

Annie, Provost , esteemed faculty, fellow graduates, honored colleagues, family and friends,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..., it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...”

If Charles Dickens had workshopped this passage with us, we might have had some suggestions for him, maybe about all those “to be” verbs, all those commas, about the need for a little more groundy in all his floaty. But still the words ring loud and clear for us a century and a half later, when things are so different and yet so much the same.

This last semester has certainly seen both the worst and the best of times in my home state of Louisiana. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have left a large portion of the Gulf Coast still reeling from the devastation. During the week of August 29th, we watched in disbelief as day after excruciating day went by and the residents of New Orleans and the other hard-hit areas waited for rescue and aid in the hot August sun. And it happened again less than a month later. Our town and our home have been inundated with evacuees. Despite the looming mountain of work I wanted to get done this final Stonecoast semester, there was a period of time after Katrina when I froze and couldn't write a word, in fact couldn't imagine my little novel having any significance in the face of the life and death dramas going on around me. I briefly felt like chucking the whole three semesters' worth of work.

But, as the worst of the situation was dealt with, I had to get back to work or abandon the semester. So, taking a fresh look at my hard-won chapters, I was gratified to

remember that I was already working with the themes of water and instability, with loyalty and exile, and that, like a post-September Eleventh skyline, Katrina could be worked into the plot. In my mind that gave me the credentials and confidence I needed to continue with the work.

Louisiana has always been a land of storytellers, and there has never been a season like this one. “How did you/your mama/your husband’s brother make out? How many people are staying with you? What about such and such a favorite restaurant, is it still there?” We talk about it in line at the grocery store, at the post office, we listen to stories of friends of friends and we continually add to the mountain of personal anecdotes. We can’t stop bearing witness to the tragedies and the miracles. There’s a feeling that, if we can listen to the stories, we’re doing something. Because the people who were affected by the storms need to tell their stories, to have someone listen, to understand what they’ve been through. It may not change anything on the material level. But it honors their experience and creates at least an oral record of loss and survival, of heroism and compassion and generosity. The entire country’s heart has opened, and things like the Stonecoast hurricane relief benefit have happened all over.

But what does all this have to do with literature? I am not suggesting that we drop all our stories, our novels, our poems and memoirs that don’t take place on a grand scale of natural disaster and personal tragedy, any more than I would suggest that we write only tales of love and light.

Each of us, by virtue of being born under the sign of the scribes and wanting and needing to create a written account of a sliver of the human heart, participates in a long unbroken cable woven of the richest and most delicate fibers imaginable, a line that

stretches back to the invention of language. It is a thick and sturdy rope made up of the stories of human beings just like ourselves who have won or lost at love and war, family and careers, who have lived through heaven or hell, who have built levees around their hearts to keep their feelings in or their heartaches out, who have had their levees breeched and been forced out of complacency and into new and unknown territory. Every writer who has cultivated the creative spirit and put pen to paper to write an authentic human experience, whether real or imagined, has done so not only for him or herself, but also for all the other human beings throughout time. Any cross section of the cable would reveal both the best of times and the worst of times, and both ends of the spectrum and everything in between needs to be expressed.

We are participating in the record keeping of the human experience, which is infinitely varied and yet has all already been done before. Robert Olen Butler says artists are “intensely aware of the chaos implied by the moment-to-moment sensual experience of human beings on this planet. But they also, paradoxically, have an intuition that behind the chaos there is a deep and abiding order,” that we write to “shape and order experience into an art object.” We take the best and the worst of it and turn it into something fresh and valid. Whether or not any of us takes the publishing world by storm, this is important work that we do, witnessing this precious human life in all its pain and its folly and its glory.

For those of us of the fourth graduating class of the Stonecoast MFA, it is the best of times in that, in a few minutes, Annie Finch will place a diploma in our hands that will validate our two years of toil and tribulation and give us those three coveted little letters to put after our names. It is the worst of times because we will have to wean ourselves

from this incredibly rich community of writers that has been our surrogate family, complete with lovable and maddening authority figures, sibling rivalry, and our own growth and maturation as writers.

My little strand of the cable will forever be linked with all of yours, my treasured colleagues and mentors and friends of Stonecoast, and I take that as a high honor.

Whatever segment of the spectrum you are called to express, do it fearlessly with your heart wide open, and know that you do it for each and every one of us as well as for yourself.