

Earlham College

1999 Baccalaureate Address by Mary Lacey, Assistant Professor of English May 9, 1999

Good morning, and Happy Mother's Day! My name is Mary Lacey. I teach English and Humanities at Earlham.

I want to thank the members of the senior class for the chance to address you today. This opportunity is one part joy, one part sadness, and one part whirling vortex of mindless terror. As soon as I said yes to the Baccalaureate committee, two crushing realities set in. The first was that I would be following Vince Punzo in this position. Vince's talk last year will live in Earlham's collective memory as one of THE great Baccalaureate addresses--witty, wise, and tender.

The second crushing reality was the knowledge that this occasion would be taped, as it is every year, and the tape shown on Richmond's public access television stations. As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, Vince Punzo pointed out the second crushing reality, with what I then assumed was true kindness and collegueship. Now I'm not so sure . . . It may be that he hoped to distract me from my task, by stirring up obsessive anxieties about where the camera would be, relative to my GOOD SIDE.

Of course, my real concerns in preparing my remarks have been substantive and have everything to do with you. I want to honor your confidence in me and do justice to this important day of completion and beginning.

My first idea about how to do justice to the occasion was to read Vince Punzo's address from last year and hope for the best. But a good Baccalaureate speech is memorable, so it seemed unlikely I would get away with that expedient.

My second idea was simply to read aloud the names of members of the senior class I have known and come to cherish over four years, then to burst into tears and repeat, "Don't go, don't go," until some kind colleague in the front row helped me back to my seat. This idea presented a couple of problems, right up front. Mine would be a brief message--not a bad thing, in itself--but your parents might begin to wonder how rigorous the expectations for teaching faculty at Earlham actually are. And this approach might suggest to the rest of you, whose names I didn't call, that I am actually happy to see you leave, which is not my intention.

As I worked through some preliminary ideas, discarding many as trite, relinquishing others I knew I would be inadequate to address, a single notion began to emerge. I found myself grappling with a familiar distinction between Earlham and "the real world." Commencement day is obviously a perfect opportunity to consider this juxtaposition, and not just here; scores of speeches across the country this season will urge graduates to move boldly into the real world.

But in fact, the distinction comes up all the time around here; sometimes it's part of a gently self-deprecating look at ourselves. Teachers are as likely as students to use it, as when we tease you that there are no extensions in the real world. On other occasions, it's offered in dead earnest, often to suggest that Earlham is poor preparation for adult life. The implication in this case seems to be that we need some kind of half-way house where people about to enter the real world can live for a time, until all the sitting-in-a-circle, sense-of-the-meeting, moment-of-silence, first-

name-basis, collaborative behaviors can be unlearned.

I think I know why we are inclined to make a distinction between Earlham and the real world, but I have tended to resist it as glib and simple-minded. It does not describe us accurately, as a place that aspires to live by certain ideals, to say that Earlham is less than fully real. My purpose today is three-fold: first, I want to encourage you to think of the step you are about to take as a move into the larger world; second, and more central, I would like to invite you consider some of the ways that Earlham participates in reality; third, as corollary to aims one and two, I want to encourage you to give in to nostalgia and other potentially soggy emotions, if you want to. To feel and express them in no way marks you as unfit for the larger world.

One way to start might be to initiate a discussion of Plato's assertion that all the phenomena in the world are imperfect or incomplete versions of ideal forms that exist in an absolute and eternal reality. We could consider how "Earlham," in quotation marks, attempts to achieve absolute reality, by striving for ideal Earlham-hood. Or Earlham-ness. Or Earlham-icity. (I haven't worked that out yet.) In any case, that would turn the initial distinction on its ear; our collective desire to live by high personal and social ideals would make Earlham more real than the world at large, which is generally motivated by more self-serving goals.

I do think of Earlham as more real than the world at large, in many ways, but frankly, I am not the person to guide a discussion of Platonism; I am already in over my head, in fact. So let me take another tack to get at the idea of Earlham as an intensely real world. The approach I've taken for these reflections is summarized in my title: "The dearest freshness deep down things": Earlham inscape and instress. Yes, the wonky syntax is intentional, and no, I did not invent the words "inscape" and "instress." I have borrowed all from Gerard Manley Hopkins, a nineteenth-century English poet. (This moment offers an opportunity for all the English majors out there to nod sagely to the people around you and murmur things like, "Ah, yes, sprung rhythm," or "extensive use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance.")

Hopkins' poetry reveals his training as a visual artist and as a naturalist and expresses a sacramental vision of the world that was strongly influenced by high-church Anglicanism and his later conversion to the Catholic church. He coined the word inscape to describe the distinctive essence of a thing, the fundamental beauty that an object's external form expresses in part. For Hopkins, opening oneself to look closely at an object's outward nature could lead one into communion with the object's true being, a source of true knowledge, pleasure, and even holy ecstasy. A line from "God's Grandeur," one of his most famous poems, describes inscape succinctly, if obliquely: "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

Instress was Hopkins' word for the energy or stress--both natural and supernatural--that sustains inscape. Instress also describes the sensation of inscape, a sudden perception of the deeper pattern or unity that gives meaning to external forms. Each of the poems you heard read this morning, Elizabeth Bishop's "A Cold Spring," and Maxine Kumin's "Custodian," relates the speaker's perception of the dearest freshness deep down things, by way of telling encounters in the natural world.

You're probably way ahead of me at this point, already clear about how I'm relying on Hopkins for language to frame my thoughts. Each of you, looking back over your time at Earlham, is likely to recall many experiences of inscape, when some passion or longing led you to the distinctive beautiful essence embodied in some external form: another person, a book, an idea, a conversation, an instant of perfect teamwork on the playing field or in the lab, a piece of music, a moment of silence. Likewise, each of you has felt shaken and changed for good, by a perception

of some unifying truth that holds many disparate insights together, the strong, supple web of instress.

I believe that meditating on such moments is one way to maintain a connection to Earlham as a place that is intensely real. Many of the most stirring moments of Earlham inscape that I encounter come up in class discussions. Knowing this, and feeling incredibly lucky that we have the works of the 1995-96 Humanities reading lists in common, I went looking for reminders of how you and I and all the other Humanities instructors spent our time together. It was a great pleasure for me to leaf through my class notes and recall the essence of each group. Individual days became real again, as I reread the message sheet to learn who had been tired that day, who had posted a joke or a song lyric, and then moved on to trace the class from first question to closing bell.

Some days, all we could hope for was to do a workmanlike job, as in some of those conversations about the Janus-face of nationalism, in Basil Davidson's book-length essay on Africa and the curse of the nation-state. I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize to the members of my section that spring for my plodding approach to Davidson. I did it better the next time around, in large part because your suggestions and questions were so helpful. Other days, we were unsinkable, grappling with the implications of Augustine's youthful rowdyism (Remember him? He and his friends stole some fruit; we might say he succumbed to peer pressure . . .). Then we fought an epic battle over whether *Much Ado About Nothing* is a good play. (I still say no, but I'm still open to persuasion.) Good discussion sprang from all kinds of questions: should Martin Luther King Jr.'s challenge to defy unjust laws, in "A Letter from Birmingham Jail" influence how we live now? What does Carol F. Karlsen mean when she says that witchcraft in colonial New England was a product of ideology? What is ideology, anyway? Can an individual know her own ideology? What is history? Is John Mack Faragher doing the same things in his study of a community on the Illinois prairie that Lawrence Stone did in examining expectations for family life in pre-19th century England? What would Aristotle think of my friends?

There were golden moments of connection, as when John Boswell's claim that majorities create minorities sent the second-term section back to their memories of the first-term reading list, to consider once again King's assertion that majorities can be wrong. There were discussions of big ideas with implications for every text: are some ideas self-evident, not open to discussion? What would it mean to say yes? Who would get to decide?

There were also personal triumphs, as when a shy member of the group found his voice and changed his image of himself forever. And there were whole hours spent reading aloud to one another, from work we had written ourselves, responding to the book we were reading. I will always treasure my memory of a session spent talking about where we feel most at home, a conversation warmed to life by *My Antonia*, Willa Cather's love letter to farming people and prairie landscapes of Nebraska. Nothing could ever be more real than our work to teach and learn from one another; nothing could be more real, or more vital to our ongoing health as human beings, than the questions we asked, the fights we dared to have, or the respect and affection we gave and received.

At our best, when we aren't using the distinction between Earlham and someplace else to make ourselves feel bad, we look for ways to link our experiences here to the larger world. That spirit is what has moved so many of you to volunteer in a variety of settings, on campus and in Richmond. It has led the majority of you to off-campus programs and internships, to live and study and labor in unfamiliar places, among people from a wide range of cultures. As an

institution, we value such experiments in living, recognizing the need to explore a larger world than Earlham, but also recognizing that a meaningful life out there may grow out of experiences one has had right here.

My experience on the Germany/Austria program, and specifically my ethnographic study on the people I met on park benches, enlarged the dimensions of the real world I had known up to that point. It is hard to determine which grew more quickly, my language skills or my awareness of social norms and cultural tensions, as I talked with refugees, war veterans, single mothers, street musicians, students, cleaning ladies--from every imaginable social background, political affiliation, and religious faith. For me, an important step in completing my experience abroad was bringing what I had learned back to Earlham to process. Family members and friends, teachers, complete strangers, had to hear all about it. Part of what made my experience real, something that's in me now, for keeps, was that all of those people understood why my experiment in living had meant so much and why they had to listen when I told my stories.

Like you, members of the Earlham faculty understand that the richest and most dedicated life is lived in vibration, back and forth between several real worlds. This understanding pushes us to launch new projects, lead foreign study programs, raise children, live in families; it prods us to invest ourselves in the communities where we live--we serve on boards and committees and are mainstays in the region's rich cultural life. We cultivate farms and wildlife habitats; we study the impact of wastewater on local ecosystems; we write books. We live outward from Earlham as well as inside the community, and we bring much of what we learn elsewhere back to this place, to keep it humming with life. In your years here, you have drawn from its freshness deep down, but you have also replenished that freshness, over and over, with intellectual curiosity, spiritual struggle, and your apparently inexhaustible sense of fun.

Earlham's in-stress, an energy powerful enough to unify many experiences of reality, is rare, and it would be naive to deny that some of the differences between Earlham and the larger world can make life out there look a little frightening. Getting ready to graduate tends to focus one's attention on those scary differences. You have probably lived the last few months in several time frames at once, feeling the present moment, the near future, the intermediate future, and the rest of your life surge and eddy through your mind.

You may feel ambivalent about leaving. Perhaps you are already gripped by nostalgia or at least an introspective mood, as you think about what you have lived through at Earlham, what it has meant and what it may come to mean. While I can't begin to answer such questions for you, I'd like to think out loud about them a bit, by way of a brief look at "A Cold Spring," the Bishop poem that Courtney and Andrea read earlier. In the poem, we encounter a speaker who is acutely sensitive to movements in time and the juxtaposition of past, present, and future. Most of "A Cold Spring" is retrospective, its tone subtly nostalgic.

One of the things I have always loved about this poem is the attention, even reverence given to each stage in the slow progression of a particular spring at a friend's farm in Maryland. The poem moves from near immobility into a world of motion and apparently deliberate energy. Bishop's spring probably looks familiar, especially this year, when the season has crept up on us so slowly; we have only a short time left to enjoy "the blurred redbud . . . motionless, but almost more like movement than any placeable color." We have not yet reached the now that Bishop's poem describes, early summer--throbbing with bullfrogs and flickering with wings of moths like Chinese fans.

Notice how fully Bishop's speaker participates in both memory and the present; notice, too, the

fragility and brevity of each season, early spring, early summer, the full summer still to come. I think Bishop does a remarkable thing in this poem. She manages to capture how time can sometimes feel, when we are able to pay attention to its passage and lucky enough to share it with people we love, in landscapes that matter. Each pleasure and instant in time gives way to another, and therein lies the poignance of such valuable experience. We know how ephemeral such moments are. Indeed, they would feel less precious to us if we were unable to recall the past or imagine the future. Their mutability makes them powerfully real.

It's not just that every present moment may become a reason to feel nostalgic. Each moment already bears the traces of nostalgia that we will feel more intensely later. Bishop's image of fireflies "drifting simultaneously to the same height,/--exactly like the bubbles in champagne" captures this awareness. Their beauty is piercing precisely because it is evanescent. Only occasionally, and only in brief flashes are we able to feel a present moment so fully that neither past nor future distracts us. We are otherwise always inside time, feeling its tides and undercurrents, sometimes buoyed up, sometimes drifting, sometimes struggling against its power to move us.

Bishop's speaker sounds at ease in the inexorable ebb and flow, attuned to movements and tensions in time. It will probably not surprise you to learn that Gerard Manley Hopkins was one of Bishop's favorite poets. Her epigraph for "A Cold Spring," "Nothing is so beautiful as spring," comes from one of his poems of inscape. Like him, she has a gift for perceiving dearest freshness deep down things, and she is ready to trust in stress to make a harmony of growth, change, and loss.

Clearly, it's possible to give too much of ourselves to nostalgia, to become so habituated to it that we can't enjoy anything new. Some of the dreariest people I know love to indulge in what we might call pre-emptive nostalgia; the worst of all, a graduate student in Philosophy when I was at the University of Michigan, was apparently unable to trust his pleasure in any present moment he inhabited. Every birthday party and dinner with friends, every chance to dance to zydeco music, was blemished by the knowledge that it would be over soon. He enjoyed these things less as themselves than as times in his youth he would eventually be able to remember fondly. This guy was not yet out of his twenties when I knew him, but he was already old, almost used up. So of course there are dangers in prizing nostalgia too highly. Each of us recognizes the temptation to give way to lazy sentimentality about a golden past which may or may not have existed. A person may resist giving way to nostalgia for the same reasons she'd be embarrassed to admit she wears footie pajamas in the winter; surely she's supposed to have grown out of THAT by now! But what could be more natural than feeling nostalgic for the well-loved past, even before it is completely past? The word nostalgia comes from two Greek roots--nostos, meaning a return home--and algos, which means pain. It describes a bittersweet longing for people and situations from the past, a desire to return home. What could be more natural? What could be more tempting than the chance to wallow in such emotion?

I don't really worry about you on this score. In fact, my advice is that if you feel like wallowing in nostalgia for Earlham now and then, go ahead and wallow. I can assure you that we'll occasionally wallow, too, as we think about the good old days when you were here. I want to reassure you, if you need reassuring, that longing to go AND wanting to stay doesn't mean you're unfit for whatever comes next. All it really means is that you don't yet know how this reality and your new real world will connect. You've felt that uncertainty before: think back to your first year again and all of those mysteries of college life. How do I get all my work done AND have time for impromptu soccer games on my hall? What will happen to me if I turn in my Humanities paper late? Why does everybody else seem so much smarter than I am? Will my

parents disown me if I major in art? You figured out the answers to all those questions, right? You'll figure the new ones out, too.

Part of what makes this day so difficult (and what may have made this semester messy for you and everyone around you), is that it presents so many pasts to remember at once, so many opportunities to wax nostalgic, even as it prods you to think about what comes next--a near future, an intermediate future, the rest of your life. This is simply too much to do, if you hope to do any of it well. The day invites chaotic feelings. Furthermore, if my experience as an Earlham senior in 1983 is anything to go by, the invitations, even pressures to think about multiple futures may heighten your sense that nostalgia for the last four years is childish or weak. So let me reiterate: you are not leaving a fairy-tale realm, to enter a wholly different world that will render memories of your life here airy and insubstantial. You are moving from one real world to a bigger one. You are packing up to leave a place where you have grown, struggled, lost, and gained. This is a place worth remembering, worth missing with all of your heart. The things you have learned at Earlham are real, with every kind of value for life in your new experiment. Those of us who remain here know, from close contact with you over the last four years, that you are going to put your practical skills, your resourceful minds, and your loving hearts to the best possible uses. We will miss you, and we invite you to miss us. Remember that you are always welcome to visit us, here in the real world.

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