

CONVOCATION REMARKS

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I want to welcome you to a year of new beginnings, a year filled with hope and growth for you, for Chatham, and if you've been paying attention to the news lately, the United States. As you join (or rejoin) the intellectual community of Chatham and meet others from different areas of the country and the world, it may find your own identity challenged. How do you know who are you when things are changing so quickly here and in the world? How do you *matter* to this community? How do you keep your own life in balance with so many new classes, friends, and responsibilities?

I have two relatively simple things to say to you this afternoon, and one of them comes out of a belief that the one thing that can never be taken away from you is your voice and your particular way of seeing and moving through the world. That doesn't mean you shouldn't accept challenges to your ways of seeing—it's crucial to your growth as a citizen that you do so—but you also need to feel at peace with who you are and where you come from. And I'm here to tell you that even if you come from a troubled family or difficult life experiences, you can turn that around.

When I was a first year student in college, I was ashamed of my background. I was ashamed that my father had died young, an alcoholic, that my brother had also died young of a drug overdose. I was ashamed of my family's poverty, of the way we talked as natives of New Orleans. We sounded, I thought, like mobsters. We sounded, I thought, like people who had never studied English. But as I developed as a writer, I came to see that my most genuine poems occurred when I spoke in a voice that embraced my roots, that I moved more surely through the world when I acknowledged and embraced my wonderful but screwed up family, my gorgeous but messy city, and yes, even the funny way we talked. And three years ago, when Katrina struck and took more lives and homes from my family it was my deep sense of who I am and where I come from, my deep love of that place and the damaged

family that helped me navigate that disaster, and helped me to write about it in ways that I hope spoke to others who had also suffered.

Getting Rid of the Accent

I thought I had gotten rid of it
 after I moved to Texas: speech classes
 and twelve years in another state, but I'd
 still fall back into it like into the gutter
 whenever I visited, even on the phone,
 whenever my mother called, forgetting
 I was a college graduate, forgetting
 I was an English major, saying things
 like *wheah ya at sweethawk*, or
dat doan mean nuttn, ya awta seen
da way she pawks dat caw, the sounds
 I was fed like milk as a child, the *aw*
 sound predominating as if it was just
 too much work to pronounce the *r*.

I tried hard to get rid of it,
 to make my voice sound
 as if I had nothing to do with
 the black smell of the Lake,
 nothing to do with my mother's
 beans and rice,
 nothing to do with my father's breath,
 my brother's track marks.

Once, after listening to me speak,
 a friend snickered, "I can tell
 you're from New Orleans
 by the way you say *room* and *leg*."
 I couldn't hear it at first, couldn't hear
 that I was saying *rum* for *room*, and *layg*
 for *leg*. It was the hardest part
 of getting rid of the accent,
rum still sounds more right than *room*,
 gets the job done quicker,
 with less effort. *Leg* was hard too
 because *layg* was in me like blood.
 It was a word my mother used a lot,
get your laygs off there, Sheryl,
close your laygs, Sheryl, wash
out the tub when you shave your

lays, Sheryl,
 but I practiced
 and practiced it, the short *e*
 of *leg* and the long *o* of *room*,
 squinching my mouth
 into unnatural positions,
 working my way from
 the voice of my father,
 the blood of my brother,

I was not going to sink
 as my mother had, lower
 and lower into this spongy
 land, I would not have my words
 sound like the drunken streets,
 the ditch-water
 that runs by our house still,
 infectious, addictive,

when I sing of this place I love
 unreasonably more than life
 itself, I want the words to rise
 strong and true, separate.

So, keep your way of talking, don't try to sound like everyone else. Listen and learn from your teachers and friends, grow, but don't forget your roots, they will sustain you when times are hard.

The second and final thing I want to say to you has to do with joy.

Yes, you need to get to your classes on time, *yes* you need to do your classwork and participate in discussions. *Yes*, you need to think of yourself as a citizen in this community. But those things are not necessarily goals to aim for in and of themselves. These are *side effects* of loving what you do, *side-effects* of being passionate about your work and studies. You won't have to remind yourself to do your work if you've found a way to make it a joyful experience, something in which you really take pleasure. You won't need to remind yourself to speak up in class if you have found a way to love what you're doing. Find ways to feel *joy*, to feel exquisitely *present* in your classes, doing your reading, writing and calculations. I'm

using the word *joy* and not happiness because happiness too, should not be a goal in and of itself but is rather a side effect of a life lived joyfully, a life lived and felt fully. Follow your joy because you want to end up, when you graduate, doing something that you love.

When I was a sophomore in college I was conflicted about my major. I had started out in English, because I loved reading and I love language. Then I felt guilty because it seemed like too much fun. It seemed like I should suffer more. So I changed my major the second semester to nutrition. Now that was hard, all the science courses, learning about why my entire family was obese and why every food I loved was bad for me. I did well for a year, but when, at the end of my sophomore year I was finishing my last humanities core course (a literature) class I'd take as a science major, I became inconsolably sad. I went home at the end of that term miserable, and, after much soul-searching, wound up becoming an English major again the following term, *following my joy*. And here I am over 30 years later never having regretted that change, still full of joy every time I read a book or write a poem or teach a class that gets others to love reading and writing.

The truth is, I would probably have been a miserable, sad, Nazi nutritionist. Maybe a little thinner, but not as happy and plump as I am now. ☺

Let me end by reading you a poem called "Joy." It's a love poem, but also a poem about being so present in the world that you feel filled with it.

Joy
-for Teake

Some days we wake, filled with sudden song
at the body of the beloved
spooned next to us,
stunned at the way the sun fills us
like butter, that there is wild mint
and thyme, sweet clover and honey
from creamy combs. There is desire,
there are the lips and hands

of the beloved, there is breath
and voice.

There are reasons for joy that birds
surely cannot know;
the moment before the pledge
that binds us to each other,
the moment our child
takes its first breath,
cries its first song of light,
and if we are lucky,
the moment even as one
slips to death.

here we are so full with joy
that we cannot stop singing from tree
or fence post, here we are carried
by sheer happiness,
song thrusts us out to sky.