

Christopher Daly  
Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing  
Commencement Address  
July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005  
Brunswick, Maine

Wow. Look at you guys. The third class to graduate from the Stonecoast MFA program.

“The third time’s the charm,” some people said. Or “good things come in threes.” Or less optimistically: “Three strikes and you’re out.”

According to a numerology guide I picked up, number one people make good lawyers, doctors, sales managers. Number twos are bankers, politicians, engineers. Number three people are suited for careers as singers, dancers, writers.

We’ll see about the dancing a little later.

When I looked for a number three analogy best suited to this class, the Hindu trinity kept coming back to me: Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. Birth, Death, and Preservation.

But the comparison became too complicated for these few minutes. That isn’t even enough time to explain which incarnation of Vishnu Tracy Bozentka really is.

Because she is. That woman in the front row: she’s a manifestation of the preserving force of the universe. And so is Alan Lewis sitting there. And Tanya Eby Sirois and Billie Bolton and James Siegel and every person in the front row.

They are the preservers – the preservers of truthful language and a meaningful literate culture.

One third of the people in this country claim reading as their number one leisure activity. But last year a serious study painted a depressing picture. Less than half of US adults read any literature in the previous year – and “literature” was loosely defined. This held true for everyone: male, female, black, white, high school drop out, advanced degree holder.

A simple reduction in reading isn't a crisis by itself. A story is a story is a story, and if you can tell a good story and people listen, that's what matters. The world doesn't unravel because good stories move from the page to the screen. Someone still has to write those words, and write them true.

*That's* the problem. Language can cease to become truthful. We are in an age when everything about our culture is being subverted, even our language. We accept that political and bureaucratic language may wear only the thinnest varnish of truth. We accept that advertising claims are often matters of unverifiable assertion. We take it for granted that business leaders avoid giving straight answers or acknowledging damaging truths.

Language is after all, neutral. It can be used to support *any* agenda. It has *always* been used for deception and dishonesty. But today the truthful use of language is suffering. Even everyday communication is effected. We have lowered our standards: all around us we tolerate language that is no longer true.

I only need to mention a few examples. The “Healthy Forests Initiative” which opens protected land to logging. The “Clear Skies” program, which guts pollution regulations in favor of unenforceable voluntary action.

Person of Interest. Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Enemy Combatant. Coalition of the Willing. Judicial Activist. We could be here all night. None of these phrases say what they mean, and all of them are seeping into our language.

The poet Marie Howe shares what Joseph Brodsky once told her. 'You Americans are so naïve. You think oppression is going to come marching up the stairs in jackboots, carrying machine guns. It begins with the language.'

He hit the mark. It begins with the language. It has begun with our language.

Without us, our language is inert. Without us, it's not alive. It can't defend itself. That's why it needs us.

That's my simple hope for the graduates. Be a preserving force. Guard against false language. Don't let it be a tool of oppression: Use it to liberate. Don't pervert and obscure meaning: Write with clarity, unashamed. Don't let the truth of the world hide behind your words: Show what's there, whether it shines or festers.

Because in the end it is our language that matters, and only our language. This is what we will pass down, not estates, or sacks of money, or a diploma that's been lost in an attic for decades. All that is nothing. What matters are the stories, and that we tell them the right way: with joy, and with sincerity, and with truth.

We are the third graduating class. We are now part of the first line of defense for this, our language, our one real treasure. Let us defend it well.

Congratulations, Stonecoast MFA Summer Class of 2005.

Thank you.