

Baccalaureate Address, May 20, 2001

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Intro.

This weekend, as your family members arrive in Grinnell, and you say good-bye to College friends, many of you have occasion to think about love. The significance of love in our lives becomes both more visible and more vibrant as we gather to celebrate your Commencement.

And sometimes that visibility is satisfying-- there is the atmosphere of pride and pleasure all around you.

And sometimes that vibrancy is stressful-- because you aren't sure whether all the people who love you should really be in the same town together.

And sometimes the atmosphere of love makes you lonely. I know that many of the seniors here miss their mothers or fathers or grandparents, who couldn't make the long trip to Iowa.

Many of you in this room today feel especially the absence of loved ones, who have died; and it feels strange to you again how your life goes on without them.

And all of you who are graduating have begun to realize the friendships that seemed pretty ordinary at Grinnell may turn out to be pretty extraordinary in your life. And you aren't sure what will happen next in those friendships or how.

So for all these reasons, I want to reflect with you for a few minutes about love. I will distinguish between two modes of love that we all feel. Let's call the first, 'desiring' love, and the second, 'affirming' love.

Desiring Love.

Desiring love perceives the beauty of another, and wants to encompass that beauty in our lives. Desire longs for the other to come close. The Greek philosopher Plato wrote that in love we want to be united to the other forever. We feel that our happiness would be ruined if the other were lost.

Now, sexual attraction presents the obvious case of desiring love. Sexual attraction is a great igniter of desire. You see the beauty in each other. You feel a mutual lack. You embrace each other. Happiness. [Grinnell College is a cauldron of lust. I'm sure your parents wouldn't have let you come here if they'd known that.]

The attraction between lovers has all the structural elements of desiring love, and for this reason, I suspect, Western philosophers and theologians heap scorn upon it. They say it is an appetite; it is concupiscence; it is fleshly and selfish and self-centered, not a mode of love at all.

But let's not hasten to insult desiring love; I suspect it is the earliest mode of love we feel. If desiring love is self-centred, it may be the reason we are selves with centers in the first place. The desire that implores the other to 'come here', 'stay with me', 'hold me forever' is the love small children feel for their parents. [My two year old, Will, takes the 'hold me forever' bit quite literally.] When we are little, our happiness *does* depend on the adults we love coming to us, to feed and care for us, to hold us and interpret the world for us.

And one might see children's love as self-centered, except that it is so often reciprocated by parents. I am not the only mother or father in this room who has been awestruck by the beauty of a child, who has longed to hold him or her close and safe forever. I am not the only parent who has thought that I should never be happy again if one of mine were lost.

So I don't think desiring love is just about lust or self-gratification or immaturity. I think it is a perennial dimension of our openness to the beauty of others, and of our need to be formed in relation with them.

But desire does present a predicament, which philosophers have rightly pointed out; that is, when we love this way, we do want to keep the other with us forever. And yet we almost certainly cannot. Every human being is vulnerable to accident, change, and death. So the risk of desiring love, despite its incurable optimism, is the risk of separation and grief. And the hurt and grief can be considerable, as many of you in this room know. We don't always recover from loss.

So, how can we love well and deeply in the face of this? Should we cease desiring the mortals around us, whose beauty is so fragile and impossible to hold?

Affirming Love

Here I want to turn our attention to the other mode of love, which I said we would call affirming love. We each have experience of love emanating from us. And by this I mean those occasions when you have felt love as active *energy* in praise of another's existence. Affirming love makes us grateful for a world that has such lovely creatures in it. Affirming love does not depend on the beloved's closeness, and does not require or demand the other's embrace. In this mode, we can love at a distance, and over a great deal of time.

Is affirming love happy? It rejoices; it delights.

And I suspect it is affirming love that motivates our vision and our work for justice. It is affirming love that sees the need for a just society, not because it sees all human beings as equal, but because it sees that each human being is unique, unrepeatable, irreplaceable. Affirming love knows that each of us loves and is loved as no one else can be; so, *therefore*, affirming love extends itself practically in the world so that those we love and those they love can realize their unique promise.

Desiring love and affirming love are not separate kinds of love. They are different modes of loving, and they must be balanced. It is the work of love to discern, in each case, what that balance ought to be.

Time, Memory and Love

The Catholic monk Thomas Merton observed that many of us learn to think of loving relationships as deals we have made. Friends, spouses, even children, all come to be assessed on the basis of how useful they are to us, how important they make us look to others. We learn that we can 'trade-in', 'trade-up', 'cash-out'. And, therefore, Merton observed, we often waste love.

There's a scene in an American film where Julia Roberts is trying to decide whether she should trade in her committed relationship for a new one that looks more exciting. And an older woman tells her, "I wouldn't do it. And Julia asks her, 'But wouldn't you always wonder?'" And the woman tells her, "I would always rather wonder than regret." When I was twenty-two, that sounded boring.

But now, I think it *is* better to wonder than regret. Because what Julia doesn't know that the older woman does—what you can't know when you are twenty-two-- is how long regret can last, or how, eventually—it is ironic—how, eventually, regret turns into wonder-- if one is blessed.

The world is full of wonders—opportunities, possibilities, people—and you can be deeply appreciative of that without regret.

As we grow older, time gets deeper. The present gains volume from the past. Memories flash to the surface and kiss the moment, then disappear again.

And so one day, many years from now, you will be in London or Toronto or Bombay, and the smell of rain on pavement will quicken the image of a woman you loved—barefeet, wet pavement, East Street, Grinnell.

Or, one day many years from now, watching your own daughter leap up to catch a frisbee, *there* will be the kinetic memory of a young man you loved, leaping—brown arm outstretched, blue sky, the pine trees, the Forum.

It is a great gift to share the volume of time with people you love and people who have loved you. Don't waste love-- I say this to all of you, to all of us--not the old loves, that

still have the power to frustrate and wound; not the new brilliant loves that bewilder the future; not the complicated loves that life might be easier without; not the ordinary, transparent, habitual loves, which none of us could live without.

There will be many times in the next years when you will long to be closer to someone in this room than you can be. And you will suffer desiring love--parents for children, children for grandparents, lovers who are separated, friends for much-loved friends. It was always the risk.

But you can love at a distance and over a great deal of time. You can extend yourselves for each other in the affirming love that works to make a world fit for all.

And you can keep each other then in your wonder and delight, so you can let each other go when you must.

Congratulations, seniors. Be daring; go well.