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Honors Day Address
by Dr. Sammye Crawford Greer

Illinois Wesleyan University

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He can not chuse but hear.

May 3, 1978

Now Wherefore Stopp'st Thou Me?

In anticipating this day, I have had much pleasure in knowing that for me personally it is as appropriate as it would ever be that I appear on this Honors Program. Not only do I take much personal pride as teacher and advisor in the outstanding senior class of English majors, but also, and especially, I take personal pride as mother in the graduation of my son with honors at another university. Like most parents, I celebrate my son's graduation with honors but am hardly capable of distinguishing between his academic achievements and other of his achievements, similar to many of yours, not likely to be noted at all, except in his Mom's convocation address: passing Mathematics 55, the hardest course in the department; changing from the major of his childhood dreams to one more accommodating to his personality and talents; escaping with his charge of adolescent canoeists from an angry Smokey Mountain mother bear who had cornered them in a trail shelter; finishing the Boston Marathon, if not in the first 500 places; for three years planning, managing, and teaching classes in dancing; working through dozens of uncertainties to narrow to three his career directions—for next year, at least.

Thus, my remarks today honor your outstanding academic achievements as listed on this convocation program and on the commencement program. The elaborate structure of this university rests on our belief in the value of the life of the mind. We pay tribute to the academic excellence that marks your participation in that life. But I mention these personal experiences, for I know they are similar to many of yours; and I wish to honor these accomplishments which cannot be measured academically but which both demonstrate your individuality and talents and enrich your involvement in the life of the mind. I offer congratulations, but most of all, I look ahead and offer best wishes, or, more precisely, I offer a best wish, my *one* best wish.

I will express this wish for you in the form of a letter to my son, Boyce, which you may think is a sneaky, second-hand way to give an Honors Day Address. But, not so, for you are hearing the letter before he reads it; in fact, he probably would not receive such a gift from me, one that involves so much mental effort, had I not had to write this speech. Thus, he may think it's a cheap, second-hand way for me to mark his graduation with honors—giving him my convocation address? It may even be a sneaky, second-hand way to be a mother, for what I wish for Boyce at this last moment before he slips completely out of the perimeters of home, I have been offering you continually as a professor of English and

perhaps have not so clearly given to him since the time I read bedtime stories to him. Now that I've revealed my identity crisis, I'll say only that what I as your teacher wish for you is the same that I as parent wish for my son upon his graduation with honors; perhaps you can understand how highly I value what I urge upon you by knowing that I choose it as my best wish for him.

Dear Boyce,

If I had the power to bless, then at this ceremonious time I would bestow my blessing; but probably all I can offer is a wish, hoping that you will accept it as your fortune: Let me wish for you what I gave to you when I put you to bed as a little child, the continuing company of a well-told story. For a year and a half after you started to school you claimed—at home—that you couldn't read; eventually we uncovered one of your finest schemes: you would deny being able to read for yourself so that we would continue to read all those stories to you. Now that I know you can read, I wish for you the same love for a well-told story, a growing friendship with the literature made accessible to you by your engagement these years in the life of the mind. Actually you haven't had enough time in college for reading stories, for there was always a political theory course that you had to take instead of the one in Shakespeare's tragedies; you needed the statistics course, and, besides, you couldn't compete with all those English majors in the Yeats and Joyce seminar. And somewhere along the way, I stopped reading stories to you; yet I devote the most important parts of my working days to reading them to other people's daughters and sons—well, perhaps not reading *per se*—but teaching how to read the well-told story, and, in doing so, professing the power of the literary work, claiming its value in human experience. I wish for you a life enriched by the insights and revelations of the well-told story, and I can best explain this claim to the power and value of the literary work by telling a story:

Once upon a time, three young people were on their way to a wedding when one of them was stopped abruptly by a weird-looking old man who grabbed his arm and stared at him. On his way to feasting, drinking, and celebrating the marriage of one of his close relatives, the young gallant could hear the laughter and singing in the distance; and he didn't want to waste any time with this crazy old man's ramblings; yet he couldn't help wondering why the old man chooses him alone of the three:

'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din.'

You recognize one of your favorite literary characters, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who makes a fantastical voyage into an unknown ocean and upon his return to land has the power to make individuals listen to his tale:

He holds him with his skinny hand,
'There was a ship,' quoth he.
'Hold off, unhand me, grey-beard loon!'
Eftsoons his hand dropped he.

He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

.....

The bride hath paced into the hall,
Red as a rose is she;
Nodding their heads before her goes
The merry minstrelsy.

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,
Yet cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

The Mariner tells a tale of a moral and spiritual journey on a supernatural ocean; he tells of his offense against the Creator and its horrifying consequences; he tells of his spiritual rebirth and the penance he must do. We think that he is doomed to wander the earth forever, in penance, telling his story to those he knows need to hear: he says:

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.

Having told his story to the mesmerized Wedding-Guest, the tortured old man departs, and the frivolous gallant is no longer interested in the pre-nuptial festivities:

The Mariner, whose eye is bright,

Whose beard with age is hoar,
Is gone and now the Wedding-Guest
Turned from the bridegroom's door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.

The Mariner's tale so affected the Wedding-Guest that his frivolity and carefreeness changed to sadness and wisdom. It seems that the young man learns from the tale what the old man learned in the experience itself.

A few weeks ago you and your friends began your merry treks to the weddings of friends; in the next few months, as first one and then another invite you to their ceremonies, you may be better identified as the wedding guest than the graduate. The marriage of young people is one of the initiation ceremonies into adult responsibility; yet it's not the bride or groom the Mariner chooses to tell his tale to; it's a young man like you, an onlooker, a well-wisher, a reveler; no vows of responsibility, just merry-making and felicitations. The young gallant keeps mentioning the party at the Bridegroom's, the feast, the merry din, the singing, and, of course, the glowing bride ("red as a rose is she"). No doubt when the Mariner spied him and his two friends coming down the road, the face of this young man registered this all-consuming interest in partying; and realizing the disposition of the young gallant, we can better understand what the old grey-beard means when he says "the moment that his face I see/ I know the man who must hear me." For the bright-eyed mariner and, consequently, for the bright-faced reveler, there is a ceremony, other than the nuptial rites, that gives the onlooker at the feast, quickly and profoundly, a sense of responsibility and sympathy for the community of humankind: this ceremony is the mariner's recitation of the story. In fact, this ghostly old sailor says that when he comes upon the one who must hear his story, "to him my tale I *teach*." The word *teach* claims the power of the story to give the listener insight, knowledge, discipline, meaning. And that the Wedding-Guest has learned, we know, and that he has been changed, we know; for "A sadder and a wiser man/he rose the morrow morn."

In one of the courses I teach, "The Journey of the Hero," we learn that once the hero has made the journey into the fantastical, terrifying or enchanting unknown, he must return to his community with a boon for his people. Whatever the boon—the defeat of enemies, the freeing of people from oppression, the magical water of life, the kiss that awakens the sleeping princess, the call to repentance of sin—

whatever it be, it brings new life to a people in need. We have discovered, however, that quite often the boon is merely the hero's story of his experiences which contains an insight into what he has learned; his story is the great gift, more powerful than the water of life or the magical sword.

Lillian Hellman, the contemporary playwright, tells the true story of her fearful journey into Nazi Germany, on a mission for her friend, Julia, to take money to buy the freedom of oppressed Jews and other victims of the Nazis.[1] While Lillian was still in Europe, Julia was killed by the Nazis. Because of her love for her friend and seeking to bring home at least the spirit of Julia, Lillian tried to find Julia's baby girl: symbolically she could bring new and promising life home with her. She never found the child, and it was thirty years after the experience before she can find the strength to write about Julia. Although she cannot bring home Julia's child, this heroine of the journey into the unknown gives us the heroic commitment of Julia in the face of the holocaust and the spirit of Julia in her own adventures.

Ship-wrecked on the coast of Mexico in 1528, starving, stripped of companions, ships, clothes, even of the ordinary sense of reality, wandering the length of the Mexican territory, Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish soldier, gained the power to heal the disease-ridden Mexican Indians. After eight years of wandering and healing, he came upon a Spanish army who took him back to Spain where he found that he could no longer heal, that he no longer even had the impulse to do so. We want to judge this hero: he was unable to return with his boon, the power of healing; yet we know of his discovery of this power within him and of his compassionate heroism because he writes a letter to his king testifying to these matters.[2] He says it is a true story, but, like Lillian Hellman's story, it is also a literary work of art, incorporating the great motifs and symbols associated with the archetypal heroic journey. Whereas we people in the twentieth century would never have known Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, to have our sickness healed by him, we have his letter—his story—to give us spiritual insights and rejuvenation. The power of healing, or his story—which is the greater gift of life? Julia's baby or Lillian's story, which is the greater gift of life?

Last spring when I was on Sabbatical Leave, I worked steadily for several days on seven little lines—36 words—from W. B. Yeats's poem, "The Tower." The passage is about jackdaws building a nest—daws, they're called in the poem, Eurasian birds, resembling crows, usually nesting in church towers or other tall structures. This great poem questions the relationship between the creative imagination and the human being's confinement within mortality and nature. I knew the nest-building was important, but, for the life of me, I

couldn't say why. I also knew that to be able to say why, I had to know what a daw's nest looks like; and the great Oxford Bodleian Library never revealed this secret to me, probably because I could never find the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I had, then, to rely on those 36 words to tell me what the nest looks like:

> As at the loophole there
> The daws chatter and scream,
> And drop twigs layer upon layer.
> When they have mounted up,
> The mother bird will rest
> On their hollow top,
> And so warm her wild nest.[3]

"Loophole" refers to the long, narrow window-slit in the Norman tower. "Chatter," "scream," "drop," and the last word, "wild," describe a frantic, undisciplined activity; but "layer upon layer" says that for all the birds' disorder, their activity results in a shape, a form. Remembering another Yeats poem about the little birds called stares which build small nests in the crevices of loosened masonry in the tower walls, I knew this daws' nest must be large—the tall loophole, nothing to constrict or confine, the suggestion of height in "mounted up" and of a large structure in the pun on "mount." "Mounted up" also describes a climbing structure, and "hollow top," not just the hole at the apex of the nest, but, ah—finally!—here it is!—in the shape of a top, that toy most familiar to me as the little wooden object we wind a string around and cause to spin. The daws' nest is like a top: twigs layer upon layer—spiralling upward, to meet the birds that reel about the apex. And then I understood—the hollow top: nature's instinctive building for the sole purpose of generation—the natural order, the gyre of generation and death—the mirror-opposite of the work of the creative imagination which transcends nature, participating in the timeless spiritual order. Basing my interpretation on my conception of a bird's nest I had never even seen a picture of, I knew I was a fool: this is not the way a scholar works.

In July I visited the 12th century Norman tower that Yeats lived in for a few years and that becomes one of his great poetic symbols. Climbing the winding stairs to the second level, I stepped into a narrow alcove lighted by a loophole at about the height of my shoulders. Yes, mounting up from the floor to the loophole were twigs layer upon layer forming what anyone would know was a huge bird's nest. Round and round, the grey twigs spun, resting on the floor and climbing the wall, in the shape of an inverted top. It was no time to go on depending on revelation but to be, instead, the scholar

and verify my earlier insight; I descended the stairs to the little bookshop adjoining the tower and asked the woman there: "Is that a daw's nest?" "Yes," she replied—"There was one there when Yeats lived here." Like the Wedding-Guest who had not seen the albatross the Mariner killed but had heard the old man's tale, this scholar had only to say, "I know."

In itself, Yeats's little fiction has not the great spiritual and moral dimensions of the Mariner's fantastical tale; but it has the same power to reveal a dimension of reality to the uninformed listener; giving me the image of the nest in the tower, this little fiction symbolically speaks to the human condition that is Yeats's concern in the poem. One of William Faulkner's characters says, "If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain."[4] No actual daw's nest will ever be so plain to me as Yeats's fictional one; probably no actual journey would ever be as revelatory to the Wedding-Guest as the old man's fantastical one.

Nunez offers his insights in a straight-forward manner, and Hellman's explicit commentary on her adventures and the character of Julia tells us all we need to know. But like the daws passage, most well-told stories don't reveal their meanings so easily; certainly the Mariner's tale of killing the albatross and blessing the watersnakes, of a spectre ship and corpses that move, of the bloody sun and the bright white moon does not so readily release its significance to us.

Apparently, by hypnosis and osmosis the Wedding Guest gains the insights that sadden and wisen him. Now, I have considerable faith in these two modes of teaching and learning: my literature students practice osmosis, and I attempt hypnosis; I'm confident that these are necessary conditions for the reception of the well-told story. As you used to do at bedtime and as did the young gallant, you must listen "like a three years' child"; and also like the Wedding Guest, even while you hear the merry din in the distance, you have to stop to let the story captivate you.

I've wished for you the continuing company of the *well-told* story, and in that adjective lies the whole matter. As I've implied, the well-told story need not be a novel or a play; it may be the little fiction of a lyric poem, or it may be the ballad stanza of the Mariner's tale. All the parts of the literary work blend together to determine its form; and our language lends itself to such subtle shaping and play that it simultaneously holds and releases its multifarious meanings. In addition, the parts of the story reverberate with meaning that they gain from their associations with varied traditions, whether literary, mythological, or historical. These are the matters that your literature teachers have insisted that you attend as

they've analyzed *King Lear* line by line or as they've asked you to do what the Wedding Guest doesn't have to do, explore in a research project the religious and folk meanings associated with white birds and watersnakes.

It's because the well-told story speaks profoundly to the varieties of human experience that I wish it for you as my one best wish. I have no need to wish for you, out of mother love, that you master the special knowledge and skills demanded by your career: you and your classmates already define your lives by that principle. I have no need to wish for you the distinction that comes from the service you can render your society; that dream, too, already captivates your imagination, even as it beautifully masks its companionable shadow, the desire for the excessive material benefits that come with most of these services.

Instead, may you have the stories and poems that keep you in touch with humankind, that depend for their complex of meaning on what people do and feel and are, that illuminate life as we live it,[5] that hold before you—shaped and ordered, yet present and vital—the great, tumultuous stream of experience in all its ambiguity and disorder. Joseph Conrad says that the writer "speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn."[6] And in a letter to his grandson, written for a Brown University publication and reprinted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,*[7] the journalist Duncan Norton-Taylor writes, tracing his career: "I became...finally the managing editor of *Fortune,* which, as you know, is an outstanding chronicler of American business and the economic scene." Speaking of his education, he says he shunned economics in college and that "If I had to choose the book that influenced me most, I would name *The Oxford Book of English Verse.*"

I wish for you a similar testimony. The old grey-beard loon has blessings to offer. I wish them for you.

My love,
Mom

Notes

[1]Lillian Hellman, "Julia," in *Pentimento* (New York: 1973).
[2]Haniel Long, "The Power Within Us," in *Voyages of Discovery,* ed. James Armstrong (New York: 1972).
[3]W. B. Yeats, "The Tower," in "*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: 1956).
[4]William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: 1936), p. 190.
[5]David Daiches, *A Study of Literature* (New York: 1964), p. 82.
[6]Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in *Three Great Tales* (New York: n.d.), p. viii.
[7]Duncan Norton-Taylor, "Point of View," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* Nov. 14, 1977.