

Boston College Dinner Address to Graduating Seniors

April 5, 2005

For me, publishing my first novel is a dream come true.

I've always been a reader and a writer. I've always loved stories.

One of my earliest memories: it's naptime, I'm lying in bed with my mom, my little sisters—our baby brother came later. My mom's reading *Sleeping Beauty*. And I'm caught in the story. But it's not only the story. It's the book, the feel of its cardboard cover, the gorgeous, painstakingly drawn paintings, with their muted, pastel colors. When you looked at the pictures, you just knew that the artist believed in the story too. It was the dim light—the rhythm of my mother's voice.

As I got a little older, I started to make up my *own* stories. I had this big sunny bedroom in the attic—today, you'd call it a loft. I'd spend hours, alone in my room. In the summer, with window open, I could hear the kids outside, playing hide and seek, laughing. Calling each other. The crack of a baseball bat, the kids squealing, cheering the runner around the bases. And I'd be sprawled out on the floor, making up stories, plays. If you stood outside my bedroom door, you'd hear me talking to myself

—and you'd probably think I was losing it.

The minute I was old enough to read, I immersed myself in books. I don't know a single writer who isn't an avid reader. I read anything and everything—fairy tales, King Arthur. *Exodus* is the first adult book I remember reading. I was ten or eleven.

In high school, I went from make believe to “real” writing. I started with the school newspaper. I liked writing for the high school paper. But I had bigger ambitions.

So one day, I went to the newsroom of our town paper—I don't think I even bothered to call, just popped in, asked for a job. At first, I covered high school sports—football and hockey games, track meets. After I'd been writing for them for awhile, they asked me to write a column, about whatever happened to be going on at the high school. They called it “High School News” and they ran my picture under my byline. That was my first professional writing position. They paid me a dollar a week.

As I got older, I continued writing and reading. I wrote for the town paper for awhile. I wrote a fitness column for a regional newspaper, edited a tiny newsmagazine. I enjoyed writing nonfiction. Especially feature articles—stories about people.

In 1990, I took my first creative writing class. I'd never written a short story. The stories and plays I made up when I was a kid were always for me. I'd never written them down. Writing fiction opened a whole new world. When I was writing, I felt the way I did when I was a kid, listening to my mom reading stories. Completely lost in the work. The hours would just fall away.

Of course I wanted to publish. I remember telling that to my writing teacher one day. At that point, I'd written a total of two stories. In my *life*. He was a kind man: he didn't laugh in my face.

He did advise me to be patient. “Don't rush yourself,” he told me. “It takes about ten years to really develop the craft.” Ten years. Think about that for a second.

The award-winning short story writer, Bobbie Ann Mason, said the same thing. The apprenticeship for serious fiction writers lasts approximately ten years. It takes about that long to pull all of the disparate parts together. That's not to say that *no* one publishes sooner. A lot depends on what you're trying to do. If you're writing a plot-driven story,

for instance, and you're an ace at plotting, you might get lucky. Same with nonfiction—a decent story, if it has the right elements, if it's quirky and unusual, can be edited into a great one. But serious fiction writers—by serious, I mean people who care about writing truthfully, about understanding and communicating things that really matter to people—have a much tougher road.

If ten years seems like an eternity to you, you're not alone. I felt a twinge, more than a twinge—of disillusionment.

Over the next few years, rejections piled up. Some days, I'd read what I'd written that day and think, this is it. I've turned the corner. The sentences said what I wanted them to say. The characters behaved. Other times, I saw my writing more realistically and knew my work wasn't getting published because it wasn't ready for publication. Chris Tilghman, a wonderful man, one of my teachers in grad school, used to say, "I can teach you 97% of what you need to know. But that elusive 3% makes all the difference in the world." Sort of like the difference between running a four minute mile and running 3:59. That one second seems like nothing; in reality, it is everything.

My lowest point came the morning I was kicked out of my writing group. I wasn't writing to the level of the rest of the people in the group. There were days—lots of days—when I wondered why I bothered. It wasn't as though the cosmos would explode if Terri Long stopped writing. The truth is, nothing would happen. I'd look exactly the same. Unless I told them, nobody would know any different. (Except for my family, of course. They wouldn't be able to live with me.) The sun would keep shining. The birds would fly south. As Flannery O'Connor said, "The world does not need another writer." It's a hard reality. But it's true.

It's also true that you can't give up. Persistence, as with anything else, is the most important quality a writer possesses. If you keep at it, keep writing, keep submitting your work, eventually the writing will improve and you'll be published.

Maybe some of you have heard of John Kennedy Toole, the guy who wrote *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Toole was a smart guy. He'd earned a bachelor's from Tulane, a master's from Columbia. He would have had his doctorate from Columbia, but he was drafted before he was able to finish. This was 1961. In 1969, he finished his novel. He considered the novel a masterpiece.

He sent the manuscript to Simon and Schuster. The editors loved it. This is a typical publishing story: Editors are excited about a book, but ultimately realize they don't know what to do with it or how to market it. The editor at Simon and Schuster had a talk with Toole. He said, "your book isn't really about anything."

Toole fell into a serious depression after that. A year later, he killed himself.

In 1980, the book was published. His mom had given it to Walker Percy, who loved it. Percy escorted the book through the publishing process.

The novel Toole's editor rejected, the novel that wasn't about anything, won the Pulitzer Prize. It's sold close to 2 million copies and been translated into 18 languages.

That's how it is in publishing. Four or five years ago, I read a profile in the *Globe*. The writer—I can't remember his name—was a Harvard grad. He'd had three or four books rejected before he published the one they were writing about. He said, "your chances of publishing a first novel are about the same as for winning the lottery."

I've been reading the New Testament, lately. There's a story—maybe you remember it—about a Canaanite woman. If you'll forgive me for imposing a secular spin on a Biblical story, I'd like to tell you about her.

First, she's a Gentile. Remember, this is the first century. If you're Jewish—which of course Jesus was—a Gentile is sort of like a wino in the Bowery. You know that you're supposed to be nice to him. But God does he stink.

Poor thing—a Gentile. And her daughter's possessed. Meaning she has some kind of mental disease. So this Canaanite woman goes up to Jesus. Jesus has always got big crowds around him, so she had to push and shove her way in. She's shouting, making all sorts of noise. Making a real spectacle of herself. "Have mercy on me," she cries. My daughter has a demon, she says. "Have mercy on me."

What do you think Jesus does?

He ignores her.

Now she's getting desperate. She's ranting and raving. The disciples are getting fed up. She's being a real pain of herself, disrupting their gig. They urge Jesus to get rid of her. Not just ask him. They urge him.

But this lady is not about to give up. Her little girl is possessed. If you're a mom, what do you do?

She falls down on her knees, gets right in Jesus' face. "Please," she begs. "Help me."

By now, Jesus knows he can't just blow her off. But he's not inclined to help her either. He was sent here to save his own people—the Jews. Not to save her. What he says is rather nasty. "It's not fair to give the children's food to the dogs." The dogs.

At this point, most of us would pack it in. I'm not a quitter, but even I would probably leave. You can only embarrass yourself so much. Most of us can only take so much rejection. If you're a writer, where do you draw the line? At a hundred rejections? Two hundred? Jesus has absolutely no interest in this woman. And he's made no bones about it. It's like an editor telling you she can't use your story. Worse, that your story reads as if a two year-old wrote it. Editors don't really say that—but that's what writers hear.

Anyway, this chick's a fighter. Her persistence goes beyond the pale. "Lord," she says. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs from their master's table."

And you know what? Jesus gave in. Except for a parallel story in Mark, that is the only time—the only time in the entire New Testament that Jesus is bested in a debate. But he gave in to this Gentile. And a woman.

Because of her faith.

If you have a dream, whatever it is, you have to have faith in yourself.

When it feels as though everyone in the world is telling you you're not good enough, remind yourself that you are.

My novel was turned down 22 times. I knew that my book wasn't perfect, that there were things I could improve. Sections I could tighten. But I'd heard enough positive feedback from the editors, at major publishing houses, who'd read it to know it had merit. And I refused to let go. If I gave up, I'd be giving up on myself. And I couldn't do that.

I'm not alone. I've gathered a few examples for you:

Alex Haley, 200 rejections.

William Kennedy, *Ironweed*, 13 rejections. His agent said, “Who wants to read about bums? Especially bums in Albany.” *Ironweed* won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize and the Book Critic’s Circle Award.

Dr. Suess’s first book, 23 rejections.

Richard Bach, *Jonathon Livingston Seagull*, 20 rejections. His agent said, “Look, they’re not interested in a talking seagull.” When it was finally published, the book sold 3 million copies.

Andre Dubus III, *House of Sand and Fog*, 29 rejections. The book was runaway bestseller, an Oprah pick, a National Book Award winner, and a major motion picture.

Chicken Soup for the Soul—The editors said: “It’s a stupid book. It has no title, no sex, no violence, no edge.” 123 rejections. The first book sold 8 million copies. Today there are between 68-70 million *Chicken Soup* books in print.

Publishing is a business. A large house can receive a thousand manuscripts a day. A small book reviewer in the Midwest—I read this just recently—receives 400 requests a week, from authors and publishers looking for reviews. And those are books that have been published—so the manuscripts have been vetted. The competition in the business is fierce. If an editor buys a book and it doesn’t sell, she can lose her job. And a lot of them do. That’s a big risk. Added to time constraints and other job-related stress, good books sometimes get away. This goes for literary agents too. You have to keep trying.

Believe in yourself. Be persistent.

And you have to do the work. That’s really the bottom line. Every semester, when I start a new class, I ask how many people hate revision. No one responds at first. Who’s going to tell a writing teacher he hates to revise? But then one hand goes up. The person

looks kind of sheepish. And then about three-quarters of the people in the room raise their hand. People, I mean people in general, say things like, “It’s not *fun*.” Or “this is what it’s supposed to say. It’s not my fault people don’t get it.” Or my personal favorite, “It isn’t *real* if you have to revise it.” When they actually mean is, it’s too *hard*.

But my students are great. By the end of the semester, they’ve heard me so many times, extolling the virtues of revision, they know what I’m going to say before the words come out of my mouth. Once they buy into the idea that revision is a vital part of the writing process—the part of the process where you shape and develop your ideas, where the real writing takes place—they actually start to enjoy it.

I have quote from St. Augustine hanging over my desk. It goes like this: Pray as though everything depends on God. And work as if everything depends on you.

I had a student once, a woman in her mid-to-late forties. I can’t count how many hardworking students I’ve had over the years. But this one stands out.

After the first class, after everyone else had left the room, she came up to me. She shifted from foot to foot, looked down at the floor.

I had a good idea about what she wanted to say, but I waited.

Finally, she said, “I don’t think I belong here.”

She’d been out of school for 20 years. She didn’t know if she was competent enough to do the work. Everyone in the class had access to a language that she didn’t know. They understood what I was talking about; they asked questions. She felt stupid.

You’ve been there, right? If not in school, then somewhere. When I was in junior high, I was always, always the last kid picked for the volleyball team. You stand there waiting and waiting for the captain to call your name—I’m sure that’s the way she felt.

I asked her to stay in the class. To give herself a couple of weeks. If she still wanted to quit, we'd talk again. "Try not to worry," I told her. She would do fine.

Her first essay was nothing special. It had some nice moments, good detail, but it didn't quite come together. Her story was flat. She didn't have a feel yet for a story arc, the way you have to introduce tension at the start, keep building until you reach a climax.

Every week, her essays were a little bit better. Around mid-semester, she started working on a piece about sky-diving. She was a mom, with several young children at home. For her, sky-diving was an outlet. It gave her space, made her feel like her own person and not just her children's mom. The ideas were wonderful. But the writing was lackluster. Not quite precise, too many qualifiers.

The second draft showed improvement.

For the rest of the semester, every night before class, she and I would meet for about a half hour, to go over her latest draft.

On the last night of class, people brought their final, revised essay and read it aloud. When her turn came, the entire room sat there, stunned, in silence. They'd read her essay in the workshop, so they were familiar with the story and with her writing. They were astounded. When she finished reading, her classmates gave her a round of applause that I thought would never end.

Believe in yourself. Be persistent. Work hard.

Finally, hold on to your dream. Don't let it get away.

We have so many distractions today, so many pressing concerns. Deadlines, people who need us. It's easy to put your dream on hold. To wait for a better time, a time when you have the luxury of spending a chunk of time at your desk. When you can afford

to quit your day job. When the kids are a little older. You'd start writing—or doing whatever it is you want to do, write, play golf—if only you had the time.

Well, you know what? John Grisham wrote his first novel on the train, on his way to and from work. In a year, that one hour a day turned into a book. If you write one page a day, just one page, every day, at the end of the year, you'll have 365 pages. You'll have written a book.

I was like most people in the beginning. I wrote when the spirit moved me. Now I write at least five days a week. I'm not always writing fiction. Sometimes I'm writing a article, or editing an article, or jotting down ideas for a piece I'm working on or one I want to pursue. If I don't write, I get rusty. And I start to doubt myself. Then I start to think I can't write, because I don't remember how. As Annie Lamott says, you feel like you're washed up. You're toast.

Writing is tough. Thinking is tough. Most days, I have to push myself to get started. I toss a load of laundry in the washer, correct a few papers. Then it's time to take the laundry out of the washer. So I do. Then I surf the Internet for awhile. Answer some e-mail.

Then I sit down and write.

People have accomplished amazing feats under almost unimaginable conditions. I figure if Dostoyevski can write a novel while he's in prison, if Anne Frank can write a beautiful, moving memoir while her family is holed up in an attic, hiding from the Nazis, then I can find time in my far simpler, far less complicated world to write too.

Hold onto your dreams. It's hard, I know. It takes guts. As Erma Bombach said, "A lot of Great dreams... never even get out of the box. It takes an uncommon amount of

”

It's hard to put yourself on the line. To risk rejection. To have your book turned down 22 or 23 or 29 or 200 times. But you have a dream. That you worked hard, that you were persistent, that you made your dream come true—it's like giving birth to your first child. In that labor room, with those contractions coming hard and fast, you just want to die. Or kill your husband. But once you see that beautiful baby you've brought into the world, you don't even remember the pain. Nothing else matters.

Good luck to you. And many, many congratulations.

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