

Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony

Remarks by Grace Cavalieri '54

April 28, 2021

It is a great pleasure to be included in this beautiful event. Thank you very much. I wanted to say a few words about what it was like to be here in 1950, and the complete joy it has given me to follow a career in writing that was germinated in this very college.

In 1950 there was a group of English/History majors with automatic Education minors. There were 35 of us; and we went to every class together, the same pod together, for four years. Luckily, we had an English professor who, therefore, was available to us for all four years. He must have taught others, but to this day that does not seem possible. He was ours! Because of this person, I can honestly say I had the best education in literature and poetry of any graduate of any institution in America because of such an enlightened professor, Dr. Herman Ward.

I also want to say a word about Joy—which is not a very scholarly word—but it has been an *energy gift* given to me in the form of a poetry baton. Dr. Ward introduced us to a canon of poets we could always access; and moreover, he gave the confidence necessary to try our hands at that art.

We “English Majors” were allowed to start a drama club that never existed before, and we produced “OUR TOWN” by Thornton Wilder first, and then other plays. In 1953 the college hired a drama teacher, but Dr. Ward’s students were given free reign.

Dr. Ward brought his English Majors to his home to read and discuss poetry by his fireplace. I wrote a poem about this, entitled “Angelo” where I implored my Italian father to make his famous sauce as an offering to these gatherings. and here are just a couple of lines from that poem.

...

...Spaghetti sauce on the bus!

My father getting up at dawn to cook it,

I am carrying a pot

Across two states to Princeton, New Jersey

Where my professor lived
And where
Students met to read their poems
Eating the sweet red specialty
Lugged up and down stairs under a huge lid.
No one could buy that kind of cooking, at least in those days,
Although now of course
There's a restaurant on every corner...

...

"spaghetti sauce on the bus to Princeton, N.J..."

This was for a man who was invested in us and who thought we were able and competent. He opened his home to us.

A favorite memory—Herman Ward took us to New York City to see Dylan Thomas read his poetry in one of Thomas' final tours in this country, it may have been his last tour. We attended other poetry readings as well. Poetry was a living thing.

I was able to parlay the impact from these experiences to make a life in writing and producing, to this day.

I was teaching as core staff, poetry, at Antioch College's east coast campuses, 1970 to 1975. We were assigned to set up writing programs for the Columbia, Md., Baltimore Md., and Washington D.C. Centers; and I saw that I could teach poetry to 20 in a classroom or 200 in a lecture hall but thought WHAT IF POETRY COULD REACH 200,000? Via airwaves? Why should cornflakes be on the air and not poetry? I found a new public radio station was just getting the last FM band on the dial in Washington, D.C. Happily the manager was a secret poet, but money was needed to get on-air. All I had to do was raise funds to get poetry on the air. I quit Antioch and spent two years fund-raising. Funding is always the secret to get what you want, and in 1977 we went on air with poetry—and poetry was "prime time" for 20 years.

Once a year I produced an entire day, 12 hours of poetry, to prove radio did not have to be "a poetry corner," and that poetry is truly "the News" that William Carlos Williams speaks of.

Now the series is recorded at the library of Congress, celebrating 44 years on-air. And still going strong. Thousands of poets have been featured. I estimate 3,000.

This is because I was taught that Poetry was not something that belonged to someone else in history. I found, in 1950 to 1954, all art was available for me to seize and use.

I still teach 3 workshops a week via zoom, this past year, and I have never stopped teaching poetry even while holding corporate jobs. And I've never stopped teaching my art because of that JOY I spoke of earlier – not happiness, no, happiness is fleeting, as philosophers will tell us. Happiness is getting a new condo. JOY is an energy that comes from creating something that never existed before, and then helping someone to do that too.

It only takes one person to endow you, and that is what happened to me, in what was called Trenton State Teachers College, all those years ago, and because of that I am going to read a small poem about Dr Herman Ward.

It's called the longest story in the world.

THE LONGEST STORY IN THE WORLD

*For Phi Beta Kappa Induction, 2021
And for Herman Ward
Trenton College of New Jersey*

The longest story in the world is

Transformation

Sunrise to yellow

Rushing waters to waterfall

Seeds breaking earth

Bird's beak breaking seed

All in service to the earth

Once 71 years ago

There was a professor

Who without having to say

Showed us how

To rinse off language

Study nature's magnificence

Notice everything

Slow down because

No one can dream in a hurry

Discover others

By finding out who we are

Animate imagination

Reread books and then write new ones

Tell everyone a poem

Make the world less lonely

For this is the heart's motion

And our deeds are all we can own

Sunrise to yellow

Rushing waters to waterfalls

Seeds breaking earth

Bird's beak breaking seed

All in service.

Grace Cavalieri