

Graduation Speech
4, January 2005
Rick Wile

I'm on the cover of TIME magazine—standing under a spruce tree on a granite ledge, and looking out over a vast, sun-lit Atlantic Ocean.

Inside TIME magazine, the cover story begins:

Richard Wile, winner of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature, and considered by most critics to be the world's greatest living writer, lives alone on a tiny island off the Maine coast, a solitary and mysterious genius, renown throughout the world for his epic novels of good and evil.

I think I was a freshman at the University of Maine at Orono when I imagined that picture and cover story, and I admit to you some forty years later that in some ways, I've never lost that vision of myself as a reclusive genius, destined for literary immortality.

Perhaps that vision influenced me to change my major at UMO from forestry to English. Perhaps it was why I was first drawn to those great writers—Swift, Keats, Byron, and Hemingway—whose lives struck me as singular and romantic, learning only later to appreciate and, even later than that, to love what they wrote. Perhaps that vision led me to stand for years in a high school English classroom surrounded by 64 British Authors (They'd come in a set), trying to transfer my love of literature to my students. And in some roundabout way, perhaps that vision is responsible for my being here tonight, even though I don't live on an island, I don't write fiction of any kind, let alone epic novels, and I've given up on the Nobel Prize, at least for literature.

The problem with that vision of myself as the world's greatest writer was that it never inspired me to sit down and actually write, at least for an audience. That didn't happen until life gave me a story so important that paramount to me was the writing of

that story, not the writer of that story. And slowly over the years, as I banged my head first against a typewriter and then against a computer screen, I began to realize that in order to tell that story, I needed to leave the splendid isolation that I'd always envisioned and get some help.

Which is the real reason I'm happy to be standing on this stage on a January night instead of under some spruce tree on an island in the Atlantic Ocean. While I've learned so much from this program over the last two years about the craft of writing, I think I've learned even more about the importance of community to the writer. I'm aware now of what I never realized forty years ago: that Swift, Keats, Byron, Hemingway were all part of a community of writers—what we old English teachers call the Neo-classicists, the Romantics, the Lost Generation—with whom they drank and argued, and whose energy fed each others' work. And it's that energy that Stonecoast provides—the energy you can feel in the air here tonight—that I've talked about when I've spoken of this MFA program to new and perspective students.

I leave this program feeling as if I'm getting up from a great banquet from which I've feasted off the talents, the generosity, the direction—the energy—of a wonderful group of faculty and colleagues.

So I thank Lee Hope, whose vision created the Stonecoast community; and Annie Finch for continuing to build community. Thanks to the University of Southern Maine for its support. Thanks to my mentors, Barbara Hurd, Michael Steinberg, and, especially, Richard Hoffman; Thanks to Becky Welsh, my fellow graduate in Nonfiction, and to the members of the first graduating class of nonfiction students who welcomed the two of us

into the community. To all of my colleagues in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction: Thank you.

For getting me off that damn island.