

**Commencement Speech**  
**James Sprouse - Fiction**  
**July 2004**

On the first day of my first workshop at Stonecoast, the writer Jack Driscoll said, “Sometimes I don’t know how people get up in the morning and not just fall down and burst into tears.”

*Everyone* in the room knew exactly what he meant. The world is *that* tender, *that* beautiful, *that* sad.

“If you’re completely invested in your writing, it will bring you great joy; if you’re not, you should quit right now, because it’s too painful.”

That was the foundation of our student careers at Stonecoast. That was the level of commitment of our faculty and mentors, and we will never be able to thank them enough. In the last two years, we have begun to learn our craft and to find out who we are as writers. We all had particular aspirations when we applied to the MFA Program and showed up for our first residency. They have inevitably changed or we have refined them. I had aspirations to finish a novel that I’d been working on for fifteen years. One day **last** January, after our winter residency, it was clear to me: it wasn’t going to work, so I let it go. I just dropped it. Between February 1st and March 1st I wrote twelve stories, sometimes at the rate of one a day, and nine of them became my creative thesis. I didn’t finish my novel.

*But I learned how to write.*

As Jo said, “There *is* beauty in our day jobs . . . There *is* beauty in the dirty dishes from dinner with our families, in the dog needing to go for a walk . . . If balancing the *pure* with the *daily* is difficult, it’s only because it should be.”

I wonder if we can really separate the pure from the daily. The *Heart Sutra*, perhaps the most famous poem in later Buddhism, addresses the relationship between the “pure” and the “daily.” The most startling teaching of the sutra is that the “pure” *IS* “the daily,” and the “daily” *IS* the “pure.” There is no difference. They cannot be separated.

What we, as writers, are privileged to do is to help make this clear. Our poems, our stories, our novels, our lyric essays, and our memoirs, can be a celebration of ordinary life. They can be a revelation that there is no “rarified air” without ordinary life and no ordinary life that is not magical, just as there is no hero who does not contain some “evil” and no villain who does not contain some “good.”

To quote another of our faculty, Ann Hood, from a 2003 interview in the Journal *Quarter After Eight*: “We read to understand the unknown; we write for the same reasons. [ . . . ] The truth is what the writer discovers in exploring the human condition.”

There is an area of concern to all of us right now that we writers have a chance to address with whatever truth we *are* able to discover, and that is the state of our nation and the state of a world at war with itself. First we have to stop the war within ourselves. Then, if we choose to write about that, we have an opportunity that few have to tell the stories that shine a light on suffering and joy in a way that promotes peace.

The African poet and playwright, Ben Okri, said, “To poison a nation, poison its stories.”

We can save the world by saving its stories.

Most of us will never again have a chance to see each others' work in it's raw, unfinished form, suffer through painful revisions and false starts with each other, and watch our work grow into something powerful, professional, and wonderful. This process has cemented relationships that will no doubt support our work for the rest of our lives. We've had some rough spots, all of us—personally, academically, and professionally—but whatever has happened over the past two years, we are *close*.

I'm honored and humbled to be part of the inaugural class of the Stonecoast MFA Program. It changed me in ways I couldn't have imagined two years ago. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to all my fellow students and to all the faculty and support staff who are the life blood of Stonecoast. I want to thank my inspired mentors: Jack Driscoll, who taught me that writing is one of the most important and most difficult things I would ever do; Richard Hoffman, who taught me to ask if my work was the truth; and Joan Connor, who patiently instructed and coaxed me to the realization that I was, in fact, a writer. I wish to thank our passionate, forward-thinking founder, Lee Hope, whose vision made it all possible. And without my wife Sandy, her patience, tolerance, and support, I would never have even begun.

Thank you.