

**Kim Dana Kupperman – Creative Nonfiction
Commencement Speech
July, 2004**

I'm so honored to share this stage with Jo and Jim.

Several weeks ago I was telling my 90-year-old father — who couldn't be here tonight — about the schedule for this residency.

"It's going to be a little bit crazy," I said. "We'll be in classes, workshops, and reading for about 12 hours a day."

"Why would you do such a thing?" he asked.

I've been thinking about the answer to that question ever since I started at Stonecoast two years ago. Why *would* I — or any of us — endure the sensory overload, sleep deprivation, and nutritional inadequacy that result in what Lee Hope so aptly called "Crash Day," those 24 hours when you feel lost in an emotional wasteland so vast that no amount of therapy or chemicals will rescue you? Why would we choose to sit so long that our posteriors atrophy? Why would a group of writers — people who require solitude to work — choose (any pay good money) to immerse ourselves in nonstop social contact?

The larger question, perhaps, is why do we write at all?

Jo and Jim have spoken eloquently to locating the extraordinary in the ordinary, of distilling everyday life into the rarefied. Certainly this urge is behind the impulse to write, what compels us to make art.

Flaubert said, "We do not write to live. We write in order *not* to live." That dark pronouncement has nagged at me for months. Perhaps Flaubert meant that art does not sustain the artist, rather the artist must suspend life in order to create. He speaking, I think, to the opposite qualities of selflessness and selfishness that must possess the writer.

Oddly, the selflessness manifests on the page as the writer's fully engaged self. As my friend and mentor Mike Steinberg has reminded us (over and over and over), when writing excels, it's because we bring all of our senses, our complete emotional and intellectual selves, to bear on the act of fashioning a text. This is what makes writing exhilarating.

And for those of you who love and/or live with us, who support our selfishness in making art, writing can be an exhausting enterprise. Thank you family, friends, spouses, partners, neighbors, for such generosity.

When writers are completely present to the work, we create a crowded solitude. And maybe that's why — when we emerge from that altered state of grace and sweat — we need to connect with other writers in a community of our own making.

Stonecoast is one such community — and it was clear to me that this was part of Lee Hope's vision when I first spoke with her about coming into this program. Here we're able to congregate with

others of our kind, build a space of ideas and relationship, craft a common language to discuss our work and lives as writers.

Stonecoast is more than a community. I like to think of us as an extended family, replete with all the dysfunction of any clan: the uncle who drinks too much at the wedding; the aunt who gives you the same sweater every birthday (that you never wear); the cousin who talks too much at dinner; the kids who stay out too late. But there are also the joys of family here, the traditions and rites of passage. Please forgive me this conceit: we watch each other grow as writers, marry ideas (and divorce some of them), birth and raise our work, bury our murdered darlings. Tonight we're celebrating our common achievement.

The poet Rumi wrote, "The body is a beehive and we are its bees. Cell by cell we made the body." For me, this is Stonecoast: an intricate honeycomb of industry, pollination, and the reward of hard work with sweetness.

Thank you.