

Bread Loaf Senior Banquet Address
August 13, 2005
Allan Reeder, Class President

Good evening. I'm afraid I must start with a warning: Two nights ago, I received a fortune in a fortune cookie that read as follows: "Serious trouble"—not a good beginning to a fortune, is it? "Serious trouble ... will ... bypass you." So, apparently, I am safe, but I cannot speak for anyone in close proximity to me.

On behalf of the Bread Loaf Senior Class of 2005, Mr. Maddox, Ms. Bartels, the Bread Loaf Faculty, the Bread Loaf Administration, President Liebowitz, I welcome all friends and family to the mountain. I am honored to be speaking tonight, and I thank my stellar fellow seniors for this opportunity, which has charged me to find words for what it means to come to the end of a Bread Loaf education—if, indeed, there is such a thing as an end. Friends and family, although your time here will be brief, it is my hope that your visit will provide you with a better idea of just what it is that has kept bringing us soon-to-be-graduates back to Bread Loaf. I consider these next few minutes an opportunity to contribute toward that end.

It was, in fact, my hope to offer a dramatic interpretation of my speech with the help of the Bread Loaf Acting Ensemble. What I had in mind, I thought, was not very grand or complicated—and certainly nothing as swelling to the heart as this year's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. (How could anything match that performance?) No, I was thinking merely of a sort of a Bread Loaf revue, just a few costume changes—a pilgrimage in four parts, beginning in the snow-capped mountains of southeast Alaska, moving through the desert of New Mexico, stopping for tea and scones in Lincoln College at Oxford, and finishing here at the foot of Bread Loaf mountain, where Jim and Emily would stand to juggle critical texts while the rest of us sang the Bread Loaf Fight Song. I figured, if our resident actors can turn virtually any literary moment from any literary period into drama that opens up the complexities of human experience, well, then certainly they could handle this. But it seems that most of the members of that astonishingly

talented, ever inventive Ensemble got word of this idea of mine and fled the mountain days ago. And though I see we are lucky that Elizabeth Bunch and Chris Hutchinson remain for this celebration, it seems much better that we leave this summer remembering them as the beautiful Juliet and the daring Tybalt.

And so I will go it alone.

But in doing so, I must make a confession. After five summers at Bread Loaf, I'm rather pissed off. The truth is, Bread Loaf has really screwed up my life. Every summer, after six feverishly stimulating weeks guided and challenged and challenged more and amused and supported and inspired by a faculty of true teachers, of model teachers, and after the witty, energetic, striving, insightful company and good will of fellow students, I have had to go home and, there, try to figure out some way to make the remaining 46 weeks of the year resonate with half the meaning I discover here. And now, tonight, I face not 46 weeks, but the rest of my life. And I know I am not alone in this predicament. So, thank you, Bread Loaf. You've really made things easy on us all.

I just had to get that off my chest.

Now, since we don't have the Acting Ensemble assembled, we'll have to use our imaginations. If you would, please imagine with me the meadow just up Route 125 and across from Tamarack. It's a space not commonly used during Bread Loaf sessions but where a friend recently informed me she has her *Sound-of-Music* moments. It is my favorite spot at Bread Loaf. Please picture a July night. Midnight. It is clear above. The sky is pricked with stars. With your back to the campus, you face a roadless stretch of the Green Mountains that includes (as Professor Elder has informed me) Romance Mountain and Philadelphia Peak. A silver shine from over the ridgeline promises, soon, a moon. And down below, at the edge of the woods, a fog seems to be gathering and approaching on the push of a breeze that you now feel cool against your cheeks. It is quiet enough to hear the wind hush through the high grass.

Have you got it? Good. We will return.

For that is, of course, what we have done here as Bread Loaf students: return. Summer after summer we have returned for what one senior has called Outward Bound for the mind. Most of

us spend our months away from here absorbed in the work of being teachers and mentors to young people, and when we return, we feel changed by the year's experiences—but we are also, somewhere in us, aware that we will likely be more changed by the six weeks we spend here. Although the master's degrees we will very soon receive may be what initially drew us to apply to Bread Loaf, and although they will certainly serve us well in our professional lives from here on, the degree alone is not what kept bringing us back. I believe the 38 seniors graduating tonight would agree that what we have gained is far more than a graduate degree.

In the middle of this summer, for the first time I left the campus during the Bread Loaf session, and I returned to my other home. There, at a party, I met a young woman who, after I'd informed her that I was finishing up a master's degree in English this summer, said to me, "For?"

"For?" I replied.

"What are you planning to do with it?" she asked.

"Do with it?" I repeated. Flummoxed, sensing a clash of perspectives, I didn't give a very articulate answer. This is because I've never thought of my Bread Loaf education in terms of a step toward a specific goal; it is not possible for me to think so narrowly or in such a reductive way about my experiences here. My acquaintance's questioning of my purpose felt akin to one asking me, during this summer of study of James Joyce with Victor Luftig, "Oh, yeah—*Ulysses*; what's that book about?"

Ummm. About? It's about ... *everything*.

Although I disagree with the notion that all educational experience is to lead somewhere in particular, the question I was posed at mid-summer is important for the reflections it prompts. What will we do with our Bread Loaf education? The answer I've come to, which I suppose I have known for some time, is: I will live *better*—and by "better" I mean *more* thoughtfully, more passionately, more *compassionately*, intentionally, creatively, openly, empathetically, courageously, honestly, and, I expect, joyfully. Yet these were not the goals of my endeavors here; they are simply the results—and they are not results that come just at the end, today. They have been in the process of becoming. They are what has happened these summers while we

have, together, been reading, thinking, writing, acting, arguing, puzzling, fretting, and not sleeping nearly enough.

Each graduating senior today has a different story about how Bread Loaf has fit into his or her life; but the stories, I sense, share a theme. My arrival at Bread Loaf five Junes ago marked the beginning of a career change. I had spent eight years as an editor, rather solitary work that, while intellectually stimulating, felt more and more limiting to myself. I felt, in the vaguest of ways, that I was more than I was allowing myself to be—that was about as specific as I could get in describing the emotion. With a long-standing curiosity about my potential as a teacher, I took this vague idea about myself with me on interviews for teaching jobs, and it proved to be persuasive enough, or at least curious enough, to earn me a position at the front of a classroom at a Quaker school on Long Island. At the same time, I applied to Bread Loaf.

I did not know then about the strange effect Bread Loaf has on one's sense of time, and, in particular, on one's estimation of what can be accomplished in a week, or a day, or even an afternoon. We have stopped our home lives repeatedly to come here, where intensity of intellectual and creative exchange proceeding at a furious pace is the norm. We contemplate—quickly; that is the oxymoronic daily Bread Loaf experience. We write and write and move through ideas as if we can't get enough of this stimulation. One peek into the Apple Cellar (as we call our computer lab) during the closing weeks of the summer shows just how intense our thought travels are—the constant clicking of keyboards like some strange communal drumming. When we emerge, it feels that we have been here six months. Friendships of a few weeks feel like friendships developed over years. And this is because, in just six weeks, without our awareness, we have changed, we have evolved, we have expanded ourselves.

So when I stepped into my first classroom at Friends Academy in 2001 following my first Bread Loaf summer, and I was immediately called to use myself in ways I hadn't encountered before in my professional life—that is, engaging in more substantive, personal interaction in an hour than I would experience in days of work as a desk-bound editor—I found myself, to my surprise, calm, equipped, confident, energized. I found myself ... myself.

What has developed over the summers since then is an increasing clarity and conviction about *how* to use myself. I have come to feel strongly that the question is important for all of us. “How

are you going to use yourself?” is a very different question from “What kind of career do you want?” or, indeed, “What are you going to do with your degree?” It asks who you are, first, and then how who are you can be put to use in the world. As an editor, I went to work every day to use a finely honed skill. Now, as a teacher, I go to work every day to use myself—as much as possible.

Who we are as human beings matters. If there were a Bread Loaf creed, this certainly would be part of it. In his history of the first fifty years of Bread Loaf, published in 1969, former professor George Anderson referred to this community as “a little nucleus of humanity.” This has not changed. And in this age of capitalistic drive, of government might forcing answers to complex problems—and, in the meantime, depleting resources for education—we soon-to-be-graduates can and should feel proud to be at work in humanism. We have repeatedly returned to Bread Loaf not for the sake of making a better living but of making a better life, and better lives for others.

Although we have conducted most of our studies in classroom desks, armchairs, beds (or, my personal favorite: sprawled out on the floor among texts), we have been at work studying the human in the world—examining experiences of desire, despair, love, hate, faith, hope, sorrow, power, betrayal, triumph, defeat. We have done so by consulting those observers and thinkers from the past who found dramatic ways of communicating with us across decades and centuries—Chaucer, Virgil, Homer, Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Yeats, Conrad, and on and on. Faulkner, Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Dickinson, O’Neill, Miller, Hurston, Ellison.... What Bread Loaf has always known, and what we graduates have learned, is that understanding of humanity comes through as much experience of it as possible, which means, in the study of literature, getting as close as we can to the texts, to the words on the page, to the perspectives on human experience that produced them. Bread Loaf also knows that answers to questions about how to act in the world are not easy—and that it is the questioning itself that is of most importance. I have always admired Chekhov’s statement about the duty of the artist—the obligation is not to find the solution to a question, but to pose the question correctly.

Those who have been posing the questions to us every summer, the members of the Bread Loaf faculty, are deserving of more praise and thanks than it is possible for us to express. They are not only experts in their academic fields, but experts in their teaching. And, as comments I have

collected during the summer from members of this class indicate, our admiration for them as human beings is profound.

“Bread Loaf instructors,” one senior wrote, “make we want to be a more compassionate and thorough classroom instructor. Across the board, these professors are not only brilliant, but kind and affirming.”

At the start of this summer, I sat down to dinner with two students who were new to Bread Loaf. Learning that this was my last summer, one of them promptly asked which professors I had had here on the Vermont campus. So, I listed them: Dare Clubb, Victor Luftig, Jennifer Green-Lewis, Alan MacVey, Sara Blair. And which ones, he asked, were the ones not to miss? “Dare Clubb, Victor Luftig, Jennifer Green-Lewis, Alan MacVey, Sara Blair,” I responded, aware that had another senior sat at that table that night, the list of names would have been different and the point would have been the same.

As a way of expressing our admiration and deep gratitude to the professors of Bread Loaf, and to Jim Maddox and Emily Bartels, the Senior class is very glad to announce a gift of \$1,000 to the James Andreas Scholarship Fund. Professor Andreas taught several members of this class in their first summer here. As one of those students noted, “Some of the best teachers I have ever had have been here at Bread Loaf, and Jim Andreas was definitely one. He taught our class not only about the carnivalesque and Chaucer, but also about how to incorporate humor in the classroom, even when you don't feel very well—as we found out only later was the case for him.” In honor and in memory of Professor Andreas, we make this gift to the future of excellent teaching at Bread Loaf.

Please, join me in applause for the Bread Loaf faculty and for Jim and Emily, who are responsible for assembling these brilliant people at the four—soon to be five—campuses.

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There is a passage from a book by Lawrence Weschler, titled *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, that has returned to me again and again as I have returned to Bread Loaf. The book is a biography of sorts on the artistic development and theories of the contemporary

artist Robert Irwin. Reflecting on his experience of being an artist in the world and on the process of development for his artistic conceptions, Irwin remarked:

“It’s like you’re on a swing, and you swing way up to the top and for a split second you can see over the wall, you can see all that light, but you’re already on your way back into the world. So you swing harder and you get a little higher and you see a little more, but back down into the world you go. To recognize something and then live there takes a tremendous conversion of your being. You don’t just swing up there and say, ‘Oh, that’s nice,’ and stay there, hanging in midair.... [T]he world always draws you back.”

Irwin and the Bread Loaf student have something in common, it seems to me, for we come back to these professors’ classrooms each summer, swinging harder, seeing more. But we’re not meant to stay here. We’re meant to go back into the world, bringing with us what we were able to see and understand. The world draws us back, and we return to it better prepared and, because of how we have expanded ourselves here, with greater responsibilities to use ourselves.

I said at the start that I wasn’t sure that the Bread Loaf education does indeed have an end. I don’t think it does—as long as Bread Loaf exists, we will feel the assurance and support of it, no matter how far away we are from it in miles or in years. Just two days ago, one senior called Bread Loaf “as reliable as the stars,” and I agree.

Which brings *us* back to that image of night in the meadow across the road. Three summers ago, I was standing in that meadow beside my very close friend, fellow Senior Bret Chenkin. We were in the middle of papers, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the summer, in the middle of Vermont. We faced the moon, which had risen whole. The fog met and soon surrounded us, but left the stars visible above. And then what must have been a meteor tore open a portion of the sky, leaving a fiery trail behind that lit the meadow yellow ever so briefly. There was nothing to say. We said nothing. Soon the fog moved on, and we knew with out speaking of it that we would never experience anything like that again. But we had it. We shared it. And still do.

And we, Seniors, will never experience anything quite like this again. But we have it. And we will share it for the rest of our lives.

In closing, I'd like to remind us of our beginning this summer, with the visit by Seamus Heaney, because he offered all of us something not unlike that night in the meadow. I had a fortunate vantage point in the barn the evening of the reading, seated three rows back and about fifteen feet to the left of the Nobel Prize-winning poet; and from there, I was able to see how his body moved behind the podium as he read. It was a slow dance of his feet, a steady shifting of his weight with his words. A lean on his right hip with one poem, a lean to his left with the next. But by the time he'd come to his final poem, he was standing still, feet together, shoulders squared, palms flat on the podium before him as if he couldn't feel more at ease, more at home. And all of us gathered in the barn were still as well. No one moved, fearful of missing a word. No one driving by on Route 125 that evening could have guessed what the barn held—200, maybe 300, people under the high, old rafters, enthralled, listening.

Heaney's final poem of the evening was "Postscript," and it seems appropriate to bring it back now, here, post-papers.

The poem is a recommendation to find the time some day to drive a certain road along the coast in County Clare, Ireland, in the early fall—"when," Heaney writes,

the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

I don't think the poet could have described a Bread Loaf student's experience better: we have been the "hurry through which known and strange things pass."

And I don't think the poet could have described the effect of that experience better. My heart, for one, has been caught off guard by Bread Loaf. Repeatedly. And each time, each summer, it has been blown wide open.

Seniors, we leave here *more*—more equipped, more curious, more articulate, more perceptive, more imaginative, more giving, and more confident.

And we leave here tremendously grateful.

Thank you very much.