

Suzanne Strempek Shea
Faculty Commencement Speech
Winter 2005

On November third, I was out on my driveway in Wellingtons and garden gloves, shoveling bark mulch into a wheelbarrow.

The pile had been delivered back in June, but a very busy year meant I didn't get near it much for the next six months. By then, rather than still be the flower garden dressing it was intended to be, it had become a garden itself, sprouting with all sorts of flora and seedy things that had taken hold in its crags. I shoveled furiously, trying to work off some of the frustration from the results of the previous night's election. Taking a break inside, I found a message from Beth Wilkins, who was calling to say that the graduating class had selected me as its faculty speaker.

Honored, thrilled, humbled, I returned to my pile. Thought about what I might say to reflect the faculty's great pride in and gratitude for these graduates. I ratcheted up my normally active search for metaphor, a lifelong practice that has me seeing meaning and message in the swing of a dog tail, the shape of clouds, an eighteen wheeler's bumper-sticker. Really - there had to be some powerful double meanings to be found in a day that brought me such wonderful news, even though I was still thudding from the night before, all while standing on the driveway, digging into an enormous hill of bark.

I considered the state of the world, the size and challenge of the mulchy mound before me, the electric and eclectic group of soon-to-be-graduating writers and poets, who right then, all across the country, were toiling away at their thesis projects on laptops and PCs and typewriters and legal pads.

(To be read with over-emotion) On the day each of you graduates filled out your Stonecoast application forms, you cast a vote. Now, the garden of your years of hard work has been planted, and this day puts the final touches on the garden of promise that you've created!

Ughhh....

Yes, all that's true. But, as I'm writing this, I'm realizing that even when metaphoric possibilities are all around, sometimes you don't need comparison and imagery to say what you want to say. And what I want to say is:

You didn't have to do any of this. Remember that. Realize that. Feel hugely proud of yourself because of the fact that you did enter and complete and graduate from Stonecoast.

Making out that application, making that decision to further your work and art, beginning the program and fulfilling all the requirements, none of that was an easy thing. It's not like you signed up for two years at a health spa. You've been creating worlds from air. That can be joyous, but it can also be very hard work. Enormous effort has gone into the pages you've filled before your day jobs, during your lunch hours, late into the night after the kids have been put to bed or all your other obligations have been taken care of, or ignored. If you'd been out there in your yard for two years, digging and planting and tending an actual garden, all in your neighborhood would be slamming on brakes in awe, returning with cameras in hand. But what you've been growing at your desks and in your notebooks isn't visible - yet - and I'm sure has caused many in both household and neighborhood to ask what the heck it is you've been doing in all those hours holed up in your corner.

But take heart: all in this room know what the heck it is you've been doing for the past two years. And, one day, may it be as apparent to the world as it is right now to those of us here. May I be back in my little bookstore informing my customers:

"Sorry, no, the new Beth Wilkins is on back order. It's only been out a month and it's in its third printing."

"Yes, we have several Natalie Segals over in the fantasy section."

"You want the second or third volume of poetry by Peter Manuel? The first two are also read by him on CD."

"You like all things Russian? You've got to read the novels of James Boobar. Yeah, that's the guy who won the Pulitzer."

You can laugh, but I'm really not joking. The books that fly out of my little bookstore have nothing on the books-to-be that are flying from your ink jet printers. I look forward to the day I'm ringing up an ISBN and flipping the book to the cover and exclaiming:

"Rick Wile? I knew him before he was published."

For today, celebrate whatever garden you've been tending these two years. To me, it's right here in 3-D. Lush, colorful, heart-tugging, wondrous, and green with promise and possibility. From it, see the faculty picking a bouquet for each of you. We are proud of you. We are in awe of you. We have blessed by knowing you.

Congratulations.