

talk given at Stonecoast MFA Commencement, University of Southern Maine, July 2005

Congratulations to the graduating class of the Stonecoast MFA program and greetings to all and sundry who are here tonight, especially to those who have borne with the graduates in their labors (I use the word carefully) over the past few years. I will not salute you categorically but you know who you are. For my part, I am honored to be the speaker for this class that is so chock full of fine writers.

One winter evening a year or so ago I was on the phone with the poet, Hayden Carruth. Hayden asked me what I was up to and I told him I was teaching in a low residency MFA program. Hayden who can be somewhat cantankerous and who enjoys being somewhat cantankerous asked me more or less point blank if such a graduate program was of any real value. He had taught a decade or so in the Syracuse University graduate program and wondered aloud (Hayden is a great one for wondering aloud) how a teacher could offer instruction to students when the teacher only saw the students a few times a year. "What kind of education is that?" Hayden inquired in his gruff yet kindly voice. I knew that Hayden thought education had been going downhill since Plato misrepresented Socrates but I knew he was curious about what I was doing.

I asked him if he believed in the importance of letter writing. This was a loaded question because Hayden is in all likelihood one of the most remarkable letter writers on the planet. He believes passionately in the importance of taking the time to say to someone whatever he feels needs to be said. Letters run a very respectable second to poetry in his estimate. "What," I went on, "if there were learning that was based on the intimacy, caring and responsiveness that goes into letter writing?" I noticed a pause on the other end of the line. I have learned that whenever there is such a pause on Hayden's part, one must seize it. Accordingly, I pressed on. "What," I asked in what I took to be an ingenuous yet ingratiating tone, "if there were learning about writing that hearkened to the model of the teacher and the apprentice, learning that was genuinely personal on both sides? What if there were learning that embraced the tutorial model rather than broadcasting seeds over the very uneven terrain that constituted the average classroom?" The pause lingered. Some serious cogitating was occurring in a farmhouse in Munnsville, NY. I pressed on further. "And what if there were learning that recognized how important reflection is in learning about writing? And what if there were teaching that simply didn't deposit the goods and leave, but that stayed around in the form of those letters and conversations and even e-mails (I was on dangerous ground there, I knew)? What if there were teaching that went on for many months and created a sustained dialogue of a sort rarely seen in this too-busy, easily distracted world? And what if the times the students and teachers were together, there was an environment that truly made one feel how heady and precious writing can be?"

"You know," Hayden replied, "I have to admit that doesn't sound half-bad." ("Half-bad" being, of course, high praise from a native New Englander.) Hayden went on. "In fact, I think I would have liked that sort of teaching. You learn about writing by talking with a writer. There's nothing like working one on one." He enthused for some minutes. I was touched by his response and his openness to what not many minutes before he had dismissed out of hand.

I respect Hayden too much to guarantee the accuracy of every word in the above conversation (I did not record it for the Homeland Security Agency) but the gist is very much there. It's a gist on which I wish to reflect briefly, not I assure you, interminably, tonight.

Though I have a couple of advanced degrees, I am one of those dinosaurs who don't have an MFA and am largely an auto-didact. When I came to the Stonecoast program I wondered what I was getting myself into. As a poet, I am very aware of the place and lack of place of poetry in the United States. I wondered if the MFA was one more way in which the buck was being passed, in which a little world was being created at the expense of dealing with the perplexing larger one. I knew first-hand how hard it is to go it alone as a writer. I started off in a sizable, pine-tree-covered vacuum myself but writers inevitably have to go it alone. That is a truism and near-platitude of the endeavor. The great, brooding issue is how much. Solitude is beautiful. I speak as someone who lived off the grid for decades on a dead-end, dirt road in the Maine woods. Loneliness, however, the feeling that one is an outcast and that one's endeavors are of no value to others is wretched. It isn't healthy and it isn't productive but feelings aren't necessarily productive. They do what they do.

The beauty of this program and the experiences that you the graduating students have been through is that each of you has been able to enact some of the ordeal of becoming a writer with someone there beside you. As I don't have to tell you, you did the work. But you were able to receive the advice, the encouragement, the criticism, even the gossip now and then that makes writing a communicable event. Talent does what talent does but writing well is an art and the faculty that is here tonight are, among other things, real artists. To encounter so many of them and to work so closely with a few of them is an inestimable gift.

Though this society sets a price on virtually every human endeavor, I wonder what a carefully written sentence is worth—not a term paper on the Internet about *The Great Gatsby* that is available on www.plagiarism-is-us.net—but a mere sentence. I believe the answer is that such a sentence has great worth in the caring that goes into it on the part of the writer and that it has great worth as it is given to another person in a piece of writing. For writing remains a gift that one gives to others. It is literally priceless. By entering a community such as Stonecoast, you have been able to experience how the gift is given and how the gift can be received. People in a community commune with one another and they commune with something they care about. That surely typifies the past two years.

One wants to go it alone as a writer because it is exhilarating to do the work one's self. There is an authenticity to the endeavor that is similar to physical sport. You are responsible and only you. But that is not the whole of the experience. Again, I speak as someone who has been by himself much in this world. You will publish books and you will celebrate accomplishments and some of you will even become known among those who read books in this increasingly illiterate society. You will also stare at form rejection slips—"We cannot use this," as if writing were detergent or underwear. You will stare at dwindling checking accounts and dark clouds out your window that mirror inner clouds. That's all okay. You know that community exists. You know

that others can be there for you, both fellow students, teachers who will be your peers, and those who are near and dear to you before you came to Stonecoast and still are near and dear to you despite your covering every available surface with books and papers. You know that writing is difficult and that is good because it spurs one on and when one succeeds in a sentence or a line or a paragraph or a stanza or a page it is an incredibly delicious feeling. Writing is innovation as each of us tries to wrestle with the language we all share and make it uniquely our own but writing is lineage too. Now you, the graduates, are part of a nascent but distinct lineage. That's something to be proud of and to celebrate. Thanks for the opportunity of speaking to you tonight.