

**Joan Connor**  
**Faculty Commencement Address**  
**July, 2004**

Why This Matters

Ah Love, let us be true

To one another! For the world which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In the course of the experiment, that chimp had a baby. Imagine how her trainers must have thrilled when the mother, without prompting, began to sign to the newborn. Baby, drink milk. And when the baby died, the mother stood over the body, her wrinkled hands moving with animal grace, forming again and again the words, Baby, come hug, baby, come hug, fluent now in the language of grief.

I choose these two pieces not only because I love them, but they exemplify for me why we do this. The author Aritha Van Herk said to me recently that here on the cusp of the new millennium, the self is in trouble. The author is dead, character is like Peer Gynt's

onion, nothing at the core. Character is deconstructed. Humans are cardboard constructs kiting before the theoretical gale. Ms. Van Herk is correct; such is the intellectual zeitgeist, but her fiction is stunning testimony to her disbelief in it. She writes in *Notebook on A Missing Person*, “And now it is his turn to talk, to tell you about the travelers up that endless and abandoned road, what he sees passing his trailer, the dust that billows behind wheels.” His turn to talk, his turn to tell you. What is the nature of this telling?

The philosopher Alphonso Lingis in a recent lecture singled out the word, contact. His theory restores the self to the self by focusing on this need for contact. And we communicate this by the glance, by the touch, by the word. Hello, he points out, is precisely that acknowledgment, one self expressing joy and curiosity about another self. That is the nature of this telling.

Writing is affirmative and optimistic. The grimmest tale in its telling tells of the need to testify, implies audience, longs for contact. Writing is the human gesture. It is the record of consciousness. It is what it means to be human, an isolated self longing for contact. It is the invitation to enter another’s thought processes, vision, associations. There is no greater intimacy than that.

I have known some writers who were jerks, but they are few. It is difficult to write well if you lack empathy. There is an analogical and anagogical aspect to our literary exploration. Our work is, to use Frost’s term, our “education by metaphor,” and our work is our cathedral. It constructs for us a contemplative space within a world that blunders along far too unthinking.

No one can take this craft from you. And I feel now more than ever before during this benighted administration the importance of writing as a site of resistance. If you do not believe in the power of the word, then ask yourself why the president of the United States had to disinvite poets from the White House.

Writing allows us refinement of thought and sensibility. And it is not without its pain. We write because we are mortal. We tell because the clock has inexorable hands. As writers, we all become fluent in the language of grief, but the telling is nonetheless a relief. Contact. You feel that, too? Somehow the world with its unrequited loves, and injustice, and deaths becomes more bearable in the telling. When Matthew Arnold, writes, "Ah, love, let us be true to one another," his voice speaks beyond the lines and the century directly to me, to my heart, and gives me courage on my darkling plain.

That is why what we do, what you do matters. Two words occur to me when I look at the members of Stonecoast, community and courage. Lee has created a remarkable community. I have come to love you, and I have been stunned watching the relationships evolve beyond this place, how you care for each other and each other's work, how you have become a community of writers, so necessary because this is such an isolate enterprise, and necessary because it takes courage. Many of you have staked your lives on this. It takes courage to change. It takes courage to do the hard work of self-examination requisite for serious writers. It takes courage to risk the failure that we risk every time that we lift a pen and lift our voices and our hearts. This is serious and important work, this telling. Continue to treasure each other beyond today and here, because you will need your writing friends. And be very proud of what you have accomplished here in your apprenticeship to your craft and in the degree to which you

have learned from each other what it really means to make a human gesture, to laugh at our foibles, to overlook our flaws, to take care of each other, and to write with unflinching courage the stories, essays, novels, poems which must be told. I am immensely proud of all of you, and I will miss you.