

David Gessner

## Convocation Speech

I am a creative writing professor and one of the clichés of my profession is to tell people to avoid clichés. A cliché, you may remember from high school, is something people tend to say a lot in certain circumstances. Something people say a lot in this certain circumstance--convocation--is “follow your passion.”

Another thing people sometimes do when they are standing up here, perhaps to the point of cliché, is to quote a particular line in a particular poem by a particular New England poet named Robert Frost. In “Two Tramps in Mud Time” Frost writes: “My

object in living is to unite/ my avocation with vocation.” He means uniting your hobby with your job, your love with your profession, your heart with your wallet. People listened to this advice a lot during the sixties, long before you were born, though people listen less often now, understandably given the tough times. But I would like to pause here and say a word for this yoking of love and work, passion and paycheck. That is I would like to take the old cliché and shake it out and beat it with a broom, knocking the dust off.

The only way I know how to do this is to turn to the experience I know best, my own. I decided to become a writer when I was about your age, and for many years after that I paid for that decision. The world, it turned out, didn't put much stock in my idealistic dreams. For a decade or so I worked as a carpenter, bookstore clerk, substitute teacher and counselor at a homeless shelter while sneaking in my writing either late at night or early in the morning. That is the thing about trying to unite your avocation and vocation. It does not often come quickly and it rarely comes

easily. But what I believe, and what I believed even during those hard years, is that it is a joy to do what you love. There is no Hollywood ending to my story, or maybe there is in a small, indy sort of way. I now get to write books that people read. True, I am not a millionaire, and I still have frustrations in my career. But I am often joyous. I make things! And I work every day at what I love most.

Okay, good for me. But what about you? The trouble with the whole “follow your passion” thing is the not-so-small problem of figuring out what that passion is. And here is where I am going to drop my second big piece of advice, advice that may be slightly less common, less cliché, than the first. The advice is this: *wait*. What do I mean by this advice, which seems so contradictory to the first? Well, during *my* first year at college I remember feeling liberated, confused, occasionally ecstatic, but also, at some base level, scared. Scared-people are not usually patient people: they want some rule, some answer, to fight off their fear with. So this is what my second piece of advice means. Keep that fear at bay, at

arm's length, while you get to know your new home and yourself a little bit. One thing you may notice about this new place, the place where you will spend your next four years, is that it is a coastal environment, and coastal environments are always in movement, islands migrating, sands shifting, storms re-shaping the landscape. "Firm ground is not available ground," said the poet A.R.

Ammons. He was speaking specifically of beach grass, which has trouble finding purchase in the shifting sands of our dunes, but he was also talking about the trouble that all creatures, humans included, have in living by the shore. You will recognize a similar uncertain state in yourself and you may feel the urge to deny it, to grasp for answers, to pave it over. There is another trickier, less traveled path, however. You can, instead of seeking quick answers, learn to be in uncertainties.

But I am getting vague again. What does this mean practically? It may mean not reaching for the first or easiest thing. It may mean nothing more than experimenting a bit by taking different classes in different majors before pre-determining "This

is what I am and what I will do.” If you look through the course catalogue with a keen enough eye what you will see are possibilities, possible selves to be. Try a few of those selves on before deciding “this is me.” “Be hesitant” may not sound like the best advice, but there it is. Though you may find a trade here, college is still not a trade school.

For good measure let me throw another writing cliché into the mix. “Find your own voice.” I’ve come to believe that the best way to find your voice is to listen carefully to yourself. That will be part of your job here, too. Listening to yourself, along with having fun, studying, and making friends.

Before moving on let me add one more way that the writing life might apply, metaphorically at least, to college life. When I am confused about what to work on next in my writing I always ask myself a simple question. Not “What should I do?” or “What do I think will be most successful?” but “What am I most excited about?” You might consider asking yourself that question as you try on different classes, different selves. What gets your blood

pumping, your pulse beating? Which is not to say that you should avoid discipline or what you may at first perceive as drudgery and only turn toward what is easy. An old professor of mine once spoke of “the pleasures of the difficult”—he was talking about both mountain climbing and writing--and steep challenges can be the most exciting. In fact small things can be hard when you are not excited, while hard things flow easily when you are fully engaged.

Let me change directions, or at least seem to change directions, for a minute. I can't quite see ending this talk without saying a word about our school mascot. With apologies to the chancellor, I need to state this directly. There is no such thing as a seahawk. It is no more real than a griffin or unicorn. But the bird that we *call* a seahawk is very real. The real name for a seahawk is an osprey and ospreys are spectacular birds, birds that you will sometimes see, if you look up, flying over campus. I became obsessed with ospreys long before I started teaching at UNCW and that obsession might serve as another example of the way that

passions can sneak up on you. At the time I first got to know the birds I was living on Cape Cod. It was a drizzly April, and I had just come out of a period when I had been very sick and my work--my writing--was not going well. I took a walk down to the ocean and headed out to the end of the jetty, lost in my own thoughts.

What shocked me out of self was the sight of a huge bird—that I first took to be a bald eagle—rising up off the small warning light at the jetty's end and flapping toward me. It wore a black bandit mask and its wings flashed dark brown and white and a fish was clutched in its huge talons. That moment on the jetty sparked something in me and before I knew it I had started to learn everything I could about ospreys. One of the first things I learned was that they were coming back from sickness, too, that they had been all but wiped out in New England by the chemical DDT, but that now, with DDT outlawed, they were recovering with a vengeance. I began to watch them at their large shaggy nests and notice things. I noticed, for instance, that ospreys were packrats and would jam anything--boat line and tin foil and that fake grass

from Easter baskets and in one case a naked Barbie doll--into the nest's sides, and I noticed how they reached down oh-so delicately with their sharp, deadly bills and carefully fed their young, who looked like miniature dinosaurs. But my favorite thing was to watch the birds dive into the ocean. I am a big sports fan and I am happy to report that your school mascot is the Michael Jordan of birds. From as high as a hundred feet they will pull in their wings until they are in the shape of the Bat signal above Gotham and then go plummeting down, looking like they are going to crash into the water headfirst, until, at the very last second they pop a wheelie and spear a poor fish with those talons. *Thwuck*. Henry David Thoreau said he craved contact. And that's what an osprey's dive is. Pure wild physical contact.

It would turn out that that moment of contact would have unexpected results in my own life. I would write a book about ospreys which would be part of the reason I would end up teaching at a school that had ospreys as a mascot. And then, one year not long after moving here, I would decide to follow ospreys on their

migration to South America, which meant sneaking into Cuba and then having machine guns pointed at me in Venezuela. The great nature lover John Muir wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” I didn’t even take a biology course in college and here I was learning everything I could about these birds. I found that Muir was right and that everything in my life was now hitched to ospreys.

But back to the wild dives. It occurs to me that while an osprey may occasionally soar to greatness, today we should focus not on their soaring but on the diving, since it seems to embody, in a less cliché way, what I was trying to tell you before. Now that you live here, by the coast, you can witness the spectacle of an osprey dive by simply heading out to Wrightsville Beach and watching them plunge into the surf. You will see that those dives are wild and intense and direct, a moment of going-for-it, and striking down at one’s singular goal, the fish. But you will also notice something else, something I haven’t yet mentioned. You

will notice that while their dives are wild, something comes before the dive. That is you will notice that as important as the passionate plunge of the dive is, the pre-drive patience is equally important.

An osprey, you'll see, will search a long time along the coast, peering down into the water, treading air, before diving. And even after it dives it will re-adjust in midair, before finally committing

So let's circle back to my original point. It's cliché to say follow your passion. *So what?* Follow your passion. Just don't forget to wait a little first. Figure out what it is that you love and while you're doing this give yourself time to be undecided. All the practical forces in the world will tell you this is a bad idea. But today I tell you it isn't. Indecision, or at least a little pausing, can be the best decision you ever make. Wait patiently before you plunge. But when you do, do it with all your heart. "I love all men who dive," said Melville. He meant all people, not just all men, but you get the point. Deep immersion, deep love of what we do and passionate commitment to that avocational vocation, is a thrilling possibility that is open to all of us.

So soar to greatness by all means. It is a noble ambition. But while you're up there remember to look around. And after you've hovered and searched and when you finally see what you want, and are sure of it—whether your goal is to catch a fish or to become a biochemist or entrepreneur or, god help you, a writer—don't forget to dive.

Thank you and good luck during the next four years.