

Stonecoast MFA Graduation
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When we began this degree program, I suspect that some friends and relatives may have asked us: “What are you going to *do* with it?” There may be people close to us who secretly (or even not so secretly) felt this degree was a luxury, and questioned its relevance or applicability in the world today.

So I would like to speak for a moment about the power of narrative. This past spring, at Duke University, I listened to two men tell their stories. A newspaper described them as “grandfatherly immigrants...who crossed the stage together just to talk.” They sat side by side in armchairs, seeking to make sense of their lives – and trying to understand what had mattered in the life of the other. Perhaps you’ll wonder what was extraordinary, even radical about such a moment: two grandfathers reminiscing and puzzling over the world together.

One of the men was Judea Pearl, an Israeli-educated professor of computer science at UCLA. He’s the father of Daniel Pearl – the young Wall Street Journal reporter who was beheaded by terrorists in Pakistan in 2002. The other man was Akbar Ahmed, a Pakistani-born Muslim, and chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington DC.

Now they travel together, a Jewish grandfather and a Muslim grandfather, around the country to tell their life stories, because they believe it is essential to hear and grasp the narrative of another.

In the case of Judea Pearl, consider for a moment: this man lost his only child to an appalling act of violence, and wants to understand the experience of people in the place where his son was killed.

When we listen to a story or a poem, we are exposed to what the novelist and poet Jack Driscoll – a charter faculty member of this MFA program – calls “the tender scrutiny of detail” in a human life. That tender scrutiny of detail brings us up close: it is the basis for empathy. The incalculable power of this craft of writing down our stories and poems is that it allows us to enter the yearnings of another, to insert ourselves for a moment into their most acute, immediate and personal experience. To tell a story, and to hear it amounts to an act of great risk on both sides. Courage is required to open the door, and courage is required to enter.

Empathy makes forgiveness possible, and ultimately, it makes transformation possible: it turns strangers into neighbors. In the process, it becomes untenable to

deny another's humanity. History demonstrates repeatedly that the most hideous atrocities happen when the essential humanity of another is overlooked or denied.

During my Stonecoast studies, I've read the work of classical Chinese poets who wrote over a millennium ago. Typically, these poets were well-educated government bureaucrats, who were sent to lonely offices in remote provincial outposts, in what amounted to *defacto* internal exile and isolation. In 12th century China, the poet Yang Wan-li wrote, "I've patched up all my windows and closed the doors;/the tea kettle and wine pot fill the room with a warm fragrance." Reading his words, it feels as if one is pulling up one's chair, to pour a glass of wine with him, and watch the raindrops "making patterns on the puddles in the courtyard." Even ordinary moments can be so intently observed and felt that almost a millennium later, we still lean across the table, to hear what he's saying: "All my life I have heard rain, and I am an old man;/but now for the first time I understand the sound of rain on the river at night."

In sharing his experience of solitude through the poem, we too are less alone. It's a miracle that knocks the wind out of me: that it is possible to enter and be moved by the experience of an old man in exile, in another country and profoundly different culture, a thousand years before my own life.

Recently, a 2000-year-old seed from a date palm tree was found in Israel – when a cliff fortress from the year 73 AD was excavated. The date palm of Judea was praised in the Bible and the Kuran for its shade, beauty and medicinal properties. A scientist germinated the seed and it is now growing foliage.

There are other extraordinary incidents of this kind: when the Nazis bombed London's Natural History Museum in WWII, and water was used to extinguish the fire, 500 year-old seeds germinated in the ashes. These ancient seeds still contained enough life inside their husks to sprout when nourished.

When you read the words of a poem or book and accord them "tender scrutiny", you become the gardener who retrieves the seed, and gives it water to make it blossom with succulent dates – so it becomes something that can once again be tasted on the tongue. Literature is an infinitely renewable resource for compassion.

Yet the practice of "tender scrutiny" is subversive, in part because we inhabit a moment in culture, place and time, at which our society is overwhelmingly invested in convenience and efficiency. Attentiveness or "tender scrutiny of detail" is not efficient, and it is almost guaranteed to be inconvenient. It slows us

down, forces us to examine what we might otherwise ignore. In the process, it raises unpredictable questions, and leaves us searching for an adequate response.

We inhabit a time when gathering around the table for dinner is too inconvenient and inefficient for many busy, tired families to sustain at the end of the day. Their stories risk going untold and even people who live in the same household can be oblivious to each other's longings.

Poetry, story-telling, and the act of remembrance exist as rebellious arts; they insist on intimacy. They will draw you close enough to whisper in your ear. They may not make an MFA degree as profitable as an MBA – but these arts have the priceless power to defy loneliness.

It is popular in some circles to say: "Shakespeare did not need an MFA program. Why do writers today need to go to school and get a degree to write?" MFA programs like Stonecoast matter urgently because they preserve a hospitable space to gather around the table – where the tender scrutiny of detail is validated, and stories are heard. Each poem, each story, each memoir exists as an invitation to come to the table together and be nourished.

This low-residency MFA program allowed many of us to return to school in the midst of hectic and turbulent lives. Among us, there are students who have persevered, and continued writing, despite divorce, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, or the loss of a job. They have continued to write as if their lives depended on it. And in fact, the quality of our lives does depend on it.

So please celebrate with us tonight the neighborhood created through Stonecoast – one defined not by geographical place, but by a community of the spirit in which attentiveness resides.