelous assortment of fine minds and generous hearts quickly becomes the largest collection of mentors and friends ever gathered in one place. Through their dynamism, guidance, and tenacity, they propel us, in Angela Carter's words, into "the vertigo of freedom." Under their care we are graced with dizzying possibility, placed at the "cataract of discovery." Through our time with them we forged new modes of tolerance and new means of empathy for our students. We do this by osmosis and through direct instruction: professors here have opened the literary canon to include voices not always heard and we have listened. And we have, I hope, appropriated that same tolerance and ushered it into our classrooms and into our lives. As an additional mark of gratitude for what the people of this place have given us, the senior class has founded a new scholarship to enhance diversity at Bread Loaf. So much for my idea of installing modern single faucets, mixing hot and cold in one clear stream, at every sink in the Annex. I've been scalded one too many times.

Our stories, performances, and conversations find a home in Bread Loaf nostalgia. This is what keeps the Bread Loaf heartbeat thumping during the year. We pack up, ship our stuff to whatever it is we call "home," and sustain our visions elsewhere. In our real and virtual classrooms we sustain our visions and connect through the Bread Loaf Teachers' Network; we connect through some of the most introspective and moving student exchanges on BreadNet. For that, ultimately, is what our work here is about, to make connections between the most disparate writings in the English language. To make connections with those different from ourselves. To make connections between narrative and life. To live out our stories as we choose to narrate them for our own good and for the good of our communities.

And stories require an origin, a return address, a wellspring. For those who went to the Oxford campus, that home is felt, as senior Jorge Rodriguez says of his time there, as the “weight of the centuries.” For those who keep coming to Vermont, we know the address by heart: Bread Loaf CPO, 4265 Ripton 125 Middlebury, VT 05753. At least that’s what it says on the subscription label of Emily Bartels’ *People* magazine. Senior Sarah Robinson has figured out an ingenious way to keep that address, quite literally, as the epicenter of her experience. She writes:

Bread Loaf will always be right here: the famous egg-yolk buildings in the beautiful forest. But how do we bring this place forward with us? The answer lies in sharing the spirit we’ve nourished here. The answer lies in participating whole-heartedly in the troubled world outside this bubble. Personally I’ve been worried I might somehow forget that. So my husband came up with a brilliant solution: we’ve decided to paint our house in Bread Loaf colors: Bread Loaf Cream with Forest Green trim: low lustre, non-fading acrylic latex paint, a special blend, number N103313.

In my own understanding of these acres as home, I turn to George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*. From my first summer here I have turned to this passage as an eloquent summation of the ways we Bread Loafers imagine, think, and work in this home away from home. The landscape of Maggie Tulliver’s childhood, imbued with memory, carries tremendous power in connecting past and future. Eliot’s narrator asks:

...what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns of splendid broad-petalled blossom, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows – such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations of the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep bladed grass today, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love. (94)

And I answer: No wild palm trees could supplant the deep fibres of this home and its familiarities. Only the well-remembered birds and sky of home and its grassy fields connect us through memory to distant childhood. That is what we’ve done above all else here through the communal symphonies we’ve spoken, sung, and shouted through the classrooms and the mountains. We’ve returned through time, space, and distance to our very own first stories in breathing life into our own characters and poetry on the page. And every year we go forth with a renewed understanding of ourselves to shape the ways others think and interpret their worlds.

We take the final lines of Robert Frost's "Directive" to heart: "Here are your waters and your watering place. | Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." We have drunk the waters, and we have become whole again here. Through that wholeness, to steal again from Virginia Woolf, "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."

Tonight and tomorrow, our music changes key as we say our goodbyes. The final paragraphs of Angela Carter's version of the fairy tale "Peter and the Wolf," which Michael Armstrong read to my teary-eyed Storytellers class last week, is both a dismantling and a building up, an ending and a beginning. Carter writes:

The birds woke up and sang. The cool, rational sun surprised him; morning had broken on his exhilaration and the mountain now lay behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw, how, with distance, the mountain began to acquire a flat, two-dimensional look. It was already turning into a picture itself, into the postcard hastily bought as a souvenir of childhood at a railway station or border post, the newspaper cutting, the snapshot he would show in strange towns, strange cities, other countries he could not, at this moment, imagine, whose names he did not yet know, places where he would say, in strange languages, 'That is where I spent my childhood. Imagine!'

He turned and stared at the mountain for a long time. He had lived in it for fourteen years but he had never seen it before as it might look to someone who had not known it as almost a part of the self, so, for the first time, he saw the primitive, vast, magnificent, barren, unkind, simplicity of the mountain. As he said goodbye to it, he saw it turn into so much scenery, into the wonderful backcloth for an old country tale, tale of a child suckled by wolves, perhaps, or of wolves nursed by a woman.

Then he determinedly set his face towards the town and tramped onwards, into a different story.

'If I look back again,' he thought with last gasp of superstitious terror, 'I shall turn into a pillar of salt.' (291)

"Now to sum up," as Woolf's Bernard begins the ending of *The Waves*. He reminds us to "stop for a moment; ... behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees." Tomorrow, in our uprooting and dispersal, we set out to plant, sow, reap, and harvest the fields we need to tend. We set out into a different story. It is a daunting responsibility tinged with sadness and nostalgia, but our compensation is that the sunshine and deep bladed grass will continue to live in us and transform our perceptions of the world not only into love, but also into hope for what is to come, because Bread Loaf isn't summer camp. It is freedom. It is life. It is the thing itself.

Thank you.