



Graduation Keynote Speech

June 2008

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to do a writing workshop in a seventh grade classroom. The only difference between this workshop and the others I've been doing all year as part of my book tour was that this was MY former middle school and I would be doing the workshop in MY former seventh grade teacher's class. Needless to say, I was a little nervous. She had been one of my favorite teachers of all time and always encouraged my writing in the way good teachers do. After the workshop, which went really well – the students were amazing, so much fun – after the workshop, my former teacher came up to me and we chatted a bit and then she said something that I wasn't prepared for. She said "You haven't changed AT ALL. You are the same, the same!" Okay, I have to admit that at first, I wasn't thrilled. I wanted to say, "Yes, I have! I'm an adult – I've matured, grown-up, gone to college, gotten married, taught high school, had a child – I am a totally different person. A grown-up!" But then I realized. She was complimenting me.

"I am?" I asked her, feeling every part of that twelve year old girl who had sat in her classroom at lunch reading book after book of the Dragonlance series those many years ago. And she told me. "You always had this energy; this way about you...you're the same."

So I got to thinking. We're told a lot as children and young adults, we're told of this greater beyond, this looming thing known as the 'real world' – we're told we'll need to learn to be practical, make adult choices, get a job. And we wonder what we'll be, what is in store for us, "When we grow up."

Looking into my teacher's smiling face, I lighted on something. An idea. A thought.

An inspiration.

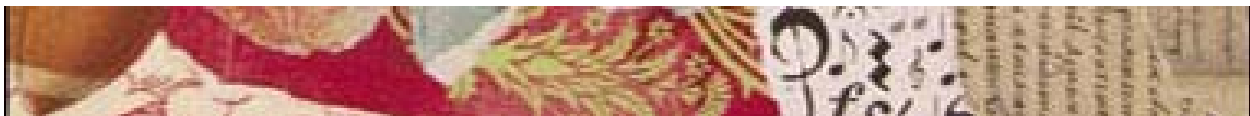
Maybe the secret is that we are who we are...we are this person from a really young age, somewhere in our centers. This twelve year old full of dreams and ideals. We are all who we are. We just get an opportunity to keep getting better at it. Polish it. Like a rock we find in the seashore of our childhood that keeps getting smoother and more interesting as we keep it in our pocket, taking it out once in a while to hold in our palm, remind us of the smell of the sea.

People often ask me, "Why do you work with teenagers?" And then, leaning a little closer, their foreheads creased with what can only be worry or confusion, they say, "HOW can you work with teenagers?"

And I tell them this.

Because teenagers are like having a constant light source.

They are twenty rocks in my pocket to remind me of what dreams are – what love is, why we care about things. I know, I know...teenagers can sometimes get a bad reputation. These are some of the teenage-critical statements I often encounter: Teenagers are self-centered. Teenagers are so cynical. They don't care about





anything. They aren't motivated. Now, I have issues with anyone lumping anyone into a larger group, I mean – I wouldn't like it if someone said "Thirty-four year old women with brown hair are so impractical." (Of course, in all honesty, I'm sure there is some truth to this.) But here is what I say to those statements. Self-centered? Maybe teenagers just have more of a sense of center, that core I was talking about earlier, that ability to tap into the creative self, the part of us that can dream and hope. Cynical? Perhaps. Certainly, we've given them a bit of a reason to be, and surely it's some form of self-defense, wondering what sort of world they are about to inherit. They don't care; they aren't motivated? Now, here, I would tell this hypothetical doubter (and now it would be my turn to lean in.) Here, is where you are wrong.

Here is what I've learned from teenagers over my ten years of working with them (and my seven years of being one). Teenagers know how to love in large, expansive ways. They feel things deeply and with a great, sweeping grace. They get furious. Not just angry, not just mildly uncomfortable. FURIOUS. Teenagers dream. They hope for the future. They see light where others see shadow – and shadow where others see light. They wonder about things – they wonder where they fit into this quickly changing world, wonder who will love them and who they will love, wonder about the way the sky meets the earth. Wonder how someone gets the flavor into all those different jelly bellies. Teenagers live in the details. They live for their friends and love their parents and families in their own, unique way – at arm's length at times and at other times pressed so close to their faces you can feel their breath hot on your face.

My husband and I always say that one of the best parts of working with teenagers is that they are in this cusp world, a world where in the same instant in a classroom they can pontificate about their interpretation of a Niche reading and then in a flash be upset because the kid sitting next to them stole their pencil. "Ms. Culbertson, I think Niche's talking about the nature of human existence...hey, he stole my pencil!" This very contrast, this cusp, is what makes them so amazing, so inspiring – they remind us. They hold all of it, all these dreams and wonder and light, out for the world to behold. It's the world who should be paying more attention.

Come to think of it, it's a little sad that my teacher was so surprised that I still had access to this soft center of me, this twelve year old – because it implies that adults often let it go, they shed it, or paper-mache over it with the trials of being so grown-up in a grown-up world. But we ALL have that capacity for dreams, for ideals, for imagination and inspiration – we all have that twelve year old who loved the ocean, or beads, or words on a page. Or jelly bellies. I mean, seriously, the pear ones really taste like pears! We all have it, and this is what I want to say to these graduates sitting here today, this is what I want to stress to you in that graduation speech sort of way. You have everything you need, everything that's great already in you. It's there, in your center – that sense of you, your dreams, what you hope for, your creativity that only comes with childhood and that can get so lost when we roam that complex landscape of Grownupland. You already hold all of it like that stone in your pocket, waiting to simply be polished, a little at a time, one experience at a time. We get to keep becoming better versions of who we've always been. It's exciting, really. Thrilling.

Lastly, I want to thank you for asking me to be here today, for giving me an opportunity to reflect, to remember. To pull my own little stone from my pocket and give it a little shine. And thank you for your dreams, for your light. Now the world just needs to widen its eyes.

