

## Graduation Speech 2009

Teaching at CRMS is satisfying, intellectually engaging, interesting, and varied - all of the things that give one immense job satisfaction. However, at the same time that teaching here is satisfying, at the back of my mind is always the question, "**How do I know if genuine learning has taken place?**" At times the answer to that question seems completely unknowable - even though we have test scores and college admissions statistics. It seems unknowable because it seems impossible to objectively measure **genuine** learning - and by "**genuine** learning" I mean - life changing, fundamental shifts in understanding and engaging with the world, with ideas, with other people, and with oneself.

This year I've taken to baking bread and as profoundly as the act of studying literature is most often located on an intellectual plane, the act of baking bread is located firmly in the physical world.

You can touch the ingredients that go into making bread - the flour and water and salt and yeast which make dough. You can smell the earthy aroma of dough as it rises. The crunchy yellow cornmeal that I press the dough into before baking, and the poppy seeds that I sprinkle on top of the dough remind me of fine grains of sand and of earth itself. The smell of bread as it bakes fills our home in the Solar Dorm and it is intoxicating. Bread needs to be cut open and buttered, and if the bread is fresh out of the oven the butter will melt as you spread it. When bread is finished baking you know it - you can tell it by the golden color of the crust and the hollow thud that bread makes when you tap it. Finally, you can eat bread. Bread gives you physical sustenance. This is particularly satisfying because, as an English teacher, although I can hold a book in my hands, I can't hold ideas in my hands - or necessarily know who has had a **genuine** learning experience.

When I came to work at CRMS I didn't know what to expect from the students here. (For those of you who don't know, this is my second year teaching here - this year's graduating seniors were the first group of students that I taught here). Every school is different and every group of students has their own unique personality. At CRMS, I found the hardest working, most intellectually curious group of students that I have ever worked with. I found students who were passionate about learning and about asking and answering questions. I found students became truly involved in discussion, in examining stories and ideas and figuring out how those stories and ideas connected back to their own lives.

Stories are the vehicle on which learning travels in English classes. Whatever else great art is, it is most often about stories. Why do we love telling stories, hearing stories, reading stories, and acting out stories? I think that we respond to stories because they are an intrinsic part of what makes us human - in some deep sense I believe that we recognize the truths, the lessons, and the undeniable humanity that stories embody - as

well as the profound answers or at least profound questions that they offer us about our existence here on earth.

When I started teaching here I was deeply impressed with how students here are willing to ask difficult questions and then fight their way to the answers, or at least to more questions. Questioning is a way of trying to understand life - of trying to understand what it means to be human and how to be human. There is something really special about having a time, a place, and space in which to sit down every day and talk about life's BIG QUESTIONS - with students who think for themselves.

Sometimes people roll their eyes when I tell them that I am an English teacher and comment in sympathy that "it must be difficult grading all of those papers"...OR... "I could never be an English teacher" FOLLOWED BY..."it must be difficult grading all of those papers." Although it is sometimes time consuming, the truth is that reading student work is almost always interesting. In fact, it is often exhilarating to read writing that is intellectually deep - it is writing that I know students have labored over, crafted, at times cried in frustration about, and in the end polished into something truly meaningful.

Joyce Carol Oates described the act of writing as the, "thought of words on paper as expressions of the soul, the voice on paper a silent rendering of the writer's own voice." By "own voice" I believe that she means the voice of the true or inner self.

As a teacher – an English teacher – I feel that I have been privileged to have been allowed to listen to your voices, to see your inner thoughts and inner worlds through your writing and through the thoughts and experiences that you have shared in class.

My introduction to CRMS was on Wilderness - the hiking trips that all new students (and faculty) do in the surrounding mountains. Like you, I spent ten days with my Wilderness group, and on a couple of those days we weathered terrifying thunder storms. I remember one night in particular. It was raining heavily and the students were on all on solo - flashes of lightening would periodically light up the landscape as bright as day. The thunder that accompanied that lightening would explode and then roll and reverberate through the mountains. That thunder was the loudest, most frightening, and humbling thunder that I've ever experienced. In a burst of insight – a sudden rush of knowing that can sometimes come with a connection to one's own mortality – I understood - I knew - why the ancient Greeks had placed Zeus at the top of the pantheon of their Gods. This is the kind of real world experience and insight that we all have on trips here. I see those kinds of experiences as creating a connection between intellect and emotion – between the ability to think and the ability to feel and empathize. I believe that when we use both our emotions and our intellect we make the wisest choices.

As I was writing this speech and thinking about this year's seniors, and thinking about what learning looks like, and thinking about the satisfactions of baking bread, the saying, "we do not live by bread alone" occurred to me. I realized that the experiences that we share here at CRMS - in the classroom and in the wilderness - are our intellectual and emotional sustenance - in the same way that we need bread to live, and we need bread for

our physical sustenance, we need to have real intellectual and emotional experiences to be truly alive. When we go on adventures together and work together, we sustain each other. We cannot live without these connections and experiences - without them, somewhere in our souls we die a little bit; we become less than we could be; we become less than our best selves. Figuratively speaking, these intellectual and emotional connections are our daily bread if you will, the bread that we break together every day.

My question today was, "**How do we know when genuine learning has taken place?**"

**When intelligent, motivated, curious young people connect with ideas, with the world, and with each other, then they are learning about life in a real way. This sustains me. And it tells me that genuine learning is taking place here.**

In many ways you are beginning your lives anew. You will go from here, most of you to colleges, some of you on adventures outside of the academic world, almost all of you away from family and friends, and you will truly become adults in the coming years.

You will challenge yourselves to find work that you love to do, you will fall in love, and most of you have families of one kind or another. You will become adults; autonomous in every sense of the word. You will experience life's joys as well as life's sorrows as adults you will reflect on the joys and sorrows of your youth.

Go out into the world as your best selves, as the people that I know you to be, as people who care deeply about your friends and families, about ideas and questions, and about the world and how to make it better. Treat others with compassion, treat yourselves with compassion. Ask difficult questions of yourselves and others. Live with integrity. If you have children, love them and spend as much time as you can with them.

One of North America's last known oral storytellers died a few years ago. He couldn't read or write, but for nearly a century he carried stories in his memory which, added together, equal the length of "The Odyssey." The person who recorded and transcribed his stories asked him how he could possibly memorize them all. He told her that to remember a story, you had to "write it on your heart." The things that you have experienced here and genuinely learned from - that you know are valuable and meaningful to you - I hope that you will inscribe those things inside of yourselves. If you do that, then those experiences and lessons will always be there for you.