

## GRADUATION SPEECH

Sarah Arnold

Good evening everyone. I'm eager to speak to you tonight about a somewhat surprising experience I've had in the Creative Non-Fiction section of this program—But first I must introduce my colleague in Creative Non-Fiction, Jane DiMillo: Jane and I actually tied in the voting to give this speech and she graciously stepped aside and encouraged me to give it.

Now back to my experience—one that may have implications for other writers gathered here. I feel I came into this MFA program through one door and am leaving by a different one. I came in with a memoir I wanted to finish, and I can't thank my mentors, Richard Hoffman and Barbara Hurd, enough for the help they gave me with this, and with some personal essays. Then something happened that set me on a whole new course—that of also writing for social change.

Second year, when we must write a "Critical Essay" in our genre, I came across newly available writings by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German theologian martyred by the Nazis in 1945. I'd been aware that Bonhoeffer was the first person to speak in defense of the Jews when Hitler began his persecutions in 1933. He said the church had a responsibility, "**not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself.**" These pungent words have since been employed in ending apartheid in South Africa, in Liberation Theology in South America, and in our own Civil Rights Movement.

From these new writings I learned that Bonhoeffer's struggle was not just against Hitler, but was against the German Church itself that to his horror threw its support to

Hitler. Bonhoeffer's writings helped persuade a third of the 18,000 German pastors to separate and form the "Confessing Church" that opposed Hitler. I saw parallels between events in Germany back then and our own situation after 9/11, namely the loss of significant human rights and the blurring of the separation between church and state. I wanted to write about this for my critical essay.

But could Bonhoeffer qualify as a creative non-fiction writer? Richard Hoffman, my mentor, said, "You must do it, because it's in you to do it." He suggested I compare Bonhoeffer to the current Boston Globe columnist, James Carroll, a former Catholic priest, a novelist, and author of a prize winning memoir on the Vietnam War. Celebrating his first mass in a chapel filled with his father's fellow generals, —the Vietnam War still raging—Carroll evoked the image of Ezekiel's dry bones. Carroll asked, "**Can these bones live? Dried and burned by time, and by desert wind, by the sun and most of all—by napalm?**" None of the generals came to his reception.

Inspired by Bonhoeffer and Carroll, I began to send "Opinion Pieces" to the Brunswick Times Record. I wrote about Evangelical Christians being deceived, the values of Tom DeLay, Social Security, and why certain judges are being nominated. The paper published all four pieces. Strangers phoned me in response. Our Post Office clerk said, "I liked your article, Ms. Arnold." A woman wrote to ask if I'd please write a piece on the Energy Bill.

But what can one local voice accomplish? When a documentary on Martin Luther aired recently, I saw that one lone monk went against the most powerful institution of his day and changed the course of history. The documentary stressed that one reason the 95 theses Luther nailed to the door of the church in Wittenburg caused such an immense

sensation was the crisp, vigorous language with which Luther wrote. His words, “**I cannot, I will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other,**” are long remembered. Thomas Paine, whose paper, “Common Sense,” did much to spark the American Revolution, wrote, like Luther, in clear, powerful prose. Who can forget, “**These are the times that try men’s souls?**”—the first line of Paine’s essay which George Washington ordered read to the troops at Valley Forge on that Christmas Eve before crossing the Delaware.

So this is the door by which I’m leaving—I will still write memoir and essays, but I will also write for social change. I would urge everyone in this MFA program, including faculty, to consider taking some time from your creative work to write about the social issues that concern you. Whether it’s onslaughts on the environment; the War, the shrinking middle class, tax cuts for the wealthiest, the deficit. Much in our country right now is neither just nor wise. But we can write about it! And send it to our local paper’s op-ed editor. Our director, Annie Finch, tells me there’ll be support for this sub-genre in the program. Tracy Kidder once said, “The point is to write as well as George Elliot in *Middlemarch* and to find ways to do that in non-fiction.” I would add—“to find ways to do that in writing for social change.” I thank you.

836 words

809 words