

THE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH GIVEN BY MARY BURCHENAL UPON RECEIVING THE CAVERLEY AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

Re-Imagining Success

First, I'd like to give a huge thank you to the Brookline Foundation and to the Caverly Committee for this award. Today I was just an ordinary high school English teacher. Tomorrow people will be stealing pieces of chalk I have touched and selling them on E-Bay. . . Well, that's how you've made me feel at this moment, anyway.

I would also like to pay tribute to my parents who traveled here from Delaware. There is so much to say about them but in order not to cry I will just steal from Chaucer's highest compliment to his young pilgrim clerk, and say "Gladly would they learn and gladly teach." They are my first and best teachers.

I'd like to start by reading a poem, since it is about graduation and this is the right time of year. This poem is addressed to my seniors, but I'd like to dedicate it to all of you, including parents, who work closely with seniors and with eighth graders.

Speech Ungiven
to my seniors
There is a special kind of farewell
reserved for those who stay put
while others set out. We stand firm but quiet
on the threshold, part envy, part relief,
part pride, watching what comes from us,
what goes from us: you.

These last weeks we have wrestled
for position: your fear and impatience against
our irritation and loss. We cling, we shove,
we write each other off, take hot offense.
You've changed. Good riddance. Who needs you?
We are all tired.

At graduation I will sit in the sun and squint.
I will watch the podium and see another year
in four-foot numbers nailed above the dignitaries,
the people who don't even know you,
but who will shake your hand and hold out
your diploma and you will smile.

I will hear your speeches, given and ungiven,
speeches where you say how much
we've meant to you, how you're sorry for everything,
how you've waited till now to tell us.
Girl graduates will knock caps crooked,
hugging each other.

I will hear those other speeches, too,
speeches equally true, equally false
where you look out over our rows and shout
“We made it in spite of you bastards!”
Bare-footed classmates will stand,
fists in the air, cheering.

Here's my speech to you, class of 2003.
Here's where I say how lovely it is, how cruel,
to watch the mortar boards in air, falling,
to walk toward the blue gowns
lined up like the squares of a human sidewalk,
looking for my handprint, my tiny initials.

The mark was so clear at the time,
and I was so sure I put it there somewhere.

The week after I graduated from Alexis I. Dupont High School in Wilmington, Delaware, I went back to the school to say goodbye to my favorite teacher, Mr. Bernard. Not only did I have enormous respect for him and what he had taught me about language and literature, but he had agreed to work with me on an independent poetry project my senior year (a sacrifice of his time I can now fully appreciate, but at the time, did not). In our farewell conversation, he asked me what I thought I might like to study in college. English, I said. I think I want to be a high school English teacher. Mr. Bernard looked at me carefully and stroked his bushy mustache. No, he said. Not high school English teaching. You don't want to do that. College. You should teach at the college level.

No, I said. I don't think so. I want to teach high school.

He shook his weary head, but smiled and let it go. He was tired. Even at seventeen, on some level, I knew he was tired. But I still dreamed of being like him. To do what he was doing. I wanted so desperately to have the effect on kids that he had had on me.

I also wanted to be a writer.

Other than these two things, I never really imagined myself doing anything else.

So now I am a teacher who writes poetry on the side. It is hard for me to imagine teaching without the release of writing, writing without the inspiration of teaching. But I often think of Mr. Bernard shaking his head and why I followed him in every bit of advice he gave except the advice not to become a high school teacher.

Even long before high school I wanted to become a teacher. For years, my best friend and I played a game called Teacher and we each had our own class of stuffed animals. We spent hours making tiny textbooks! Designing miniature teddy bear worksheets! Correcting Mr. Piggy's wee papers! I don't know -- is that normal?

Maybe it is because I had wanted for so long to become a teacher, had imagined it so hard, that it has actually been a problematic choice from the beginning. I started out teaching in private schools. Before coming to Brookline, I left teaching twice, determined to do something else, something at which I could feel more consistently successful. When I had imagined myself as a teacher, I imagined GREATNESS. With actual unstuffed students I found I could be fair and occasionally pretty good. Like J.

Alfred Prufrock, I saw “the moment of my greatness flicker. . . And in short, I was afraid.” I certainly didn’t match up with Hollywood’s version of the good teacher. I wasn’t Mr. Chips. I wasn’t Robin Williams jumping on desks in Dead Poets’ Society. I wasn’t Escalante in Stand and Deliver. And as much as I resemble Michelle Pfeiffer in all sorts of obvious ways, I wasn’t Michelle Pfeiffer in Dangerous Minds.

I tell my students they need to speak the truth in their writing, and so I promised myself to speak the truth today. Here’s my confession: Even though I know that Brookline High is the best possible school for me, every other year or so I decide in mid-November that it’s my last year, that the sacrifice is too great, that I’m failing in the classroom. I tell Bob Weintraub, that’s it, I’m through with teaching, you’re going to have to find someone else -- I’m off to become a letter carrier. He always listens patiently. (It’s not that I expect Bob, who is eternally unconflicted about his job, to understand. Here’s a man who travels to a large building every day in order to play dad to almost two thousand teenagers. He does this not only voluntarily but cheerfully. He’s a very scary man.)

One of the problems with teaching is that it’s hard to know when you are good. How do you know when you’ve been successful? Here’s a typical example, one from last year. Seniors had just gotten back drafts of papers with my corrections. I asked if they had any questions, any questions at all. A girl, Emma, raised her hand eagerly. “I’ve never understood what a dangling modifier is,” she complained. I leapt upon this opportunity as if I were a starving coyote. After almost twenty years of teaching, I knew dangling modifiers cold. I spontaneously composed witty sentences to write on the board, I was clear and made the explanation simple, but simultaneously revealed the subtle and logical beauty of English grammar. I did this in six minutes flat. I brushed chalk from my hands and smiled. “Does that answer your question, Emma?” Emma jerked her head up. I repeated, “Does that answer your question?” “Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “I wasn’t listening.”

Is that success?

Here’s another example: Just a few weeks ago a senior who is in both my creative writing class and my Good Citizen class, as part of his senior project about the disappearance of poetry in American life, went into the Comm. Ave. Star Market and taped mini-copies of William Carlos Williams’ poem “This is just to say”—a poem apologizing for stealing plums “so sweet and so cold”—on various fruits in the produce department. The cranky stock boy, after removing these poems several times, only to have my student return and tape more, finally summoned the manager, who not only forced this student to leave the store but banned him from Star Market for life. As he was being escorted out for the last time, my student put up his fist and yelled “Poetry Lives! Poetry is free!”

Is that success?

I realize now that much of the poetry I write about teaching is about my struggle to figure out what it means to be a successful teacher. “Speech Ungiven,” the poem I opened with, uses graduation as a way of considering the students we reach, as well as students we fail to reach -- or at least fail to reach immediately. I sometimes feel a little nervous about these poems because sometimes I think the general public, when they think about good teachers, wants to idealize them as committed martyrs, martyrs with few doubts about their ability to change or save lives.

This next poem was actually my first attempt, I think, to tell my complicated truth about teaching. In writing it, I used a voice harsher than my own, and it helped me to get at my truth. In this poem I am weighing the pros and cons of the profession.

To a Young Teacher Considering a \$20,000 Hiring Bonus

One thing you should know is that if you
are young and male and make a joke
now and then the girls will have crushes on you
and come to see you in pairs between classes to
ask you about question #5 and to tell you

that tattooed girl in your C block has
a crush on you which is probably true but
you would be better off looking at
your watch at this point and asking
the girls don't they have a class

they will say OOH can you write us a note
we are late to Miss Upping's class we are SO dead
they look up and you will be tempted to save them
but this is the beginning and if you could disappoint
them now the rest will be easier but more likely

Miss Upping will find you in the corridor
after F block when you are trying to make it to your
G block on the first floor before the erasers go
out the window or something ugly is scrawled
on the blackboard and she will take you

into her confidence about these two girls
and students nowadays and she will scold you
for your note in an almost motherly way and you
would be better off listening maybe apologizing but
more likely you will back up oh I have a class to get to
her eyes say I have been here, here since 1973

as you slip to the men's room where there is still
an unpleasant plumbing problem and you step around
the yellow cone that says Wet Floor and forget to
use the only urinal which can't be seen by the
students in room 341 through the corner courtyard window.

Another thing to know is that your sophomores
will splinter completely out of control
on a daily basis since you are young and new
and the boys respect you only slightly more

than their young female teachers
but you made some headway with the freshmen
on Tuesday and there are students especially girls
in each class who nod and jot and ask questions
that are frequently related to the topic at hand so
you would do well to enjoy the classroom part when you can

because the papers get heavy at 3:00
and correcting is let's face it mostly
no fun at all in fact it will stun you silent
to see what adolescents are willing
to commit to paper. So enjoy the eyes

of the girls because the crushes may not last
but the stacks of paper are forever new
and maybe five or six years down the line
a young woman with bad skin will
send you a short note after graduation

which says she never had a crush on you
and to tell the truth you let your classes get away
with murder but you wrote something on an essay
which made her think she could be a writer
she says thank you period

and what I want to tell you is that this may
or may not be worth twenty thousand dollars.

The theme of today's event is "Celebrating Teachers." Here is another truth: I celebrate teachers not because they are selfless saints sacrificing themselves wholly for our nation's youth. There are those teachers, I suppose. I'm just not friends with any of them.

I celebrate teachers because the ones I love, like Mr. Bernard, are human. They struggle, fault themselves, and sometimes wonder if they should become real estate agents-- but then they go back at the job with fervor and faith. They love kids and see their potential and agonize if they can't crowbar the door open. They laugh with their students during the day and wake up in the middle of the night worrying about them. They struggle to maintain a healthy life apart from teaching. They work too hard and convince themselves it isn't hard enough.

I celebrate teachers not in spite of our doubts, but because of them. I celebrate teachers because every year, every class, we must re-imagine what good teaching is, we must take it beyond correcting Mr. Piggy's tiny paper, beyond Hollywood, beyond what we were taught in Ed. school. We must re-imagine success, each one of us, for ourselves and for our endlessly surprising students. And if we develop this imagination, we can see our initials in the squares of the human sidewalk, we can wait for the letter from the girl

with bad skin, we can recognize success in unusual places -- even in the produce section of Star Market.

It took me twenty years -- twenty years! - to write Mr. Bernard a letter about the impact he'd had on me. Now in his 60's, he is no longer at A.I. Dupont, but he is still teaching what he loves at another school. His letter back to me is full of news about innovative courses he is teaching, new roles he is taking on -- and he assures me he still has his moustache, now all gray. His postscript reads as follows: "As I read this over, I realized that I went on quite a bit about myself. It was my way of indicating to you that I still love what I do very much. We need to be thankful we have found our passion -- so many don't."

He has found a wonderful place to teach, as have I. He has colleagues and students who amuse and inspire him, as do I. No doubt there are days when he is weary. But I'm sure that now when students tell him they are considering high school teaching, he tells them what I tell them: "Teaching! I can't think of a better job. I wish you all kinds of success." Imagine that!