

Address to the VI Form
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Artists and Ancestry

I want to talk with you tonight--specifically to you the VI Form, but I hope the faculty will feel equally included--first exploring these remarkable essays by Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker, then setting up some parameters for us to discuss later our own ancestors. I have three major questions to consider as we study these essays: one, what connections exist between these works and a discussion of heritage? two, why are ancestors important to us? and three, what do those figures from the past--what do your great grandparents--and these two essays have to do with your VI Form year, and with the start of our academic year? Let's begin with the essays you read.

Virginia Woolf, one of the most profound and influential writers of the 20th century, whose novel *To the Lighthouse* you may read this year, and Alice Walker, whose novel *The Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Prize, both search back through what initially appears to be a dead, unwritten and silent past to discover how rich, spiritual and alive that ancestry is. Both recognize that any form of creativity, be it poetry or quilt making, is worthwhile and essential; indeed, Woolf and Walker go out of their way to assert that the non-heroic non-public life--for them, the non-male life--is equally heroic, courageous, necessary, fulfilling. Woolf notes, with understated irony, that women could excuse the lack of a female Shakespeare because,

pointing to the streets and squares and forests of the globe swarming with black and white and coffee-coloured inhabitants, all busily engaged in traffic and enterprise and lovemaking, we have had other work on our hands. Without our doing, those seas would be unsailable and those fertile lands a desert. We have borne and bred and washed and taught, perhaps to the age of six or seven years, the 1,623 million human beings who are...at present in existence, and that, allowing that some had help, takes time.

The unseen life of women, a life that only in recent years has been explored and documented, is no less mighty than the experiences of their male counterparts. My family spent four days this summer hiking in upstate New York, living by the side of an unspoiled lake far away from any town or house, sleeping in a lean-to and cooking out of a one room kitchen that had not been updated since

the 1860's one cold water faucet, and a wood-burning stove--not electric, not gas, but wood. Each morning we would light a fire, feed that fire, fight the smoke coming out the rusted cracks, wait the half hour for water to boil, the hour before the oven was warm enough to bake biscuits; the pattern repeated itself at supper. The first night it was romantic to live so simply, so rustically. The next morning dawned cold, wet, raw; waiting 35 minutes longer for the first cup of coffee was a hard realization of the amount of time meals took. Since the responsibility to prepare food fell to the woman, a creative woman working under spend all day cooking and keeping the stove hot. What a loss of talent, and how comparatively easy we have it today.

Alice Walker points to the same dichotomy of spiritual creativity versus choking conditions. She, like Woolf, observes how women could not create artistically, could not do anything but have and then raise children, maintain and sustain the house, because they were too busy raising the children, keeping the home, "asking for love and instead getting pregnant," living unfulfilled lives, and, in Walker's heritage, answering to white male and female masters. Recall Walker's central questions about this horrible waste of genius:

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmother's time? In our great grandmother's day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. Did you have a genius of a great-great grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)--eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children--when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion. in stone or clay? How was the creativity of black women kept alive? (p. 233-34)

Interestingly, and I believe very significantly, both authors refuse to make their essays pulpits of bitter sexism and racism; the very existence of these essays is a stand against oppression, but when reading them, I do not think men and non-blacks feel excluded from their hopes, fears, criticisms and celebrations. Woolf demands that "Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father" (p 107). Despite surrogate mothers and sperm banks, creation and creativity still require collaboration; we need a harmony of the male and female psyche within all of us to be whole. Alice Walker, rather than lashing out against centuries of injustice, celebrates her mother's garden--she calls it her mother's art--celebrates the "anonymous Black woman in Alabama" who made the

priceless quilt in the Smithsonian, celebrates women's "ability to hold on, even in very simple ways...She has handed down respect for the possibilities--and the will to grasp them...She is involved in work her soul must have"(p. 241).

Furthermore, both essays detail the importance for all of us to create so that there is no silent past, no muffled voice, of either sex or any race. Both Woolf and Walker commemorate an unknown past because they know that that past created, sustained and fostered them, Walker's prologue poem, "Motherroot," portrays the "fragile bloom/ that in the glory/ of its hour/ affirms a heart/ unsung, unseen." There is the crucial connection between previous generations and present day artists. Virginia Woolf insists that Shakespeare's sister,

who never wrote a word...lives on in you and me, and in other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for the great poets are continuing presences: they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. (p. 117)

For Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker, then, the "continuing presences" of the Jane Austens and the Zora Neale Hurstons, known and unknown, are vital to their sense of identity and creativity. But why, you still ask, are ancestors and knowing whom they were worthy of summer research and a humid September evening's talk? Is it only an aristocratic, preppy trend to know how long you have lived in a certain place, how many of your relatives went to that prestigious college, that you are J. Alfred Prufrock the XIV? Or is it only significant to Blacks, as it was in the 1970s when the movie came out, to trace their "roots" back through slavery to Africa? I do not believe either is true. Why? For starters, I think ancestry points to the heart of our most basic human fear and our most fundamental human need: initially, the fear of being alone, unknown, lost--going away from home for the first time, moving into a new town where you haven't gained acceptance yet, not being known or recognized in a foreign city, being misunderstood because someone does not understand you Secondly, the need to belong, to be part of a group; the strength and confidence gleaned from friendship and family; the security of knowing you are in familiar territory; the ease with which we can return to our parent's home, the comfort this campus represents to us against what it symbolizes to those 75 new students trembling at home right now. In *The Grapes of Wrath* John Steinbeck asks "How can we live our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?" A

knowledge of the past, like traveling to another country or part of America and seeing that your life and your home are not the center of the universe, provides a healthy perspective and humility. Learning that other people, especially those related to you, also experienced hardships, parental conflicts, frustrations; that people we only think of as 70 or 40, or as dead, were once children, hormone-filled adolescents, worked at demanding Jobs, traveled to exotic lands, saw towns and industries begin--knowledge of such a similar pattern of life by those related to us gives us our composition. Remember Tennyson's "Ulysses.": "I am a part of all that I have met."

Additionally, an awareness of our ancestors lets us better understand whom we are today. Shakespeare wrote "What's past is prologue"--what has happened begins our present, introduces the right now. That past, all those great grandmothers and grandfathers, great aunts and uncles, is within you, and there is not much you can do to unrelate yourself to that heritage. Of course, you can deny them, you could try a face lift to remove similar features, but the genes, the mannerisms will still reflect your relationship. I am not insisting on you cloning your parents or grandparents, or forcing you to maintain the "family business," live in the same town, vote the same political party, etc. You are a different generation, with different concerns, idiosyncracies, thoughts --but you are connected to them through family, through blood and memories, perhaps even through love and nurturing, through generations of nurturing and molding character and values. I discovered a superb novel this summer called *Obasan*, which describes the lives of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. In it, Aunt Emily, a person filled with history and heritage, exclaims:

"You have to remember. You are history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out. Scream! Denial is gangrene."

I tremendously admire Aunt Emily's sense of identity. To lose or deny any of one's past is to become fragmented, sickly, dead.

Heritage also unites us in surprising and paradoxical ways. During a two week seminar this summer, I was told by a history professor that instead of looking at America as a melting pot, a cauldron where different cultures and religions and races boil down until those differences and great individualities are indistinguishable, that we should see America as a salad bowl, where those

same differing cultures, races, religions, ideas and colors can all be gathered together without losing those unique and vital characteristics; where we can celebrate the differences in cultures, allowing for countless lively contradictions and nationalities and beliefs without homogenizing them into one breed. Here we have been talking about individual family trees, and yet we start becoming closer to our neighbor because we start recognizing how eclectic, how varied, how similar our diversity is.

Let me give you a brief example: my father's great grandfather was married to the granddaughter of Roger Sherman, who signed the Declaration of Independence and helped forge the Constitution. To put the relationship in those terms, a great grandfather and a granddaughter, rather than my great-great-great-great grandfather, makes that connection immediate: I knew one of my great grandmothers, so that past becomes alive, less black and white and frozen as textbook pictures make it; this way I de-romanticize the past. Yet while Roger Sherman may be my great-great-great-great grandfather, he is also that to hundreds of other people. I haven't checked with historical records or the math department, but for argument's sake, say Roger and his wife had three children, and each of them had three children down to my generation: their family--excluding Mrs. Sherman's brothers and sisters and their descendants, Mr. Sherman's brothers and sisters and their descendants, and the families of all the spouses--their family would number 1,093, and there would be 728 other people who could say that Roger Sherman was their great-great-great-great-grandfather! That's a lot of people, and a lot of people in those more recent generations who have different names, locations, interests, people who do not even resemble Roger Sherman, people who do not even know they are related to him or to each other. But they are: here is where neighbors become relatives; the big impersonal world grows smaller, the salad bowl more exciting, the pattern more encompassing. And the whole sense and meaning of the word "family" changes, is forced to change, because it is now embracing so many people, so many cultures, religions, races, countries, beliefs. The family bond is the strongest bond as that family grows--as our recognition and acceptance of how large that family really is' how idiosyncratic and exciting that salad bowl is--then so too does our sense of how connected we all are We are all tied up together on this planet, our fate is familial, our heritage is universal.

How is each of us that salad bowl? During August I too researched my own heritage, discovering ancestors who were Scottish, English, North Irish, French, Dutch; there were early presidents of Princeton, Harvard, and George Washington University; federal judges, ministers, teachers, social workers, merchants, admirals, volunteers, organizers of YWCA's, farmers; family lore even rumors of an ancient relative who in the early 1600s killed his wife in Virginia, at a place still known as Savage's Neck. But I liked these three the most: my great grandfather Peter Carter was a small book publisher in New York City in the mid-19th century, having come over to America from Scotland as a boy. He was also an elder in his church, and through mission work in the city he became extremely close to the Black community, serving as their friend, counselor and minister. They turned to him for help in emergencies, waking him in the middle of the night, asking him for counsel amid their grief. Then there was another great grandfather, William Speers, who lived his whole life in White Abby, in County Antrim of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a land that for centuries has been and still is torn apart with religious hatred between Catholics and Protestants--a fury akin to the Montagues and Capulets. My great grandfather was a Protestant, he was a farmer and he raised livestock; but he was also so respected in White Abbey that neighboring Catholics gave him their money for safekeeping because they did not trust the banks. Protestants admired him so highly that they did not criticize him for dealing with the Catholics. Like Peter Carter, great grandfather Speers built bridges between people who need not be separated; he nurtured the salad bowl.

Thirdly, there was my great-great aunt, Bessy Kent, wife of a congressman from California. Aunt Bessy, with her husband's support, was a Suffragette, fighting for the Women's Vote which finally became law in 1920. During the winter months in Washington, D.C., she brought hot bricks down to the White House, where many of the public demonstrations took place, for her colleagues to stand on and to keep warm by; she even "borrowed" some of her husband's fur coats for her compatriots. But best of all, this middle-aged woman and mother chained herself to the White House fence, was arrested, and would have gladly spent the night in jail except that her husband paid bail and urged her to come home.

Another bridge builder, another character of immense determination and belief

Where does this heritage leave me; what do I do with it? Certainly I am aware that my background defies a simple classification: it is hard to put a man who killed his wife along side a champion of women's rights without some conflicts, contradictions and tensions Great grandfather Carter, great grandfather Speers and great-great Aunt Bessy are beacons of integrity and dedication: their affirmations of faiths are both humbling and inspirational; they are a source of pride and a challenge of conviction But there are many voices within my ancestry that still need to be heard, those hearts "unsung, unseen"; there are Democrats and Republicans, individuals of many features and priorities, but it is essential to embrace them all—"Denial is gangrene," and it is healthier and more fulfilling to confront these contradictions than to suppress and avoid them. In these contradictions is the soul and mesh of character and existence.

The subject of contradictions brings me to my last point, the relevance of this talk to your senior year, the relevance of your grand and great grandparents, whom you will shortly talk about, to the start of this academic year. Some would say that the ability to understand paradoxes and contradictions reflects wisdom, perception, maturity. Ted Sizer, former headmaster at Andover and now Professor of Education at Brown, states that his teaching philosophy is "to disturb" his students as much as possible. I share his tenet about the need to disturb and the need to be disturbed: it is necessary for your growing minds to be challenged; likewise, for faculty's preconceptions to be rattled a bit in the classroom--not to change those thoughts but to activate them, so that we all keep learning. I would hope this year that you seniors, in your classes, in your friendships, in your service to and for the school, will be open to these varying voices --to a younger student or faculty member who may think differently from you, to your parents who are not 17 as you are, to visiting speakers and books that may challenge your vision of the world, to required Chapel, to academic and nonacademic responsibilities expected of you. Work with that salad bowl; do not destroy the wild individuality that can exist together; and, as a friend told my wife when we were married, "keep the edges rough."

Secondly, keep searching, as Woolf and Walker did: explore your ancestors, explore those "continuing presences," but also explore yourself, your own room, your own garden. What different voices remain unheard in you? What apparent contradictions brew within you? The best path to discovering such treasures and traits is to observe yourself in as many contrasting lights as possible:

this school and this particular year offer you rich opportunities, and I urge you to challenge who you think you are through your relationships with others. As seniors, you are the leaders of the school--all of you--not just the class officers and prefects; you set the tone, you establish the atmosphere within the student body and between students and faculty. Work on the corridor, in the classroom, in clubs, athletics and Chapel at that leadership and its many qualities that you mentioned here Wednesday night. Don't worry about your stumbles but keep plodding, keep tugging at these new responsibilities; and again, be receptive to what you don't know now but will discover. Additionally, view yourself in service to others--in community service, form projects, volunteer work, Big Brother/Big Sister. You may never have been involved in such efforts, and you may unearth gold and fulfillment you never imagined possible. Take that challenge on a Sunday morning at Christiana Hospital, or tomorrow when all those new students arrive and could use a Big Brother/Big Sister to steer them through their first busy and terrifying days--remember your own recent past one, two, three or four years ago when you arrived here for the first time. You have much wisdom to hand down.

Finally, recognize as Alice Walker and Virginia Woolf did, that it is essential--it is life-sustaining--to express the creative pulse within you, not to hinder it, nor to hinder that process in others. I believe this need again calls on you to explore yourself, especially through our remarkable Arts and Chapel programs. From woodworking to music to charity to drama, there are an extraordinary number of ways for you to answer your soul, to create, to find meaning and form, to respond to some calling within you. Do not pass up these opportunities to discover how eclectic you are, and do not stifle any of those veins. While there have been other senior classes, what makes you unique is the unknown; what sets you apart is the particular chemistry of the individuals in your class. All of these variables react with each one of you to unfold the tone of this year and the path of your future. In that future lie many challenges and confrontations; therein also grows your creativity, how much fun you can have, how much energy you can foster and infect, how much new meaning you can derive, how much more heritage and vibrancy you can weave into the tapestry, toss into the salad bowl and plant in the garden--Arbor Day has a whole new meaning! Thank you.