

Life's Too Short Not to Eat Pie (and to read poetry, too!)
Kenny Martin, 4 March 2018

Thank you, Dr. Reynolds, and a tremendous congratulations to all of you for doing what you love, and for doing it well. That is no small thing, and it deserves to be applauded. I hope that you will find time today to say in the mirror, in your very best Whitman: "I celebrate myself," because you all should.

I'd like to start by quoting the first poet I ever knew, and I suspect the first poet many of you knew too. "From there to here, from here to there, funny things are everywhere." Some of you might have already guessed: it's Dr. Seuss's masterpiece *One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish*. It was my first book, the first thing my father read to my sister and me. Perhaps I even heard those lines in the womb. As I was preparing this talk, I found myself puzzled: where to begin? And then it hit me, in simple, silly, and yet somehow profound Seussian fashion: we begin, of course, at the beginning!

Re-reading Dr. Seuss after all these years, I'm struck by just how little sense that book actually makes. But then I think: sense isn't really the point. Fun is. Imagination is. Dr. Seuss gets kids to read by showing them how fun, funny, and powerfully pleasurable language can be. He stumbles onto a rhyme and sticks with it, no matter how many new words he has to create to make it work, and he's pulsingly rhythmic. And indeed, his lines continue to resonate throughout my life in ways I often don't expect or even perhaps recognize. No matter where I go—there or here, here or there—Seuss and his funny things and his funny language are with me: if you ever doubt the staying power of poetry, just try to shake thoughts of Mr. Gump and going Bump Bump! on his seven hump Wump! Dr. Seuss is irresistible because the sensual, imaginative pleasures of language are irresistible.

So where does all of this fit into Phi Beta Kappa, you might ask? I'd like to suggest that those of us who live and work in the liberal arts and sciences, or the humanities, or the creative arts, ought to think hard about Dr. Seuss. How is it that so many young people first learn to describe their world through his joyous words, and yet grow up to disdain poetry? How is it that our society will happily sell Dr. Seuss to young children, but discourages its adolescents and young adults (and even old adults) from writing poetry of their own, or reading that of others? Why are children given license to be as imaginatively capacious as they can be, and the rest of us are shamed for being fanciful if we continue to believe that the word, to quote Wallace Stevens, really might constitute the making of the world?

Let me be clear: I do think that poetry is under attack. I think, in a larger sense, that the "love of learning" this society professes as its highest ideal is under attack. I also think, however, that these things have pretty much always been under attack—and I think they will endure nonetheless. As John Steinbeck once wrote: "Nothing good gets away." Steinbeck was writing about love, but he might also have been talking about poetry...in the words of our own Greg Brownerville, "Love and poetry are kindred, are they not?"

The thing about poetry—whether Dr. Seuss or John Keats—is that it centers and animates our human experience; poems are like little anchors, sparkling cerebral stars around which to shape the practice of our lives. Poems confirm that lurking truth we all suspect, but seldom confront face-to-face: namely, we are all the same, and always have been. They also celebrate and probe our differences. They don't automatically make us more tolerant or empathetic or even more kind, but they often can and do. By allowing us to imagine and desire beyond what our society, our parents, and even our own psyches tell us is possible, they do not merely change the way we see the world. They change the world, at least for us, at least for a moment.

Let me give you an example. A little over a month ago, I was walking back to Martin Hall around 2 a.m. from Meadows, after a late night of practicing Bach. I was somewhat pensive, and somewhat melancholic. I was thinking about my friends, and how we will probably be dispersed all over the country, if not the globe, in a few short months—and how the distance between us might strain or even break the close relationship we enjoy today. I was thinking, too, about love, and the fact that it is so irresistible and wonderful and yet also so very difficult, so painful.

And then, by happy chance, I looked up, and beheld the splendor of the moon, which was nearly full. In that moment I could think of nothing but Chaucer's great poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. One of the poem's finest moments comes just as Troilus realizes that Criseyde has left him for good. He stands out under the firmament and tells his sorrow to the moon: "He stood the brighte moone to byholde, / And al his sorwe he to the moone tolde."

In that moment, my life—my living, breathing, fleshy existence—converged with the literary life of Troilus, which Chaucer had so memorably imprinted on my mind and in my heart. Knowing that Troilus had contemplated his sorrows under the brightness of the moon before I had placed my own sorrows in context. It gave them precedent and validation and solace of the highest, most humane order. Chaucer, by pouring forth his own profound, imaginative humanity into his poem and his character, helped me to make sense of my own humanity.

Feeling, imagination, generosity, grace, love. It might seem strange or embarrassingly naive or even inappropriate to utter such words with such earnestness at so serious and intellectually sophisticated an event as this. But that is precisely why I feel so compelled to speak them today. The hot coals of poetry burn in my bosom, and that is a very good thing. Poetry—like all art, all disciplined study, all science—gives us, in the words of Mark Strand, "reasons for moving." These things to which we devote ourselves, which some people persist in ignoring or deriding, make our hearts, as A. R. Ammons memorably observes, move roomier.

In school, we're often taught to approach questions rationally, to exercise reason and objective methods of evaluation when solving problems—whether that be in the science lab or the history classroom. This strikes me as profoundly strange, and profoundly wrong. For I believe that what the liberal arts teach us perhaps most of all is that *feeling* and *thinking* and not so opposed as they

might initially appear. At its best, our thinking is animated by stalwart, emotional purpose. And our feelings, too, are aggressively honed by the empirical and rational sense of thought.

What I'm saying perhaps amounts to this: the imaginative and moral and fundamentally *human* stretching of our capacities of feeling that poetry produces is not unique to poetry. All art, all dedicated study, all good science has it, too. In other words, all of us here in this room have it, or at least ought to. I worry, though, that our hyper-technological, consumerist, and politically divided times distract us from our capacity to feel passionately or transparently. We forget about feeling, we become embarrassed to admit that we do it—and so we cease to feel, in the words of Wordsworth, “in the blood” or “along the heart.” We cease to feel at all, and with our feeling goes our imagination.

As self-professed artists, scientists, scholars, teachers, and intellectuals, this is a very bad thing. Edward Said has said that “the role of the intellectual...[is] to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits...to reexamine rules and institutions.” It's distressingly easy to become comfortable in our lives, to forget the stakes of the work that we do—especially in a world that derides and disrespects the written and spoken word at every turn, a world that claims to revere science, but respects it only when convenient.

We should remember people like Sophie Scholl, the German student and anti-Nazi activist, who was executed, at the age of 21, some 75 years and 11 days ago, for her role in the White Rose resistance group. We should remember our duty as self-professed intellectuals and humanists to care, to feel, and to express the zealous strength of our emotional convictions in the seriousness with which we take our work. Good reading, and better writing, really can move and shake this world—especially when propelled by the calm desperation and quiet rage we cannot help but feel when we look out and behold its brute injustices. As Toni Morrison has written: “There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language.”

This is not, ultimately, about anger or resentment, but about love for our fellow people, and a genuine belief that there is no such thing as a lesser person. It is about, as Henry David Thoreau puts it, “getting your life by loving.” To again quote Steinbeck, it is “an outpouring of everything good in you,” whatever it is you finally choose to pour yourself into. Or, in the words of John Berryman, finding ways to make ourselves “alive with surplus love,” and then channel that love into the world with all the impetuosity and ambition we can muster.

I'd like to close with a reminder of where I began: with Dr. Seuss and his funny things. The title of my talk—Life's Too Short Not to Eat Pie—comes from my father (the poetry bit is my addition). It's the title of the book he wants to write, someday, sometime, somehow. I hope he will—perhaps I will even have the honor of helping him.

I think of my dad's phrase today because it reminds me that despite the uncertainty, tragedy, and difficulty we encounter in this world, there is always something to be enjoyed, relished, and

cherished about it, too. Funny, wonderful, and lovely things really are everywhere around us. In fact, this room is full of them, at this very moment. The way I see things, if we cannot always have pie, we can at least have poetry—poems are short, and once in our heads, they cannot be taken away from us. And if poetry ever fails, we still have each other. That is the humanist vision in which my liberal education at SMU has taught me to believe: that life's too short not to love other people, not to take the time to recognize the enduring mystery and miracle of human existence, and to do what we can to make that existence better for all of us.

A final note—I promise this time—on imagination. John Keats, one of the most imaginative beings ever to have walked this earth, has this to say about what he called the “poetical Character”: “it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated...It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation.”

If I could issue one challenge to you today, it would be to remember the poetical Character you all already possess, and to cherish it. Nurture it. Do not be ashamed of it. Speculate. Feel. Explore the light and the dark; reach beyond yourself, into the hearts and minds of others.

And then do your work, and do it well, as you already have been doing. I often get intimidated whenever I visit the 3rd floor of Fondren library, and behold all the glorious books that have already been written: what more could I ever hope to add? And yet, like my father, we all have books to write, books the world may just direly need. That is our job: to write, experiment, think, feel, teach, love. Let's get to it.

Congratulations again, and thank you.