

essay

Commencement Address 2008 Smith College

Margaret Edson

President Christ, my new friend;
Chair McPherson, taller far than a common board chair;
Trustees, you who care so much about this college, and who know how to party;
Faculty and Staff: how beautiful on the mountain are the feet of the messengers;
Class of 1983, my sisters: when the history of the college is written, the record will note that this class was the best looking;
Allison and Desirée, I met you in the processional and I just wanted to say hi;
Families — Mom, Dad;
and Graduates, the Pride and Joy.

I remember on this day Smith women who have died and who continue to be part of my life:
Ruth Mortimer, Class of 1953, curator of rare books, my teacher and my generous friend; U.S. Army Captain Roselle Hoffmaster, Class of 1998: her death diminishes me, and I pray her life will expand me;
Nancy Boyd Gardner, Class of 1984, had the color of red hair that looked so good with dark green;
Beth McBeath, Class of 1982, whom I knew in the Glee Club and at whose memorial her senior year we sang the old revival hymn “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”;
Louise Zanar, Class of 1978, whom I did not know personally, but who could play the harmonica with her nose.

“Filled to the brim.”
“Drunk to the dregs.”
“Unscrew the locks from the doors.
Unscrew the doors themselves from their hinges.”
(My task is to burden you with platitudes, and I accept with relish.)
“Only connect.”
“Think of things in themselves.”
“Stop, drop, and roll.”
“Do Not Walk on the Grass if You are Going Anywhere.”

Salutations, memorials, bromides: let us commence.

I want to talk about love — not romance, not love l-u-v.
I want to talk about a particular kind of love, this love: classroom teaching.

I have my posse of gaily clad classroom teachers behind me.
They like to be called college professors.
And we can't all work for the government.

We gather together because of classroom teaching.
We have shown you our love in our work in the classroom.

Classroom teaching is a physical, breath-based, eye-to-eye event.
It is not built on equipment or the past.
It is not concerned about the future.

It is in existence to go out of existence.
It happens and then it vanishes.
Classroom teaching is our gift.
It's us; it's this.

We bring nothing into the classroom — perhaps a text or a specimen. We carry ourselves, and whatever we have to offer you is stored within our bodies. You bring nothing into the classroom — some gum, maybe a piece of paper and a pencil: nothing but yourselves, your breath, your bodies.

Classroom teaching produces nothing. At the end of a class, we all get up and walk out. It's as if we were never there. There's nothing to point to, no monument, no document of our existence together.

Classroom teaching expects nothing. There is no pecuniary relationship between teachers and students. Money changes hands, and people work very hard to keep it in circulation, but we have all agreed that it should not happen in the classroom. And there is no financial incentive structure built into classroom teaching because we get paid the same whether you learn anything or not.

Classroom teaching withholds nothing. I say to my young students every year, "I know how to add two numbers, but I'm not going to tell you." And they laugh and shout, "No!" That's so absurd, so unthinkable. What do I have that I would not give to you?

Bringing nothing, producing nothing, expecting nothing, withholding nothing —
what does that remind you of?

Is this a bizarre occurrence that will go into *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*?
Or is it something that happens every day, all the time, all over the world,
and is based not on gain and fame, but on love.

There are those who say that classroom teaching is doomed and that by the time one of you addresses the class of 2033, there will be a museum of classroom teaching.

Ever since the invention of wedge-shaped writing on a clay tablet, classroom teaching has been obsolete. It's been comical. Why don't we just write the assignments and algorithms on a clay tablet, hang it up on the wall, and let the students come who will to teach themselves from our documents?

Why, since the creation of writing with a pen on a piece of paper, do we still bother to have schools?

Why, since the invention of movable metal type, don't we all just go to the library?

Why do we have to have class? Why do we need teachers?

Why, since the advent of the microchip, don't we all stay home in our pajamas and hit *send*?

Technology is nipping at the heels of classroom teaching, but I perceive no threat.

How could something false replace something true?

How could a substitute, a proxy, step in for something real and alive?

How could the virtual nudge out the actual?

The other great threat to classroom teaching is the rush to data — data-driven education.

We must measure everything — percentages, charts, tables.

I'm not entirely opposed to this.

If data-driven education were a pie graph, I would have a piece.

But I was not educated and did not become a teacher to produce data.

I love the classroom.

I loved it as a student, and I love it as a teacher.

I can name every teacher I ever had:

Mrs. Mulshanok, Miss Williams, Mrs. Clark, Miss Bogan, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Muys, Mrs. Parker, Mr. Eldridge, Miss Bush — and that's just through sixth grade.

I could go on, I promise.

I loved coming to class: the chairs, the windows, unzipping my book bag.

And I loved my teachers.

There was content, I suppose, but that's not what I remember.

I remember my teachers.

I remember being in the room,

and no data and no bar graph will be assembled to replace that, or even to capture it.

This week my students worked on dividing a pizza between two people, and they realized that if you make the line down the center of the pizza the two sides will be equal. After much trial and error, they came to this conclusion on their own, and I welcome you to try it. I think it's really going to take off, and let this be where it begins.

When they take a standardized test, they will be able to fill in the bubble next to the pizza that is cut exactly in half. Do they know that will be the correct answer? Yes. But I don't care that much. What I care about is how they got there, how they figured it out for themselves.

This skinny little high school senior got herself into Smith College by writing an essay about Anne Morrow Lindbergh's theme, "The journey, not the arrival, matters." It worked for me.

Standardized tests measure the arrival, but they have nothing to say about the journey, about having wonderful ideas. *Do you know it/do you not know it* is second, and *how do you know it*, and *who are you*, is first.

The only way this knowledge grows inside a student is with a teacher, a classroom teacher. Of course, my students will insist they did it themselves, and I don't try to disabuse them of that.

But the work you graduates have done was in the classroom with your teachers.

That's the miracle of today.

Why don't we talk about it?

Because it doesn't show up.

There's not a bar graph for classroom teaching. There's no data for classroom teaching, and yet it persists this year and the next year and the year after that.

Telling tens of thousands of people what to do is not teaching, it's shouting, and there's a lot of that going around.

Showing somebody how to do something exactly the way you've always done it is not teaching, it's training. And there's plenty of that, too.

But the reality that is neither shouting nor training is classroom teaching.

Nobody can touch it because nobody can point to it.

You have it forever.

When it grows inside you, it's doing its work.

We can disappear.
We'll never see you again, probably.
The chairs will be folded.
It will be as if we were never here.
There will be nothing we can count after today.
But not everything that counts can be counted.
Not everything that matters can be put into a pie chart.

The Board of Trustees has set a very great challenge for itself:
to educate us all for lives of distinction.
You are never going to be able to make a bar graph out of that.
That is immeasurable, and that's what makes it so real.
I admonish you — because that's my job — to think about the things that float away:
your love for your friends,
the smell of the lilacs,
the feeling your families have on this day.
You will have nothing to take with you.
The diploma you receive will be someone else's.

Everything meaningful about this moment, and these four years,
will be meaningful inside you, not outside you.

I've been a classroom teacher for sixteen years—as long as you have been in the classroom. We
started the same year. And I hope to go on for fourteen more years.
That will make thirty, and I'll be done.

At the end of that time, someone will bring me a box, and I will put in it a ceramic apple somebody
gave me thinking it would be symbolic somehow. I will have nothing, and that will be proof of the
meaning of my work.

If you can point to something, you might lose it, or you might break it, or someone might take it
from you. As long as you store it inside yourself, it's not going anywhere — or it's going
everywhere with you.

This day is a day of love.
It's a day of your family's love for you,
your love for each other and your teachers,
and your teachers' love for you.

In time, the bar graphs may tumble,
the clay tablets may crumble.
They're only made of clay.
But our love
is here to stay.

Thank you.