

SLOWING DOWN

Billy Collins (appointed United States Poet Laureate on June 21, 2001)

Choate Rosemary Commencement Address, June 3, 2001

Faculty and staff, relatives and friends, graduates of 2001:

The commencement address is a tricky genre. To be asked to give one is an honor, of course, especially if the invitation comes from such a prestigious school as this one, but at the same time it puts the speaker in the awkward position of having to dispense sage advice to a group of relative strangers, not to mention some of their strange relatives. This is only the second one I have delivered, but I have listened to many, and I remember distinctly only one reliable piece of wisdom. It was from a college commencement. The speaker lowered her voice to an ominous level and said to the assembled students that life in the real world was not like college; it was like high school. Now if that's true, in terms of sheer survival skills you are better prepared to face the world today than you will be four years from now. So I would urge you as you move on to college, don't let them beat the high school out of you.

This year you have invited a poet and an English professor to give the address. I assume you were aware of the dangers. Such a person might forget to write down the date. Such a person might decide to compose the address in verse, say six or seven hundred lines of heroic couplets. Then there is the professorial tendency toward excessive analysis. Trial lawyers say that for every professor in the jury box, add one extra day of deliberation. Professors, remember, are the ones who ask "Well, that's fine in practice, but will it work in theory?" Plus, today's English professor views any species of writing, including the grocery list, as a potential act of literature. Every scrap of discourse or occasional outburst such as a commencement address is, therefore, considered a distinct literary type, like the epic or the ode, and a poet-slash-professor might even want to take stock of the conventions of this genre, which is, I'm afraid, what I am now going to do.

Some of the conventions of the commencement address are too conventional even to mention, but I will anyway. It's conventional, of course, to start out by examining the etymology of the word "commencement." Those of you with the benefit of a classical education know it is from a Latin word meaning "to sit on folding chairs under a tent trying to avoid getting beamed by a beach ball." Then there is what might be called the Report from the Front. Here graduating seniors are offered a description of the world that awaits them; the imagery ranges from the idyllic to the purgatorial, but always there is the metaphor of the Road—Road with a capital R— as if your years of schooling had been nothing but a long, unnecessarily elaborate entrance ramp. What else? It is conventional to announce that the past is behind you and the future lies ahead. Presumably you know that from one of your classes, perhaps a history seminar. And it is so conventional to refer to Emerson, that you get the impression he wrote his essays with the sole purpose of providing

commencement speakers with inspiring quotations, often involving the image of a Road.

I am going to avoid as many of these conventions as possible. I am not going to give you advice that I have not followed myself I am not going to tell you anything I am not really sure of, which means, I'm afraid, I'm not going to tell you much. Vladimir Nabokov, when he taught in America sometimes started his classes by saying that really he knew only two things: one, that life is beautiful, and two, that life is sad. And finally, I am not going to wave a banner over your heads and deliver a call to action. I am not going to ask you to rush bravely into the fray of life. In fact, I am going to do the opposite. I'm going to deliver a call for slowing down, for quietness, for stopping by woods, even for a kind of creative loafing, for taking a moment to observe, as Whitman did in the opening lines of *Song of Myself*, "a spear of summer grass."

Why would I ask you to slow down? Simply because the chorus of the world is urging you and will continue to urge you to go faster. We live today in what Paul Virilio had called "an empire of speed," ruled over by the gods of acceleration and driven by the engines of efficiency. Decades ago, we experienced a physical acceleration—a speeding up of things—cars, planes, even food. And now we are in the midst of a more subtle kind of acceleration—a speeding up of information where facts and opinions are judged as much for their velocity, as for their truth or value. We have all heard the advantages of this new rapidity, tiresomely celebrated. Instead of having to visit a library—a task that might require putting on a jacket and starting up a car—we now click along a keyboard and instantly summon what we seek onto the screen before us. But without wanting to sound like a crank or a Luddite, I want to suggest—to warn you really—that the desire for speed is never to be fully trusted. Indeed, the wish to have everything go faster will always end in frustration because, short of the speed of light, there is no end to speed. Ask any workaholic. Ask any methadine addict for that matter. Ask yourself the next time you are cursing your computer for taking four seconds instead of half a second to fetch a little stick of information for you. Or ask science writer James Gleick, whose most recent book bears the title *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*.

Some of your time here at Choate was spent in a swift current of information: and by the time you find yourself on another spring day about to graduate from college, the pace of information will have accelerated even more—perhaps within paradigms we cannot now imagine. To grow up in this kind of world is to feel the pace of your life pick up speed, to feel lured into a hectic race. Why it has been called "the rat race" you will find out soon enough. Someone said that even writers are part of that race. It's just that they can't see the other rats.

The danger in all this haste is that we ourselves will accelerate to keep pace with the speed of information, and in doing so, we will lose sight of the real life around us, of

the discreet moments of our experience, and even of the natural world, the earth which holds us in its hands.

How can we avoid being so caught up in an information frenzy that we forget who and where we really are? How can we widen our apertures so that we can see more than just that spot on the horizon, that unattainable dot we are always rushing toward? How can we preserve a sense of mindfulness? The answer, as usual, lies in plain view.

Although teaching and learning themselves have been motorized by the hyper-pace of information, it is good to remember that the true tempo of education has always involved a deceleration. You can actually feel it as you walk onto this campus, a shift from the urgencies and demands of the world to the more leisurely pace of discussion, the cadence of study and reflection, the seeming stop-time of engrossed thought. Here, you are offered not just the advantage of a passport into the realm of public life, but also the opportunity to learn the value of modulation, the habits of analysis and speculation. Here lies an antidote to what the cardiologist Meyer Friedman calls "the hurry sickness." This is the more relaxed pace of learning and thought that I hope you can sustain even after your formal education has ended. And I need only to touch upon the intrinsic joys of idleness. Milan Kundera, in a book appropriately titled *Slowness*, bemoans our contemporary fascination with a "speed that is noncorporeal, non-material, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed." In a wistful aside, Kundera wonders, "Where have they gone, the amblers of yesteryear? Where have they gone, those loafing heroes of folk-song, those vagabonds who roam from one mill to another and bed down under the stars?" Time is not just money—sorry, Ben Franklin—time is way of telling us if we are moving at the right pace through the life that has been given us. One of the most basic pleasures of poetry is the way it slows us down. The intentionality of its language gives us pause. Its formal arrangement checks our haste. In his poem "The Garden," Andrew Marvell uses the phrase "a green thought in a green shade" to describe the mind at peace with its natural environment. Emerson (I know I promised) tells us to be a "transparent eyeball" as we look at the world, that is, to see it without prejudice or motive, without the need to twist things into a shape that makes it more convenient for us to proceed. What I am really saying to you today is what all teachers say in the classroom: pay attention! But I am asking you to pay attention not always just to what is on the blackboard, but what is out the window. That bird on a wire. That cloud. Pay attention to the natural world. Pay attention to your day dreams. Pay attention to what is on the periphery, for that is where the small wonders often reside. Don't let the turbulence of public life overwhelm the sanctity of your inner life. It is no accident that probably the best-known poem ever written by an American poet is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in which a man not only slows down but comes to a halt in the middle of nowhere on a cold night to do nothing but stand and stare into woods. His horse thinks the man is crazy

and shakes his bells. But we know that he is engaged in a vital activity, one that distinguishes him from animals. He is stopping to experience his own existence.

Poets from Wordsworth of the English countryside to the haiku masters of Japan insist on the importance of slowing down to look at what is before our eyes. They agree that paying attention is not only a self-sustaining activity—a “Wise passivity” as Wordsworth calls it—but ultimately a form of prayer. And this prayer is a prayer of Gratitude.

I am now standing on the brink of the biggest commencement address cliché of all, the one which asks graduates to just about fall to their knees in gratitude for the abundance of things and privileges that they enjoy. It is the kind of gratitude that parents wish they heard more often. “That was a wonderful meal, mother and father, and by the way, thank you for working so hard to pay for all this terrific furniture and to keep our house so well-heated.” You don’t hear that kind of expression on a daily basis, even though a life of privilege that lacks gratitude is surely a life lacking in grace.

I will let my feelings about material gratitude be expressed by a Persian proverb that I heard by way of the Irish dramatist Sean O’Casey. The proverb says that in order to be happy a person must earn two pennies: one penny to buy bread and another penny to buy a lily. If you make only the one penny for bread, you are merely surviving, living hand to mouth. We know there are many people in this world and in this very country who have only that one penny, and others in more dire straits who have no penny at all. The penny for bread is the penny for necessities, the penny for the lily is the penny for pleasure. O’Casey said it was his life-time goal, as a man of social conscience, to see that as many people as possible got that second penny. The penny for joy. To follow his lead would be to move in the direction of doing something unambiguously good.

But the gratitude I would like you to think about today (and tomorrow and the next day) is a deeper, more basic kind of gratitude, an existential gratitude that can be felt by anyone, no matter how few or many pennies they have—I mean the gratitude for being alive. The vibrant, breathing life we experience every moment of the day is the easiest thing to take for granted because we are always standing in the middle of our own existence and cannot easily see it as something that we possess, as a gift. Perhaps the bare, irreducible fact of your personal existence can be appreciated only by imagining its opposite—non-existence. Imagine for a moment that the chair you are sitting in is suddenly empty, nothing but a neatly folded gown and a cap with a tassel. You do not exist. Your name will not be called today. And now....guess what? ... YOU'RE BACK! sitting there among your friends. About to graduate from a really good school to boot! That should be enough to make you fall to your knees. We should not have to survive major surgery or a near fatal car accident to feel this most elemental, yet most elusive form of gratitude.

I have just one more point, and it has to do with the connection between slowing down and memory. When I teach classes and workshops in poetry, I have my students memorize—probably because I am afraid they will quickly forget everything I have said to them. In this way, at least they will exit my class with a little wheel of Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson spinning in their heads. Memorization suffers a low status as a pedagogic tool these days. It is commonly devalued as old-fashioned as the little red schoolhouse because the emphasis today is on the externalization of information, the shift of knowledge from the self to a cyber-dimension that exists somewhere outside of us. Most of us don't even know where. This emphasis has a corrosive effect on memory. The sudden accessibility of information deadens memory and may even make its functions seem obsolete. But to memorize is to possess something, whether it be a sonnet or a succession of kings, by making it an almost physical part of you, a kind of invisible companion. Why memorize, when you could look it up, as Casey Stengel more or less said, though with all due respect to the coach, the aim of an education surely is to produce students with something more than a dexterity for handling information, rather students whose minds are significantly furnished by their education, and whose hearts and sympathies have been enlarged by it, students who have embodied their learning.

A beautiful library stands on this campus and the virtual library of the internet is at our fingertips--but each student here today is in the process of evolving into a kind of walking library as the shelves of his or her memory are gradually stacked with learning. And the key to taking knowledge into yourself, ingesting it, is taking your time, acknowledging what Kundera calls the "secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting."

Let us remember that poetry itself began as a memory system, a series of devices like rhyme and meter to facilitate the storage and retrieval of sometimes vital information. There will always be those who regard poetry as an avocation of dilettantes, despite its ability to say what cannot be said otherwise. But originally, poetry was necessary for survival, for human identity, and it issued forth from the wellsprings of human memory.

Robert Pinsky, our poet laureate, recently initiated what he called the "Favorite Poem Project," a kind of national poll which sought out ordinary working Americans who had a poem by heart. His campaign was a counterweight to the notion that poetry belongs exclusively to the academy, and it was revealing to see and hear an airline hostess reciting Frost, a telephone lineman saying his Sandburg. In my fantasy commencement exercise, every graduate would come up to the stage and recite a dozen lines of poetry before receiving a diploma. Now that would really slow things down—but I can still hope that many of you will leave this school carrying with you the silent companionship of a poem. A danger I did not mention at the outset of having a poet as a speaker is that he will not be able to resist reading one of his poems, but it's short one, it's about the loss of memory, and when it's over, I will

say no more.

"Forgetfulness" The name of the author is the first to go followed obediently by the title, the plot, the heartbreaking conclusion' the entire novel which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never even heard of.

It is as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain, to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses good-bye, and you watched the quadratic equation pack its bag, and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps, the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember it is not poised on the tip of your tongue, not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall, well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those who have forgotten even how to swim and how a ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war. No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted out of a love poem you used to know by heart.

I wish each and every one of you graduates the very best of luck. May all of you gathered here today enjoy many green thoughts in many green shades.

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