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Once More, with Feeling

James Plath (Honor's Day Convocation, April 14, 2004)

To begin, I'd like to thank Mona Gardner, Chris Prendergast, and Mike Weis for nominating me, as well as members of the Promotion and Tenure Committee who voted to give me this award. Mostly, though, I'd like to thank the students who sat in these very seats last year and burst into spontaneous applause as my name was announced, instead of turning to each other and going, "What?!"

As my colleagues know, and as you students who will become teachers or even workers in the "real" world will learn, there are days when you're convinced it could go either way.

As I look out at this sea of expectant faces—at least, what I can see of them in this darkened auditorium—I'm reminded of Day One each semester. When I enter the room and look at my students, for the first (and sometimes *only* time), every single face is turned attentively, even *eagerly* towards me, waiting for me to say something profound.

I hate that look.

Because it makes me panic. *What?* I think. *What do you want from me*, I want to say. *Put your pens away. I don't have anything noteworthy to say, do I?* Then the defense mechanisms kick in. Lines from old movies flash through my mind, and I think, like Cool Hand Luke, *Stop feeding off me!*, while the Taxi Driver inside me wants to say, *Do you know who I AM? Do you KNOW who I AM?*

Until I actually begin talking about journalism, or literature, or creative writing, and remember that, *huh*, I guess I really do have something to say, I'm not sure *I* know who I am. What carries me, until I get to that point, is sheer animation: humor, energy, and enthusiasm. In other words, *feeling*. If I think back to the best teachers I had in high school and college (and this should depress pretty much everyone in the audience), I don't remember a single thing about anything they tried to teach me or force me to memorize. No, that's not true. I *do* remember the first few sentences of "The Gettysburg Address," half of the first stanza to Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," and a rhyme my high school Latin teacher taught us to help us remember declensions. Mostly what I remember are their personalities, and the way they looked at the world. I recall, for example, how every day seemed another occasion for my Latin

teacher to revel with students, but it was just as much of a romp for him to lead us through Caesar's Gallic Wars—which, of course, I've forgotten. I also remember the deadpan seriousness of a literature professor at Utah State University, and how absolutely detailed he was in his analyses of novels and poems, dissecting them as if he were a botanist counting sepals and petals in order to make a classification. He would never be mistaken for a passionate man, and I can't even recall whether it was American or British literature that he taught. But it was clear that literature was an important, even crucial, part of his life, and that's what left a permanent impression on me.

Last year, Professor Nadeau dedicated her speech to our beloved Minor Myers, jr., and my remarks are partly inspired by Minor, who, as you know, had a habit of asking people what their passions were. His own included antiques, musical instruments, and 17th century French cookbooks. But I'd venture to say that if I asked for a show of hands asking how many of you shared Minor's level of passion for those musty old cookbooks, very few, if any, would be raised. That's because passion seems to me an almost blessed state—whether it's a romantic passion or a more erudite interest—that can be as individual as a snowflake that drops from above to anoint the fortunate. Make that a bucket of water. It's an all-consuming and all-encompassing love that drives the afflicted (and I mean this in the nicest possible way) to forms of behavior that the rest of us mere mortals could only describe as, well, extreme. I remember when poet Carolyn Forché visited the president's house. Learning that she liked old, hand-bound books in Moroccan leather, Minor rushed into his study and brought her one. Then another. And another. And like a Moroccan merchant peddling his wares, he pointed out the artistry in every book. Forché turned to me and gave me a look which said, Okay, I'm a poet, and I trade in feelings every day, but here is someone infinitely more passionate about old, hand-bound books in Moroccan leather than I could ever be. And I understood her reaction. Minor took feeling to the nth degree.

Like Minor, I collected ancient Roman coins, and when I told him once that I had to sell my entire collection—including my prized gold aureus of Caesar Augustus—in order to pay for my college tuition, his eyes squinted even more than usual and he asked, incredulously, “But *why?*” When I told him I was working two jobs during the summer and two during the school year and had simply run out of things to sell, he said, as if it were *his* coins I had surreptitiously sold, “How *could* you?” That's the kind of passion Minor was blessed with. It's no wonder he was also a writer.

As some of you know, I directed the Hemingway Days Writers' Workshop in Key West for ten years. During one of those festivals, I was awakened at 5 a.m. by a gentle but insistent pounding on my hotel room door, and a voice that

whispered (or maybe hissed, it's hard to tell at that hour) "James . . . James? Wake up. It's the equinox, and the tarpon are rolling out in the harbor. You've got to see this! They look just like mercury does when you roll it in the palm of your hand." It was my good friend, Lorian Hemingway, Ernest's granddaughter, and a fine writer herself—though I wouldn't recommend trying that mercury thing.

At that moment, still groggy in my half-sleep, it occurred to me that a writer is really very much like a small child who gets so excited about a new discovery—even things as dull to most adults as a simple, blue-streaked rock—that the child simply *has* to share it with someone. And in that moment of discovery and delight, there exists a heightened state of feeling that approaches passion.

It also occurred to me that I wanted to *kill* her for waking me up at that ungodly hour . . . but we won't get into that.

Painter Salvador Dali once quipped, "I don't take drugs . . . I *am* drugs," meaning that his "high" was naturally created, from within. It's a high that every inventor and creative person knows. More precisely, it's a series of highs. There's the high that comes from getting an idea, and the greater high that comes from seeing that idea take shape on paper or on canvas or 3-D model. Then there's the high that comes when the work is going well, and, one which students can appreciate most, there's the high that comes with the completion of a project. But the greatest high occurs if the creative process gets rolling almost out of control, and the creative thinker is overcome by the dynamics of exhilaration and energy that propel an idea forward with the subconscious sitting in the driver's seat of a convertible, radio cranked up, hair blowing in the wind.

In classical times, poets—those writers with a capital W (the only capital poets ever have, by the way)—were associated with a kind of divine madness. Socrates wrote, "It seems that God took away the minds of poets that they might better express his," while his pupil, Plato, was convinced that "Every man is a poet when he is in love." Even Horace, one of ancient Rome's greatest poets, seems to have bought into the associations, for he wrote, of another, "The man is either crazy, or he is a poet."

Which brings us to *me* . . . and the title of my talk. In the world of emotions, if passion is a state of grace that happens *to* you, feeling is more of an active state. With feeling, we can generate, sustain, and regain energy and interest, something which our coaches might describe as "intensity."

Students who are used to Scan-Tron graded exams tend to freak out a bit when they encounter me in a writing class, and I tell them that there are many right ways and just as many wrong ways to approach any creative work . . . including some I don't know about yet. Those who are accustomed to memorizing facts and regurgitating them back to their instructors always think that the grading of a piece of writing is as wickedly arbitrary as a coin toss. But I edited a literary magazine for 16 years, and have been teaching writing now on the college level for 25 years, and I can assure you that it's not as random as it seems. A piece of writing is like a psychic thumbprint, in fact. Like a handwriting sample, it can reveal quite a few things.

I'm no clairvoyant, but I can usually tell not only the grades that papers deserve, but what state of mind students were in when they wrote them. Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that "Good writing is a kind of skating which carries off the performer where he would not go," and certainly I've found that to be true, as *well* as the opposite. Bad writing, or mediocre writing, usually shuffles along in safe and familiar circles, like those quasi-athletic mall walkers. Bored writers create boring writing, and I remind students that they need to psyche themselves up like athletes before a game if they expect their work to succeed. The most interesting thing, for me, is that I can often tell when a student started out great guns but then lost energy along the way. And isn't that typical of so many things in life? Take jobs, for example—as I'm sure you seniors would be glad to do right about now. With a new job, you're pumped up to make a good impression, and the freshness of it all makes it easy to approach each day with energy, enthusiasm, and an almost heightened sense of motion and thought. But five or ten years later? Forget it. It's tough to sustain that kind of eagerness and emotion. Then comes that two-week notice, and suddenly, with a finish line or legacy in sight (or, at the very least, a hoped-for letter of recommendation as motivation), the desire returns to finish strong.

Or, take college students. As first-year students, could they *be* any more wide eyed or pumped up? Then come those business-like sophomore and junior years. But by senior year, the energy and enthusiasm starts to Okay, maybe that's not the best example. But you get my point. It's relatively easy to handle beginnings and endings with some measure of feeling. Middles are what give us the most trouble, and ironically, the bulk of everything we do in life is occupied by middles.

Poet William Stafford once wrote, "You must revise your life," and, of course, the part that usually needs revision is often the middle. This involves a mighty return to beginnings and an attempt to re-create the surprise, enthusiasm, dedication, or fascination we felt when we first approached something—again, whether it's an artistic work, or any endeavor in life. Need a

refresher course? Offer to take a two year old on a walk across the quad. Leaves, sticks, even someone's chewed-up, spewed-out bubble gum take on the significance of crystalline wonders inside what for them must seem like a sparkling geode world. It's what happens when we experience things for the first time, before they become familiar and, if we do nothing to counteract the slide, ultimately mundane. Maybe that's why Ernest Hemingway was so successful. As he explained to Mary, his fourth wife (obviously, he wasn't successful in *everything*), "All my life I've looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time." Hemingway told his literary friend and rival, F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Look at how it is at the start—all juice and kick" and then "you use up the juice and the kick goes but you learn how to do it." What he *didn't* tell Fitzgerald (and Hemingway was famous for only pretending to share secrets) was that learning "how to do it" involved figuring out how to get back some of that "juice and kick." It was something he did often in his career, somehow finding it within himself to follow a bad or mediocre spate of writing with a revived commitment and intensity of feeling. In Hemingway's case—and don't try this at home—with every extremely successful book he wrote, he was inspired by a new love affair. He wrote *The Sun Also Rises* when he was still young and in love with his first wife, Hadley Richardson. When he wrote *A Farewell to Arms* he was having an affair with Pauline Pfeiffer. Third wife and fellow war correspondent Martha Gellhorn inspired him to write *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *The Old Man and the Sea* was dedicated to new wife Mary.

But there's more to it than that. Late in life, after his chief rival, William Faulkner, won the Nobel Prize and Hemingway the competitor became even more determined to write a book that would put him over the top, he ironically produced what most critics pronounced as one of his worst books. *Across the River and Into the Trees* was a novel about a retired American colonel who shoots ducks and has a fling with a 19-year-old countess in Venice. It was so bad that it invited parody, and E.B. White was happy to oblige with a little piece he called "Across the Street and Into the Grill." Hemingway was furious, of course, but he hadn't written a book that critics had really praised since *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was published a decade earlier. He responded by going back to what he tried to do from the very beginning. As a young Hemingway once explained to his father, "I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not just to depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive." And so he stopped going through the writing motions and rededicated himself to helping readers *feel* his next book, which just happened to be about the life of a poor Cuban fisherman who listened to American baseball on the radio and thought that Joe DiMaggio was greater than any human being, living or dead. *The Old Man and the Sea* won the Pulitzer Prize, and indeed put Hemingway on track to win the Nobel Prize. What it had that a decade of books before it lacked was *heart*—feeling.

Poets often talk about having muses, external spirits that favor them with inspiration. But I'd like to share an insight from William Stafford contained in a short poem he wrote, titled "When I Met My Muse":

When I Met My Muse

I glanced at her and took my glasses
off—they were still singing. They buzzed
like a locust on the coffee table and then
ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the
sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and
knew that nails up there took a new grip
on whatever they touched. "I am your own
way of looking at things," she said. "When
you allow me to live with you, every
glance at the world around you will be
a sort of salvation." And I took her hand.

That's exactly what Hemingway did with his most successful short stories and novels, and it's also what John Updike's hero, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom did in the four novels that Updike wrote about him. A simple linotyper by trade who inherits a car dealership, Rabbit embraces the child inside him who sees things differently from the average person. Like Jan Vermeer, the Dutch painter that Updike most admired, Rabbit is able to find radiance in the commonplace, and because of that his own life is elevated. When he has an affair with an overweight ex-prostitute, Rabbit asks if he should pull down the shades before they make love. She responds, "Please, it's a dismal view." Rabbit, however, deliberately looks to see what could possibly be so dreary, as if it were another challenge to his own powers of artistic imagination. What he sees is a sight so lovely that "he feels gratitude to the builders of this ornament, and lowers the shade on it guiltily." After his powers of perception are thus awakened, Rabbit sees the woman as "great and glistening sugar in her fifty-grained slip." Say that three times fast. Though Rabbit, like his hop-a-long namesake, is

somewhat driven by sex, he's driven even more by a creative impulse to reshape the world around him so that just about everything becomes fascinating and beautiful. Updike himself has spent the better part of his creative life trying "To transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities" into something more magical, in order to help his readers see the world anew. Recapturing that kind of feeling is nothing short of a kind of baptism.

I, meanwhile, have a confession to make. As I was preparing my talk, this is the point at which I lost energy, and it may amuse students to learn that the very first thought that occurred to me was, *How many pages do I have left to fill?* Now, the good thing about writing is that when you do hit a wall, you can just power down the computer and walk away. Go jogging, take a shower, run errands—anything to distract you so that the ideas and energy can return. This time, I found myself doing what I rarely do when I'm experiencing a brief bout of writer's block: I looked up "feeling" in the dictionary, and was somewhat surprised to see that it means "to perceive or examine by touch." Suddenly, I began to get interested again. To feel, I was reminded, we must be "in touch," whether literally or connected in a very personal way to an idea or visual image.

For the rest of an afternoon, I thought about the connection of emotional feeling to touch. Soon after that, I found myself recalling a moment I experienced one Hemingway Days when I was moderating a discussion on writers and war, and it suddenly looked as if emotional feeling would result in some pretty heavy-duty touching. As I sat between two writers who obviously didn't care for each other, I felt like a referee. In one corner, weighing in at 250-plus pounds and wearing his jaunty Australian bush hat and a fresh alcoholic buzz, was National Book Award-winning poet James Dickey, who was a bomber pilot in World War II. In the other corner, weighing in at considerably less, but carrying much more baggage, was Larry Heinemann, another National Book Award winner who served as an infantry foot soldier in Vietnam. War to James Dickey was a glorious adventure, and he told his stories with swagger and described them with relish. His was a long-distance war, one of beautiful patterns formed by explosions that looked like abstract art, as distanced from real killing and the reality of warfare as the American public was during the first Gulf War when Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf pointed to blown-up aerial photos of explosions to describe America's "precision bombing." Heinemann couldn't describe his war without getting emotional. He saw it up close. What he touched was the mud and stench of in-your-face warfare. And while Dickey wasn't devoid of feeling, Heinemann clearly had much more of it, *according to Webster's*.

Now, this may seem like a digression, and it probably is. But digressions are an important part of the creative process. A trip to the dictionary led to brief excitement, free-association, and a Key West recollection. Once I began thinking and writing about Dickey and Heinemann, it led me to the analogy with the Gulf War of George the First, which, of course, got me thinking about our current predicament. I mean, *president*. And as any of my students can attest, nothing gets me so fired up that it approaches vein-popping passion than thinking about George the Worst and an administration that's presided over a record budget deficit, a devalued dollar, record job losses, blurring of church and state, a backsliding in women's rights and environmental protection legislation, broken treaties, lost prestige in a global community, reduced civil liberties, and a war waged over lies, distortion, and hidden agendas!

Full of fresh fury, I returned to the computer and began to write. Poets and writers don't enjoy the same profile as scientists working on new breakthroughs or politicians making decisions that affect millions. But John F. Kennedy believed that "when power corrupts, poetry cleanses." Digression had led me to feeling, and once more I was able to attack this talk with energy, though it took a totally different direction than I thought it would. In that respect, it's very *much* like a poem. Robert Frost once wrote that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom," while Stafford added, years later, "When a poem catches you, it overwhelms, it surprises, it shakes you up."

So when I speak of "feeling," I'm talking about something more than energy and enthusiasm, which are both expressions emanating from within. I'm talking about *touching*, about being receptive to things that have the capacity to move or inspire us. I'm talking about being able to see the wonder in things, of being able to absorb them and take them in. We need to remind ourselves of what it once felt like to do things for the first time, to remember that those on our family tree who came before us made it collectively possible for us to accomplish things they could only dream of. To do that, we need to revel in the poetry of the ordinary. And so today, as we celebrate the end of four years of student achievements and anticipate the beginning that will commence on Commencement Day, this poet, journalist, and writer would like to remind the Class of 2004 that you will probably forget every word I've said today, except one. But that's okay. Because there will come not just one time, but many, when you will become stuck on a problem or mired in routine. When that happens, you must revise your life. Whatever it is you find yourself doing, try it once more. With feeling.