



# High School Graduation

June 10, 2012

Speech by John Burghardt, Faculty Speaker

The first inkling I had of what I had to say came in the staff room.

You must wonder what we talk about there. Sometimes it's about you.

Sometimes it's about spinach dip.

This time it was about the separation of powers. Sue Ikenberry was making a point about the way the Constitution lives in us: Her point was that the president takes a risk when he scolds the Supreme Court—even when the Supreme Court would seem to deserve scolding—because people care about the separation of powers, whether or not they ever use the phrase. I saw in the paper that weekend that Sue had been a couple of days ahead of the pundits, but even when we were talking I could see that she was doing something she does, something amazing: Making a page of the newspaper open up like a page in a textbook to show how history keeps teaching the lessons of history.

I said something of the kind. She cocked her head and said, "Well.... I don't read as much history as I used to, but I do read the same history—over and over." We laughed. "Yeah that's our life." But walking away I realized that our lives of re-reading are a little different. The stories Sue keeps sending through her mind seem to reveal something stable in their depths, their deepest grain, the abiding principles behind what happens—and that make things happen. I read the same poems and plays over and over, but they keep changing, maybe as I change.

When I was in my 20s, still resisting the idea, but also facing the fact that I was going to be a teacher, there was a poem I loved, by William Butler Yeats, a poem about school.

"I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;  
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;  
The children learn to cipher and to sing,

To study reading-books and histories,  
To cut and sew, be neat in everything  
In the best modern way —the children's eyes  
In momentary wonder stare upon  
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.”

Sixty. At G.D.S. he'd still be coaching. Here are the lines that used to make my hair stand up:

“Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.”

If I had to be a teacher, this is what I wanted to teach: that our labor didn't have to be torment. Poems by William Butler Yeats, the separation of powers. Calculus. Among those monuments of unaging intellect, a person could have a pretty good time.

What I wanted to bring to any school that would hire me was the sheer delight of reading, thinking, and writing. The joy of it.

What I found of course—what all of us found, was that we couldn't bring it because it was already here. You brought it to us.

A few weeks ago, on a day that began for the faculty like most days, hauling our books and bookbags up from the parking garage, jingling our carkeys, on a word, you turned us into a dancing flash mob. Celine, Annie, and Chloe taught us to dance.

Andro and Julian taught me to freestyle—to spit dope rhymes to a hip-hop beat. Don't worry. I'm not going to actually...But I want to say a few words about the Freestyle Club. For three years I have been its faculty advisor. And my advice has been, "Keep the door closed." I particularly did not want the Development Office to get wind of you. They would love you too much. A dozen clean-cut kids sitting desks in a history classroom, big smiles, bobbing heads, one person starts to do this...everybody else laughs. It's a calendar shoot—boys and girls together, and even if over the years there seems to be an ethnic advantage in being Croatian, the group is notably diverse. The visuals are perfect. The soundtrack though could be tough. Because when fifteen-

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and sixteen- and seventeen-year-old minds freely associate, and the only really pressing decorum is the beat, they can wander into perilous territory. Though even here, even transgressing, we have Anthony Head to guide us.

Anthony is an amazing improvisational artist, and he says some amazing things—so funny and so wrong. Hard to be laughing so hard when it's so hard not to laugh, but every time, just when the pangs of conscience and the pangs of laughter were starting to pull in opposite directions, Anthony would save us, would correct himself with a deft politically correct disclaimer, and a little homily straight out of freshman seminar, all in two bars, all on the beat, and it would all rhyme.

You can learn how to freestyle there—just show up every Thursday at 2:45, but you can learn a lot more: how to live across difference—with amazement, in torrents of laughter, with respect and accountability all around the cirque, also love.

It's hard not to learn at this school, but maybe we learn most by teaching. I teach Shakespeare and between plays read maybe three background books a year, but the sentences laden with insight that I'm carrying into the summer, and will carry into class next year's class, are mostly not from Stephen Greenblatt, but from Isaac, Jordan, Molly, Andro, Isabel, the unending sentences of Aaron Slater...

I teach Creative Writing and know a lot about it, noble accents and lucid inescapable rhythms, but I also know that Rachel, Kali, Alexandra, Alec, Jude, ... Maria Paz, Nicole, Courtney, Lisa ... Conor, Daryl, Riley ... are involved in what I know.

That poem by Yeats has a big finish:

“Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

I'd like to go out on that line, but it's the wrong image. Yeats' dancer is a soloist. Celine, Chloe, and Annie do ensemble work—a little like Fata. What we do most days though is touch dance, you move we move. That's the way I've been dancing here for a long time, and I'm about to sit down any minute. And any minute, you're going to dance out of here, with your genius and your joy, into a world that badly needs it.