

Commencement address  
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Everything that needs to be said about the Bread Loaf School of English has already been said by my eloquent predecessors.

I would like to add...

a moment: two years ago, in the midst of a misty summer in Vermont; we sat beneath the great oak tree in the circle to the left of the barn, the great oak tree we sat underneath so often in John Elder's class, the great oak tree in whose boughs I had climbed when John had me read the first stanza of Tintern Abbey; the great oak that is now cut down. I climbed two trees that summer: this was one, I'll get to the other later.

John Elder, one of the vast pantheon of Bread Loaf gods that has graced the most accomplished, compassionate, powerfully brilliant cohort of faculty assembled in academia anywhere, shared his erudition and experience with us, the students in his Pastoral Tradition class. "Bread Loaf *is* the pastoral," John said. For our guests, the pastoral tradition is writing about the constant loss of a mythical Golden Age, when everything was crystalline and pure, *and* the very human desire to return to that evanescent moment of pastoral perfection.

So when John said, "Bread Loaf *is* the pastoral", it clicked for me – here we have sat, in places as surreally stunning as Juneau, Santa Fe, Oxford, Guadalajara, and Vermont, reading literature while clouds drift beneath mountains and towers and seas, and sunstreaks slide across waving meadows – we live, or appear to live, for six weeks each summer, in the Golden Age.

And yet, each summer I have struggled with my existence in such a golden place. In my first summer at Bread Loaf, in Juneau, I had a schismatic moment, appropriately, while reading Virginia Woolf. We sat discussing the rapture Lily felt while painting, but I felt my own rupture – what was I doing, discussing such abstract, fanciful ideas, when there was a world out there to be engaged with. What did this have to do with the reality experienced by the majority of the world? What right had I to experience such privilege, when others struggled to eat? I nearly left the classroom.

Each summer at Bread Loaf, I have had such a schismatic moment – while watching "Fahrenheit 9/11" in the year of a heated presidential campaign, when trains and a bus, immediately outside the office of my school's international headquarters were bombed in London, this summer when watching a documentary about the "invisible children" of Uganda, boys and girls who walk miles each day into cities to avoid being kidnapped, to avoid fighting as child soldiers in their country's civil war. Each time, I nearly quit

Bread Loaf, wondering what this degree was possibly doing to better the world, how this would help me make a positive impact on the world at large.

Sometimes I feel this way. That Bread Loaf “is the pastoral”, and that this is dangerous. That to be cut off from the world at large, but even from the realities more immediately around us, is incomplete and dangerous. Each day, while we sleep, Chef Jim Logan, Randy Bushee, David Scott, Mike Degray, Amber Degray, Ashley Conwin, Hank Stowe, Dylan Zwicki, and Seth and Ethan Dickinson prepare our food; while we eat, Carol Williams, Brenda Hanson, Darlen Gero, Karen Reynolds, Joyce Fleming, Marilyn Dragon, and Jessica Rochon clean our barn, our library, our bathrooms; while in class, George Coro, Tim Kerr, Ray Hollerook, Larry Burns, and Leo Hotte keep *everything* working, and the grasses waving at the appropriate length for moments of poetic revelation. And sometimes, while in class, I have caught myself grimacing when a tractor drives just outside the window because I couldn’t hear the last comment about how Marlowe constructed Turkish identity in the Elizabethan period.

This summer, while we read Milton, Keats, Dickens and Beckett, four UN peacekeepers were killed, perhaps intentionally, by Israeli missiles, in retaliation to Hezbollah missiles; it has become clear that BP’s 267,000 gallon oil spill in Alaska earlier this year was entirely preventable by following standard business practices; 180 people were killed in Bombay on sardine-packed commuter trains during rush hour. I say all this not to depress anyone on a night of celebration, but to root us in the earth, in a reality that exists continuously, and one with which we should use literature to engage.

Each summer, when I have this schismatic moment, when I almost pull out of Bread Loaf, I struggle to remember what I have remembered each other time, what Bread Loaf, in fact, has taught me – Bread Loaf is *so* special, for me, because it brings together so many people who can seek to positively impact the world through the teaching of empathy and compassion.

Earlier this summer, Oskar Eustis spoke to a crowded barn. Oskar is the director of the New York Public theatre, and is known by some as the “brains *and* brawn” of the contemporary American theatre. Oskar’s speech captivated. And his message spoke to me. He said, “Fundamentalism comes from a rejection of a world without community, of radical individualism so rife in our modern world.” I feel so strong about Bread Loaf, certainly for the community that we create here, but so much more for the communities with which it helps us engage, and *how* it helps us engage with those communities.

This community here, each summer, is so ephemeral – six weeks of the year -- and so for me, it is the other forty-six weeks that Bread Loaf truly exercises its power over me. Through the friendships created here, with fellow students and with professors, I seek each year to teach the same empathy that my professors and classmates have taught me, to attempt to reach outside my world, my comfort zone, into the lives of characters in another’s world. Through understanding how language constructs and deconstructs realities – ethnic, racial, and class identities, power, war, love, and hatred – we help ourselves, our students, and those who interact with us challenge the “radical

individualism” that we face. On any level, literature is necessarily about community, necessarily about understanding another’s perspective, *both* in a classroom environment and in reading on our own; it is necessarily responsive to the world, yes, but it can also be, at its best, transformative and provocative to its audience: to our values, our assumptions, our ways of understanding the world around us.

I so appreciate my time here at Bread Loaf because it has challenged me to see the world through another’s lenses, and forced me to re-formulate my own engagement and understanding of the world. At our worst we take the easy, comfortable path; at our best, we challenge ourselves, our students, and our friends to truly understand another human’s perspective, and to understand what it means to *try* to understand another’s perspective – how limited that necessarily is, but how necessary it is nevertheless.

For while John Elder taught us the aesthetic power of the pastoral tradition, he also taught us that the pastoral writers were, for the most part, children of privilege who could afford the time in the country, who *could* sit under the tree to contemplate the herding of the sheep because the shepherds, for whom life is not fanciful, were doing the physical labor. We joked that summer that the only thing missing in Bread Loaf’s pastoralized surreality was a herd of sheep: we could all take turns moving them around the fields, and truly “understand” the pastoral writers. But, as John taught us as well, Frost would ring the bell when he wanted food, because he had someone to buy, cook, and clean, and what would happen to the sheep on Thursday nights when we went to Gilmore to hear Paul Muldoon read about Fa, Ha, and Lok in *The Inheritors*. What would happen to the sheep when we all leave?

Virginia Woolf understood this. In one of her most brilliant, and most missed, passages in *Mrs. Dalloway*, while Mrs. Dalloway flits about her party with Willie Titcomb, Lady Lexham, and the Prime Minister (who was good to come), Mrs. Dalloway’s servants, Mrs. Walker and Lucy, work: Woolf writes, “The Prime Minister was coming, Agnes said: so she had heard them say in the dining room, she said, coming in with a tray of glasses. Did it matter, did it matter in the least, one Prime Minister more or less? It made no difference at this hour of the night to Mrs. Walker . . . All she felt was, one Prime Minister more or less made not a scrap of difference to Mrs. Walker” (Woolf, 251, Modern Library, NY, 1925).

All of this is going on right now, right there [point to kitchen]; the cooking team has been working for *twenty* hours to prepare this meal (really, I asked). But literature, and Bread Loaf, and that first class I took with Carla Mazzio on *Mrs. Dalloway*, helped to understand me this. Bread Loaf has challenged my reality, infused my own worldviews with those of Milton, Tagore, Achebe, and Oliver. And as we leave Bread Loaf, we must infuse the experienced realities of those worldviews into our study of the ephemeral, ethereal, aesthetic. The most powerful thing I have learned at Bread Loaf has been that literature can and must be relevant to our lives, to our students’ lives, to the lives of others; to learn compassion and empathy, it must be rooted in the experienced reality of the world.

Robert Frost, Zeus in the pantheon of Bread Loaf gods, perhaps said it best in his great poem, “Birches.” At the end of my summer studying with John Elder, I *had* to go swing a birch. (This is the second tree I climbed that summer.) I hiked up to Silver Lake and, finding just the right tree, began climbing “black branches up a snow-white trunk”. Higher “toward heaven” I climbed, and at that point when the “cup was up to the brim, and even above the brim”, I “flung outward, feet first with a swish”. What Frost left out was that the ecstasy of this moment that comes not from some abstract, theoretical escape from the iron age of earth or reaching towards some golden age, but rather from simple, guttural fear – I was *really, really high* in the air! I was afraid, if I fell, I would break something, big (and I know my mother is groaning right now!). As the birch tree began to bend back to earth, it even caught its tip in a notch in a nearby tree, and I found myself holding onto Frost’s beloved birch, horizontal now, not exactly dipping “its top down and [setting] me down again” – I was hanging 30 feet in the air! My friend grabbed the other tree, shook it, and, then, the birch laid me down softly back to the earth. “I too am a swinger of birches!” I screamed, *not* in clichéd poetry-turned-reality, but in ecstasy that I hadn’t broken my femur!

While in many ways the poem is about that ecstatic moment when the birch begins to bend, about the climbing up, I think the important part of the poem, about the experience, is found a few lines before the last verse: “Earth’s the right place for love: I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.” As we swing back from our summers of brimming cups, let us embrace the earth, the hard realities; let’s remember that the birch can only swing us because it has roots. It is the earth that gives us, and the writers we read, the inspiration to write literature. It is only through working toward an understanding of their perspectives that we realize the true potential of literature – to *empathize*, to learn *compassion* for another. To step outside what we know already, and to *try* to understand the world of another.