

No Green Berries or Leaves

President Steele, faculty, members of the Board of Trustees, graduates, families, and friends, it is an honor to be speaking at the Muskingum College 2007 Graduate Commencement.

Congratulations, graduates, on your significant academic achievements. You give witness to the vision of the Muskingum College graduate teacher education program, which is to train educators to empower all students.

While developing this commencement address, I thought of Joseph Campbell's mystical sentiments relating to following one's bliss. I then realized that your journey as educators and the sacrifices you have made to earn a master's degree evidences your courage to follow your heart.

Your chosen path to help others learn is spiritually centered, and I think of you as holy people, not unlike members of the clergy who follow an inner calling. As you grow in your profession, society will hold you in high esteem and trust your authority.

By nurturing students, you are also influencing their families and their communities in many, many ways. You will be blessed for your professionalism and courage many times over.

Tonight, I want to share with you the struggles and successes of one student, a child with special needs. That person is speaking to you now, and he became successful in spite of, or maybe because of, a learning disability.

I was educated at a time when little was known about learning problems, and my 14 years in school were distorted by undiagnosed dyslexia. I learned to trust those teachers who encouraged me to persevere. Now, as a mature adult looking back, I recognize that I've been driven by an inner need to be educated. I've acted on that need, and over the years learned how to overcome the effects of my learning challenges.

I grew up in an Irish-American household, the second oldest of nine children. My parents promoted success in school as our solemn duty, one notch below being a good Catholic.

I remember my mother saying, "The better educated you are, the better you'll be able to help the less fortunate." In my adolescent mind, every time I heard that point of view, I felt bad, thinking I wouldn't be able to help people because I was stupid in school.

I am in the process of writing a book about my journey as a studio artist working in glass and, to my delight, I discovered that my publisher, Dr. Jerry McDonald, the founding president of McDonald and Woodward Publishing Company, is a Muskingum College graduate.

During the research for my book, I retrieved my grammar school records, and was both surprised and saddened to learn that my first IQ score was very low. My grammar school years were not that difficult, because I was nearly invisible in the large classes that averaged 43 to 45 students.

In the 1950's the good sisters of Saint Mary's Parochial School managed their classrooms with loving kindness and a wooden pointer, and if you were identified as a poor student but were well-behaved, you were left alone. This contributed to my failing the third-grade and being put on probation in the fifth-grade, which resulted in being tutored on school nights by my mother. My poor performance in school was responsible for my having low self-esteem, and as sad as it sounds, I was jealous of the smart kids.

Reading was like torture. I was constantly being corrected for repeating the same mistakes. Simple words like *was* I read as *saw* and I couldn't distinguish *N* from *M*, among other challenges.

In math, I transposed numbers, and the most embarrassing deficiency was not being able to distinguish right from left. In the seventh grade, I made my right index finger raw by repeatedly scratching it in order to feel my right hand. My parents thought I had a nervous tick and constantly told me to quit picking at my finger.

My mother had me read poetry aloud, which I learned to love. My mom would first recite the poem and then I would read it. With my good memorization skills, I could sound out the words and connect them to the rhythmic flow of the poem. Often, I could identify the poem's idea, and took great satisfaction in my small success in reading.

Outside of school, I was fascinated with nature, especially the native flowers, and I treasure my memories of working in the garden with my father and grandfather. I loved being a Boy Scout and learning how to be self-reliant in the woods. As an artist, these childhood memories became the bedrock of my creative vision, and I've been enlivened by feelings of God's primal sanctity in nature. Like Walt Whitman, I believe that this timeless quality touches our souls.

High school was comfortable in a strange way because no one had any academic expectations for me. The courses that I loved most were the industrial arts, and I would earn Bs in wood and metal shop.

You know sometimes, one little event, one small experience, can make a profound difference in the course of a life. You educators will have a multitude of opportunities to provide meaningful experiences for your students. One such experience happened to me during high school. Mrs. Reid, my English teacher for three years running, would often read books out loud to the class for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. Mrs. Reid's reading out loud allowed me to experience the classics in a way that I couldn't have done otherwise.

Years later, in the mid-1970s, the Franklin Mint, a direct market retailer, was offering *The Greatest Books Ever Written* on audio cassettes. I ordered the series and became enthralled as I listened to the quarterly installments. I credit Mrs. Reid with introducing me to a great joy that actually changed my life. She cultivated a love of literature in me that celebrates the power of the spoken and written word. The classics have challenged me to take creative risks and seek out the same depth of human emotion in my work that I feel in great books.

In 1972, I left a factory environment to be on the creative side. By good fortune, I turned on the radio and heard an interview with Olympic gold medalist Bruce Jenner. Jenner was discussing how, as a poor student and reader in middle school, he was diagnosed with dyslexia. Fascinated by what I was listening to, I stopped working and focused on every word that was being said. It was a "Eureka" moment because I realized Jenner was talking about me. After all these year, I had discovered the reason I was a poor student, and this meant I wasn't stupid. After learning that there was a neurological basis for my inability to process information like most people, I knew my passion could outwit my brain, and I could be successful with what God gave me.

A short time later I happened to tune to a program on National Public Radio that was discussing excellence in the arts. The speaker was discussing art-making and said, "In order to do excellent work, you have to know what excellence is." She went on to say, "That means excellence not only in one's field, but in a general sense." She recommended experiencing classical music, literature, and art history. For me, this was a powerful thought.

This comment was an epiphany for me. Thereafter I sought out great works with which to educate and inform myself and my art.

A year later, a major art exhibit came to the Philadelphia Art Museum. The French-born American conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp was being featured in a retrospective exhibition, and I became excited when hearing the publicity declare him to be one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. I thought this would be a great opportunity to experience significant art.

So my wife Pat and I, with the children in tow, arrived at the museum Sunday morning when admission was free. The exhibit was crowded with people, and I initially felt upbeat, only to become frustrated a short time later. I was looking at weird stuff, like a stool with a bicycle wheel mounted on top of it, positioned next to a urinal that Duchamp declared to be a sculpture. I didn't have a clue as to what I was looking at.

Even after Pat read a few of the curatorial statements, I found myself perplexed seeing these cultured people enjoying the exhibit, but I wasn't getting it. This conceptual art made absolutely no sense to me and for years I remained curious about why and what it was that I was missing in Duchamps's work.

Now fast-forward to the late 1980s, when a major intellectual breakthrough occurred for me. I became a member of the nonprofit organization, "Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic," and my world expanded with access to the organization's library of more than 90,000 unabridged books on tape.

Two special books, "How to Read and Why" and "The Western Canon" both by Harold Bloom, gave me a seemingly endless reading list. These two thought-provoking books introduced me to great literature that celebrates the mysteries surrounding sex, death, and God, which have become the primary themes woven into my artistic vision.

For a person who once couldn't read, I now can say I've read from Homer to Walt Whitman to James Joyce, and I enjoy discussing my favorite books from the nearly 200 classics I've read.

After I finish listening to each book, I ceremoniously place a copy on my living room library shelf to symbolize a victory over past challenges. And I now celebrate Duchamp's artistic concepts as creative opportunities to layer myth and ethereal ideas into my floral designs.

It is not uncommon to meet talented studio artists who have experienced poor academic performance due to disinterest in school or to learning disabilities. I love how creativity allows people to reach their full potential in life and how this fascinating ingredient distinguishes humans from other living creatures.

You are the gifted and talented teachers who will inspire young students, especially those having difficulties, to never give up because in the end they will learn that perseverance can help them reach their full potential.

Let me reiterate what you already know. Do what you love by listening to your heart and understanding why it feels right. I think it is ironic that my learning challenges gave me the emotional strength to compensate for my shortcomings and to grow into artistic authority. It is also interesting to know how my low self-esteem has motivated me to "get it right" in a way that most knowledgeable people would consider obsessive.

Finally, my fondest memories as a child are picking blueberries in North Attleboro, Massachusetts. When I would take my blueberries home, my mother would look into the container and say, "Paul, you're a good blueberry picker because you don't have any green berries or leaves in your bucket." Then she would bake the best blueberry pie ever.

In closing, I would like to share with you the following poem titled, “No Green Berries or Leaves,” which is dedicated to my Mother’s memory:

No Green Berries or Leaves

Walking north
along the tracks
past Lily pond,
thistles mark
the narrow path
through grass
moist in morning dew.

To the blueberry woods,
where filling a quart container
brought praise
for no green berries or leaves,
as a mother smile
on a child’ labor.

Now gathering blueberries
like a prayer,
the first taste
a communion,
the mystery shared.

I will end by saying that as educators you will be connecting to potential greatness daily; know that your kindness and thoughtfulness can be a major inspiration to young lives.

You also may become influential policy-makers, so please protect the fine and industrial arts in our public education systems.

Today has been a high honor in my life – receiving this Doctor of Fine Arts honorary degree. My parents are smiling down on this day.

Thank you, and God bless you, the good people of Muskingum College.