

**Commencement Address – Saybrook Graduate School of Psychology, 2006**

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Congratulations on this day of completion. Savor it. There aren't many completion days in life. Those delicious moments when you can sit back and say "It's done. And I did it." Of course, the files may be a mess, the closets overflowing and the cupboards full of moths from all the stuff you forgot to throw out while you were finishing the last page of the last paper, but breathe now, smile, bask in this moment of glory.

And yes, begin again. Washing the cupboards and throwing out the old notes allows your mind to wander, and inevitably it scuttles and crawls into the unfinished business of yesterday and the unknown corners of tomorrow. We may long for rest but the signal changes as we sit there and the green light tells us to get moving.

If you find yourself thinking, "Well, when I retire," or "After I'm 65", forget it. Moving on is part of being alive, and fortunate the person who, in spite of aching bones, and slower mental

processes, reaches old age still able to move in concert with inner desires and the will to be useful.

This is what occupies my thoughts and actions these days: how to do this last phase of life with joy and elegance, how and what to move toward, and, for you, who are not yet here, how to prepare for the inevitable.

Don't be afraid. It may be, as the poet said, "the best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made," And, (God speaking here) "a whole I planned, youth shows but half". It often feels like that to me, pushing 80. And I never expected to feel this way. It's common to hear people who are dying before their time report how their capacity for joy has increased, how they notice beauty all around them, how they relish each moment. And often they say, "Why didn't I live like this before now?"

So old age is that life-segment before dying, only stretched out to maybe 20 years these days. And "before now" is where *you* are.

Given increased life span, and new expectations that come along with that, we have a whole new long-lasting act before the final curtain. Not just an epilogue, but a full-scale performance. We get a chance to pull it all together, better seasoned, more

rehearsed, if not really stars, less self-conscious, less hungry for applause, finding our own light in a deep affinity with the earth and our fellow actors of all generations.

These days I am meeting many people my around my age, running groups, doing readings, and giving talks. Several things have surprised me:

**First**, how many young and middle-aged people are thinking about these later years, some because they're involved with aging parents, many because they, like me, recognize this expanded lifeline as an opportunity and they'd like to get it right.

**Second**, how many elders I meet who are shocked to find themselves old and enjoying it, even, given the fact that, in my terms "we swim in a sea of loss". They are realizing their gift, trying to figure out what to do with these years that will be fulfilling and satisfying.

And **third**, what a force this group will be if it's motivated, respected, utilized. ***So, hang in there!***

*If you are 40 years old now, by the time you're my age you will be one of over 70 million people surviving over the age of 65 and the chances are good that you will reach 90 and beyond.*

And you should be interested in this...because? Well, for one thing, you have a lot more life ahead of you than you thought, probably more than you've lived so far. You can think in broader terms, plan several careers, enjoy winding up instead of down. For you, the word "graduation" tips more toward beginning than ending.

My own life divides almost neatly into 20 year segments and includes full-tilt religious life, running a college theatre department, wife and mother, working as a psychotherapist, and now, a little of everything: writer, group leader, full-time caregiver, mother to a daughter and son-in-law who have brought me constant joy *and* an adorable grandchild, "professional elder." Every now and then, just as an intellectual exercise, I look for the common thread. I find it in phrases like,

pleasure in the creative process,

a continuing delight in close relationships,

a belief in the power of community

a hunger and reverence for beauty

a prevailing awareness of mystery and the unknown

Because you're here, at Saybrook, I will assume your common thread to be somewhat similar to mine, although one

thing age teaches me every day is to assume very little. The groups of elders I meet with remind one another often to remember they have little real knowledge of their younger friends and family members and to offer very little, if any, advice.

So what am I doing here, besides representing women, age, and the founding fathers in the person of my husband? How about if I just try to share some observations which may fit in to a comfortable, familiar space in your mind and add a little upholstery to what you already know.

First, **the world needs you**. Start with that. Specifically, it needs you **right now** because you are students of the **personal**. You speak the language **of motivation**, attitudes, desires, regrets, disappointments, ecstasy . You know, first hand, something about the dark side of altruism, the selectivity of conscience, the continuing subjective interchange of lies and truth.

You understand not only the moral degradation of torture, but the generations of suffering it incurs for victim and perpetrator.

You know that the louder we have to shout our absolute rectitude and dogmas, the more fragile our certitude;

that the more innocent we believe ourselves to be, the more suspect we become;

that each person's story is full of nuances and inexact details, and that pointing to goodness, especially our own, is a relative gesture, at best.

We also bear daily witness to  
the glory of the human spirit,  
the power of determination,  
the joy of connection,  
the endurance of love.

We know something politicians have just discovered as they point to the person in the gallery seated next to the First Lady: **the universal language of the deeply personal story**. We know that gigantic events can be captured in the words or actions of a few: "Let them eat cake", "Bring 'em on", "Ask not what your country can do for you...", "I shall return".

Pictures of suffering individual human beings shout at us beyond argument: Abu Graib, Indonesia, Guantanamo. ( For weeks I carried with me a front page picture of a little girl caressing the face of her newly- found father in New Orleans.) We grieve with the woman wailing over the bodies of her children in Iraq, over tiny corpses covered with flies, strewn on the desert in Darfur, a returning soldier smiling from a gurney with one arm and no legs.

We know that one powerful *movie* putting a personal human face on global warming will open closed minds; that the plays of Moliere sock us in our relaxed, amused bellies with a all-too-current 21<sup>st</sup> century recognition of the greed and hypocrisy eating away at 17<sup>th</sup> Century France, that a short poem, “In Flanders Field”, still speaks to us of one soldier’s personal grief long after World War I; that Leni Riefenstahl’s propaganda films about Hitler helped make him into a hero to his people.

*Society* needs us, among other things, to sharpen our efforts to discern the difference between *whining* and *suffering*, between *appropriate grief* and *depression*, between *ventilating* and *threatening*, and to remind others that *rebellion* might well be the most normal response to a psychotic world. (If you’re on Tom Greening’s email list, you’re getting this message in a much more gut-wrenching way in his poems.)

We must keep faith with this knowledge, our particular discipline. We need not disguise or quantify personal experience to make it true, (although it may be a very worthwhile endeavor to convince the unbelieving.)

Cynicism and ridicule are often an amusing respite. But, after the laugh, let’s return doggedly to developing our stock in

trade: helping ourselves and others to nurture our capacity for empathy, generosity of spirit, awareness of our common bonds. From our work every day we are *forced* to recognize ourselves as lovers, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, who are capable of nobility, heroism and betrayal.

Your expertise at drawing out and portraying the personal subjective experience of your clients or your ability to chronicle the hidden recesses of the human heart *with believable research* is profoundly needed at this moment. *Honor it.*

You are *artists* of the psyche. Aristotle defined *catharsis*, but he relied on the Greek dramatists to *move* the people to fear hubris, recognize the futility of war, feel immediate anguish as Antigone is entombed by the state for daring to speak against it.

For years I was a little embarrassed at teaching and working in college theatre, thinking it not as “academically sound” as history, literature, math or science. (Not dissimilar to the way our present educational system treats music and the arts, and the way many academics look at Psychology.)



But I was young.

I should have known better since I had switched my college major to drama after seeing a performance of Lansbury's "Raisin in the Sun", an experience that slammed me and an audience of strangers into a powerful common awareness of racial segregation. I knew something huge had just happened and I wanted to join up. (The likeness between that electric jolt and the elation of religious ritual in the company of believers has not escaped me.) Still, for years, I didn't quite trust myself. Delving into all those powerful feelings was so constantly stimulating, so full of *emotion*, so alive! How could it be really worthwhile?

I'm grown up now. I understand that drama, novels, poetry, elegant language and design, the spaces we inhabit, as well as the music that reaches across all boundaries, teach us from the *inside* out.

What goes on *inside* the person sitting across from you is your focus. What you see and hear, the way you respond, using your powers of observation, intuition and presence is, without doubt, *an art form*. The moment the door shuts in your office (or the corporate board room), leaving you on your own with one or more persons, knowledge becomes only a backdrop, There is no script. Freud and Jung aren't there. Improvisation is required; your

skill improves with time, but always pulls on the deepest part of your being.

The root word for artist and practice are the same. An artist is one who *practices*. We call our work our *practice*. And what a practice it is! Our everyday materials and subject matter are the struggles, passions, joys and failures of human beings like ourselves. Like the painter, writer, musician, sculptor, architect, we are pressing an ear to the moans and yearnings of the universe and intervening on its behalf.

If we do this well, and pass along what we know in whatever style suits us, our work reveals, reflects, and may even foretell what we're all up to here, *right now*, on this planet.

We have to remember that accepting murder, plunder, extortion, and greed as “necessary” parts of life is not only a failure of *compassion*, but even before that, a failure of **the imagination**. If we cannot imagine trying to breathe in a world swallowed in smog, sleeping on the street, carrying H.I.V. in our body, losing a job or a pension with kids to feed and a mortgage due, having to choose between food and medication, we won't feel compelled to change anything.

We need to revere what we do; learn from it every day, even as we bemoan our limitations. This profession provides a natural learning ground for increasing our capacity for intimacy, compassion, flexibility. ***You will need these qualities as the losses pile up in your later years***, as they surely will. We have a very personal investment in every moment.

In her 90's, Joan Erikson, who had outlived Eric into the next decade, added a new developmental stage beyond ego-integrity. She borrowed the term from actual research and her own experience, calling it *ego-transcendence*. Among other characteristics, this life-phase moves into

affinity with all generations,  
a feeling of cosmic communion with the universe,  
an appreciation of solitude  
and an easy flow between past and present time.

For me, this is no dry theory, because I live with it every day in the person of my husband, Jim, whom many of you know either personally or from his writings. Since his stroke he has no memory of his accomplishments or the particulars of his life. But having lived with him for 38 years I see him as having simply melted down to his essence. The “tornado” of production and

accomplishment has quieted into a gentle breeze of acceptance, even contentment.

For many of you, Jim's therapist interventions are familiar: "What now?" "And so...?" "And then...?" "You're quiet now...take a breathe, just listen inside."... "Wait... What's happening now?" And lots and lots of *silence*.

This is where he lives these days, *in the present moment*, experiencing first-hand the existential perspective which involved him all of his life.

***Even without a memory:***

he's moved easily to tears,

chuckles over his own disabilities, comforts me when I'm caught in mine,

delights in being with people he loves,

still loses himself in an opera, a symphony, a poem, a beautiful day outdoors

and, unfortunately, still bombards us with terrible puns!

When he speaks, you're most likely to hear, "thank you" and "I'm so lucky". The other day he told me he had to think of a better way to say, "I love you". It just wasn't strong enough to convey all he feels.

*(An actual bit of bathroom dialogue from the other morning.:*

*Me: “Oh dear, when I look into the mirror I see an old lady.” Jim: “I see a cute chick” Me: “That’s my guy!”)*

Perhaps this is all merely an accident of nature, the mysterious workings of an aging brain. But I’ve been noticing that most of us grow old becoming more and more of who we already are. As far as I’m concerned, I still live with essentially the same person I’ve been with all these years.

Still, these final days were not in his plan. It turns out that growing old, like the rest of life, overflows with surprises. So, *stay awake*.

In Jim’s words, “Play the hand you’re dealt.”

Don’t fold while you’re still holding some cards.

Sit out a hand if you need a break.

And even when it looks like you’re losing, it may not be too late to try a new strategy.

Above all, as long as you’re in it, stay in love with the game .