

An Excerpt from

ROLLINS COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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My point today is a very simple one: I want to insist that you sustain your desire to learn beyond these classrooms. I would like to picture you as part of a future where the expression “continuing education” has become a redundancy, where, at graduation, students are instantly transformed into autodidacts—those who continue to learn without the encouragement or intervention of teachers. The most obvious way to perpetuate your learning is through reading. The nineteenth-century thinker, Thomas Carlyle, wrote that the sole purpose of the university was to teach people to read. He did not mean basic literacy. He was implying that once you have learned to read critically and sensitively, you are empowered to leave the university and educate yourself.

As far as what to read, you are on your own. There is no argument in matters of taste. Apart from cautioning you against glossy magazines that focus on the weight problems of celebrities, I would tell you to read whatever you like. Read regularly and read widely. You can read James Patterson or Henry James. You can read *The Complete Mother Goose* (Mother Goose is worth a close re-reading just to see what childhood was once like), or you may prefer to get settled at a table at Starbuck’s with a copy of Julian Janes’ *The Origins of Consciousness and the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*—a really hard one to beat when it comes to high-brow book titles. What is important is that you continue reading not as a distraction—a way to kill time on an airplane or at the beach—but as part of an ongoing imaginative and intellectual adventure called the life of the mind.

Whether you are going off to graduate school or pursuing other avenues matters little; what is important is that you stay attuned your own interiority, that you continue the work that began here, the cultivation of your inner garden.

A less exalted but maybe just as important reason to keep reading steadily is that it will increase your chances of meeting and maybe even marrying a smart person. In a recent *New York Times* essay, Rachel Danadio examined the vital role that literary taste plays in romantic compatibility. Do you want to risk ruining an otherwise blossoming relationship when your partner discovers that you haven’t read a word of Melville, that you’ve never heard of W. H. Auden or that you think Baudelaire is a brand of air conditioner? Beware what you put on your MySpace favorite books list, Danadio warns, you might be setting yourself up for a romantic deal-breaker.

But let me suggest a higher motive for continuing to read. I want to set in your minds the notion of reading as a way of maintaining and augmenting your sense of orien-

tation. It has become an echoing complaint among educators that young Americans lack a basic knowledge of history and geography. We hear of students who cannot locate Australia on a world map, much less Estonia. We hear of students who are not able to find the Renaissance on a time-line of Western Civilization, students who think the Civil War was the one where soldiers were really polite to the enemy. And it's not only students. I overheard two people talking in a doctor's office the other day. They were wondering what Cinco de Mayo meant and concluded that it was a day to drink margaritas. Many adult Americans are walking around with a very murky sense of where they are and what happened before they got there. Lacking a clear sense of where you are in space—that is, in the geo-political world—and when you are in time—that is, a product of the past—means you are disoriented in the most critical way—you are ungeographic and atemporal. You are lost.

If you include travel writing and history as well as historical fiction in your diet of steady reading, you will feel more like a citizen of the earth, and more like one of the most recent links in the long chain of human development. You will know where and when you are. To find out *why* you are, you will need philosophy or religion.

And what is the role of poetry in your continuing education I can hear you wanting to ask me at this point? If non-fiction will keep us oriented in the global village, poetry may offer a pleasurable form of disorientation as it carries us into realms of the imagination that never existed before the poem was written. Plus, poetry, as well as imaginative fiction, keeps reminding us of the basic themes of life. Willa Cather once wrote that there are only about four or five human stories, but we keep telling them as desperately as if they had never been heard before. Someone else reduced all human stories to two: a stranger rides into town or someone goes on a long journey. And did you know that all science fiction is based on one of two stories: either they come here or we go there.

Poetry repeats these stories and the states of mind they represent: grief, joy, nostalgia, separation and reunion. But poetry repeats one theme obsessively, probably because we need to be reminded of it continually. As you know, *carpe diem* does not mean the fish of the day. *Carpe diem* poetry urges us to seize our days, to *carpe* our *diems* simply because we do not have an unlimited supply of *diems* given to us. The echoing song of *carpe diem* is meant as a check, a corrective to the presumptuousness of walking on this earth taking life for granted.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, many people, especially in New York City, spoke of how the event prompted them to make adjustments in their personal lives, to speed things up. An engaged couple who had planned to marry the following year decided to get married the following week. Plans that had been put off jumped to the tops of people's lists. Without knowing it, people were simply following the advice that poetry has been delivering since the Roman poet Horace wrote the words: "*Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero*"—seize the day and trust little in the future—in the first century before Christ. Some of us require a catastrophic experience to awaken us to being alive. Some require major surgery to realize that life is precious.

Some need to go through a windshield to see that time is more important than money. Others know this from their reading of poetry—a somewhat less traumatic experience.

And the corollary to *carpe diem*—a vein that runs deeply through the rock of poetry—is gratitude, gratitude for simply being alive, for having a day to seize. The taking of breath, the beating of the heart. Gratitude for the natural world around us—the massing clouds, the white ibis by the shore. In Barcelona a poetry competition is held every year. There are three prizes: the third prize is a rose made of silver, the second prize is a golden rose, and the first prize—a rose. A real rose. The flower itself. Think of that the next time the term “priorities” comes up.

And speaking of a life infused with gratitude for the very gift of itself, a good place to start not just feeling but expressing our gratitude, Rollins class of 2008, would be with your parents, the ones who brought you into this world and helped you to this lucky place, guided you to this fortunate milestone.

Let me leave you with this. By one of those odd coincidences today is not only Mother’s Day but the birthday of Salvador Dali. This morning’s “The Writer’s Almanac” included this quotation from him: “Every morning I awake to a supreme pleasure—that of being Salvador Dali.” May you, Rollins graduates, awake every morning to the supreme pleasure of being yourselves.