

Good evening to all.

I am deeply honored to be addressing this graduating class, whose members have worked so long and so hard and accomplished so much. Many of you who aren't writers, and perhaps many of you who are, have wondered at various times during the past two years, what is it exactly that writers do? What has my wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend/daughter/son/grandchild/niece/nephew/cousin/mother/father/friend/colleague/classmate been doing all this time? Well, I am going to tell you what it is that we writers do.

The writer sits at a desk or on a couch or at the kitchen table or in a café or library or on a park bench or carpet of leaves on the forest floor. The writer stares at a blank piece of paper, pen in hand or fingers posed above typewriter keys; or the writer gazes at the blinking cursor on a computer screen. The writer listens to classical music or jazz or hard rock or rap or reggae or the conversations going on around him or the purr of the cat on her lap, or the beating of his own heart, or the loud, lonely silence inside her own head. The writer stares off into space or at the wall, the floor, the ceiling, the sky, the back of someone's head, the darkness behind the lids of his or her closed eyes. And then eventually the writer begins to write.

A phrase or a sentence appears on a page. If the writer is lucky, it sounds like this:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, hysterical naked,

OR

There were two husbands disappointed by eggs.

If the writer is not lucky enough to be Allen Ginsberg or Grace Paley, the sentence sounds like this:

The brown dog lies on the rug.

This isn't a terribly terrific sentence, and it isn't a terribly terrible sentence. It's a rather run-of-the-mill, dime a dozen, ordinary, everyday sentence. So what happens next?

Next the writer wonders if it's time for lunch. If the cat's nails need clipping. If the mail carrier has come yet. If those cute leopard print shoes are still on sale, if the kitchen sink has stopped leaking, if that agent will ever call. The writer gets up, has a snack, uses the bathroom, sweeps the floor, walks the dog, fills the birdfeeder, pays some bills, calls a friend, sends an email or two or twenty, and then sits down and looks at the sentence again:

The brown dog lies on the rug.

The first thing that disturbs the writer is the word "lies." Like many writers, this particular writer can never remember the difference between "lay" and "lie" so to fix that problem, the writer changes the sentence:

The brown dog sleeps on the rug.

The next question that comes to the writer's mind is, what's so special about this brown dog? For no discernible reason, the writer decides to make it a grey dog.

The grey dog sleeps on the rug.

Better yet: the grey poodle sleeps on the rug.

The writer decides to give the grey poodle a problem:

The old, arthritic grey poodle sleeps on the rug.

Arthritic or Asthmatic? The writer isn't sure. But this is better: now the dog has potential. But still, what is unique about this dog? How is this old, arthritic or asthmatic grey poodle different than all the other old, arthritic or asthmatic grey poodles, real and imagined in the world? This old, grey poodle has the unique distinction of belonging to Myrna.

Myrna's old, asthmatic grey poodle sleeps on the rug.

Who is Myrna? The writer has no idea. But the writer isn't all that interested in Myrna at the moment. The writer is interested in the rug. Where is this rug? What does this rug look like? Is it interesting? Is it important?

Myrna's old, arthritic grey poodle sleeps on the braided rug in her bedroom.

That's not very interesting. Lots of dogs sleep on braided bedroom rugs. What if instead of Myrna's dog, it was Myrna who was sleeping on the braided rug in her bedroom?

Myrna sleeps on the braided rug in her bedroom.

That's intriguing. So, we'll just kill off Myrna's dog. In a humane way, of course. Writers are used to murdering our little darlings, and the poor poodle was old and arthritic or asthmatic and was probably going to die soon anyway. We'll just put it out of its misery and focus on Myrna. Why is she sleeping on the rug in her bedroom? Why isn't she sleeping in bed? How old is she? What does she look like? Is she sleeping on her back, her belly, or her side? Now the words fly out of the writer's fingertips:

Myrna sleeps on the braided rug in her bedroom, the edge of it curled in her fist like the baby blanket her father snatched out of her hands when she was fifteen years old.

Aha! Now the writer is getting somewhere. Why did Myrna's father snatch this baby blanket away from her when she was fifteen years old? Why not when she was ten, or thirteen, or six?

The writer decides to give the baby blanket some personality:

Myrna sleeps on the braided rug in her bedroom, the edge of it curled in her fist like the frayed, plaid baby blanket her father snatched out of her hands when she was fifteen years old and pregnant.

Myrna was pregnant? Who knew? The writer stares at the sentence, and doesn't like the ending. It's not that Myrna is pregnant—that's fine. That's interesting. It's the sound of that word. It ends with a thud. It's too clunky. The writer goes on:

Myrna sleeps on the braided rug in her bedroom, the edge of it curled in her fist like the frayed, plaid baby blanket her father snatched out of her hands when she was fifteen years old and pregnant with the triplets who are now standing in her kitchen talking about Portugal.

Portugal? The writer has never been to Portugal. The writer isn't even sure where Portugal is. The writer doesn't even know how to spell Portugal. But, the writer likes the sound of the word, and so, at least for now, it remains.

That's a glimpse of what we do. And we love doing this. The writer can spend an hour deciding if a character's skirt is bluish-green or greenish blue. The writer can ponder the line break of a poem for months, sometimes years. Once, when Oscar Wilde was asked what he did all day, he replied, "I spent all morning taking a comma out of a poem, and I spent all afternoon putting it back." This is what writers do.

Or to put it another way, when writers sit down to write, we take all the words we know and eliminate each and every one until a single word remains. Then we put that word on a page. Next, we take all the words we know and eliminate each and every one

of them until only a single word remains. Then *that* word goes on the page. And we do this over and over and over until we have a poem, a story, an essay, a memoir, a novel, a series, a screenplay.

When I began writing this speech, I followed the process which I have just described. And I thought: what if I took all the words I knew, and eliminated each and every one of them, until only a single word remained for me to give our graduates as they leave the Stonecoast nest and make their way into the literary world? If each of you found yourself alone on a desert island, which is what it often feels like to be a writer, what word would you need to carry you through? And the word I came up with is courage.

Every one of you has already displayed a remarkable amount of courage. It takes courage to say to oneself, "My writing matters. It matters so much that I am going to drop everything and devote the next two years to it." It takes courage to fill out that application, slide it into an envelope and stick it in the mail. It takes courage to break into one's savings account or take out a loan and write that check. It takes courage to hop in a plane, a train, a bus, or a car and head up to the only state in the country with a one-syllable name. It takes courage to travel the long and winding road that leads out to the Stonehouse where you are sure to find yourself surrounded by a blizzard of whiteness or come face to face with a deer, cow, or moose. It takes courage to sit in a workshop and tell people you've never met before what you think about their writing. And it takes courage to hear these same people tell you what they think of your story/essay/poem/prose poem/novel/memoir/play. It takes courage to say, "You're right. I do need to change that." And it takes courage to say, "I disagree."

It takes courage to send off your work month after month to your mentor, especially after you've heard "Oh my God, you got *her*? She's really tough." It takes courage to teach a seminar and give a reading during your final residency. And despite being filled with fear, as I know some of you were, you have done all these things.

There is a quote hanging above my desk which reads, "I have been afraid every single day of my life but my fear has never stopped me from doing anything I ever wanted to do." That quote is attributed to Georgia O'Keeffe. Courage is not the absence of fear. Aristotle said that one must develop the virtue of courage in order to curb the natural emotion of fear. I like that verb, "curb." And I like the way those two words, "verb" and "curb" just bumped up against each other inside my mouth, and the way they rhyme, too. You see the writer's mind is always at work. But to get back to the point and quote another philosopher, H.P. Lovecraft: "The oldest and strongest emotion of humankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

Every day of your writing life you will face the unknown and you will need the courage to curb your fear of it. Every day when I sit down to write, I do not feel courageous. I feel terrified. To me, a blank piece of paper is the scariest thing in the world. It fills me with "page fright." But I take courage that all over the world, writers just like me are sitting down to write. And just like me and all those other writers, you will find the courage to put words onto a page. The courage to bring your words to a writer's group. The courage to change your words again and again. The courage to say, "I've finally gotten it right." The courage to offer your finely crafted words to an editor or agent. The courage to still believe in your work after it has been declined. The courage to send it out again. And again. And again. The courage to apply for a grant or enter a contest. The courage to tell an editor that you aren't willing to change the last line of

your poem even if that means it won't get published. The courage to take an editor's advice and cut 100 pages from your novel knowing that the end result will be a better book. The courage to refuse a publisher's offer because you don't think the terms are fair. The courage to accept an offer, sign a book contract, and put your work out there for all the world to see.

And always, the courage to stay committed to your work. The courage to say, "Not now, honey, I'm writing" to your spouse, your kids, your pets, your parents, your friends, your overflowing email inbox, your insistent telephone. The courage to say to yourself and to all those around you that your "letter to the world" matters. The courage to stick it out when the words won't come. The courage to face that blank piece of paper again and again and again.

The cellist Pablo Casals said, "My cello is my oldest friend. My dearest friend." I feel that way about my pen. Casals was once asked why, at age 92, he was still practicing the cello for several hours a day. He said, "I think I might be improving." We writers are lucky. If we keep practicing, we keep improving. The graduating class that sits before me is living proof of this.

Beloved Stonecoast graduates: you have shown tremendous courage over the past two years, and you will continue to show that same tremendous courage as you embark on your post-Stonecoast writing life. You will continue to write with intelligence, passion, wit, honesty, beauty, originality, and style. You will make all who know you proud, and your writing will truly make a difference. I congratulate you, I applaud you, I am inspired by you, and I look forward to celebrating all your future successes and achievements.

--Lesléa Newman

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