2003 commencement speech to the University of Montana

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COMMENCEMENT-RETIREMENT SPEECH (#14, FINAL)
(10 minutes, UM Center, 5/17/03)

(Attempt at Reconstructing Actual Delivery: Patricia's Last Act as a member of the University of Montana Faculty)

(At the podium, where my predecessor, pulling the microphone up, had remarked that the world seemed to be made for midgets, "I guess I'm one of the world's midgets")

First I want to extend my warmest congratulations to all the graduates, (especially Lisa, Dennis, and Patrick Hutchins) and also to their parents. (Waving my hat which I had taken off for vanity's sake, "My hat's off to all of you"). All of you have every reason to be bursting with pride this long awaited day. And you know what? Spring is almost here. The calendar says so!

Anyway, I'm glad to see you all -- even though the sad truth is that nobody in this room really "knows" anyone else in this room. We are all of us, each husband and wife, each parent, each student, and each professor, utterly alone. At any given moment, none of us knows anything about what even those closest to us in the whole world may be thinking, not really. We can guess, of course, but still no one knows who anyone else is, at least not for certain. And that, alas, is a large part of what is known as The Human Condition.

And yet in a way we do know each other. We talk to each other, we make educated guesses about what each other is like. But also, and far more importantly, we do so intuitively. Because each one of us has two wonderful possessions. We have our bodies, and we have our minds. And out of the inextricable fusion of those two entities comes -- imagination.

Which is what I want to say a few words about today: imagination, a subject which is so essential to the character and basic to) the future of humanity that I'm afraid
these remarks are going to sound not only pretty simplistic, but also and fairly unusually intimate — I hope not too much). Nevertheless, that’s what tends to happen when you try to get down to basics. To begin with, the dictionary definition of imagination is, simply enough, “to form a mental image of something not present”. But if you take a close look at the word itself you find that embedded at the very beginning of it is the word “image”, which is a signifier of the mind, but a of a involving a tangible and visible representation drawn directly from the body, from the 5 senses of touch, taste, sight, sound and smell with which we make, as we say, “sense” of the world, chiefly by turning it into — guess what, English Majors — our old pals simile and metaphor — those tremendously powerful ways of expressing what the world feels like — what it looks like — not just to ourselves but to others. And so, since all of us have more or less the same kinds of bodies, if the poet says that his lover has turned into, not the peach he thought she was, but a lemon — what more does he need to say? In every language in the world, love is sweet, not sour.

But imagination not only helps us to understand others, it helps us to understand ourselves. “Am I really that angry with that person?”, I might ask myself. “No,” I might reply, “I feel like a city that’s been bombed to smithereens, that’s all.” And suddenly I understand not just what I’m feeling, but a little bit about why I’m feeling it. Or “I just feel blue,” you might say, using another image. Or “No, not really,” you might say, “I just feel a little antsy” — and voila! Not just you but everyone else has some sense of what you mean.

But Benjamin DeMott says “Most men don’t know what they feel, and therefore feel nothing.” In that case, I submit, they can be sold anything: a car, a new kind of beer, a war, yes, even a president — by anyone — an advertising agency, say, that knows how to use imagery to arouse feelings we sometimes didn’t even realize we had. That’s why it’s so important to use the imagination to understand ourselves and others.

Okay, here comes the show and tell part of this. An experiment I like to do with my beginning poetry classes — you could even do it yourselves, right now — is to ask everyone to look around the room and try to imagine what it would be like to be inside
the body of, say, the person sitting opposite you, or even right next to you – whatever. Try assuming (as unobtrusively as possible, of course) the same posture she or he has adopted. Tilt your chin (imitated) as he’s doing, does, cross your legs the way she does. Or slouch, or twiddle your fingers. Or stare out the window (imitated) – it’s astonishing, but when you actually try to do those things, somehow, through this odd process of what’s called “sympathetic identification” almost immediately one gets a quite strong sense of what even a stranger’s whole personality might be like.

You know the great poet John Keats used to identify with the world beyond himself so strongly that when talking about a nest full of baby birds he’d often open his own mouth almost as wide as they do. And once, when he was reading aloud a wonderful line about whales – “the sea-shouldering whales”, it was – Keats’ friend Clarke said that Keats just “Hoisted his small self up and looked very burly and dominant, as much like a monster whale as he could. And we do the same thing ourselves: reaching for the ball with the outfielder, switching hips with the slalom skier, breathing harder and harder at the movies as the lovers move closer and closer together...

Still other ways we use imagination are of course to predict the future; and also of course, to invent things that never were: the wheel, to begin with. By making mental models of the natural world, scientists, for instance, not only understand how it works, but sometimes make it work better. Think of Albert Einstein’s famous “Thought Experiments”,

Or think of Francis Crick and James Watson in 1953, trying to come up with the basic structure of DNA. As they knew (garbled this sentence perhaps worse than several other misreads and garblings) the minute they thought of the right image for it, what they discovered -- and ran to a nearby pub shouting about it -- was only the secret of all life! They’d studied the problem for years, covered pages and pages with abstract equations, but it wasn’t until one day in April that they suddenly hit on the answer. How did it work? Like one of the simplest (“Logorithms" I said before I corrected myself) algorithms of ordinary life, the Double Helix, an image I’ve always
thought is nothing more nor less than a slight elaboration of the way we human beings braid our hair.

So. I don’t of course mean that by using the imagination only we’d be able to solve the secrets of the universe. Nevertheless, by thinking imaginatively about ourselves, others, and the world, by imagining both the negative and the positive side of everything, and especially by using the five senses (personally and particularly as you can -- no matter how peculiar what comes out may sound; that’s likely to be the best thing of all), it’s very likely we’d be able to make the world at least a little better for everyone.

I know all of us been told our whole lives -- or I was, so I’m sure some of you must have been -- "Oh, just use your imagination"! But what I want to stress today is the weirdly simple but amazing fact that if you just stop and consult those five senses when you’re puzzled by almost any problem you come up against, and then stretch yourself out, think yourself into the problem, I mean actually ask yourself -- (what does it feel like ---, etc. etc.) why then who knows, there’s no end to the wonders you might accomplish. Even Einstein, though of course he relied on the idea that “An equation is for eternity”, also said, but “imagination....is more important than knowledge”. For “knowledge is limited. Imagination circles the world.”

Well, I could go on about this for hours -- there’s so much more to say about it -- but I promise I’ll only keep you a few minutes more, and finish by reading you a poem I love to read for audiences who’ve been as patient as you have. It’s a poem that’s based on the fact that it really does matter what you think. I’m reading it especially for the class of 2003, and it’s called

FOR ALL THE SAD RAIN

AND THEN I HAD TO SAY – “WHICH, GUESS WHAT, IS NOT HERE, DAMN! Well I suppose that will be a relief to some of you – I know you’re eager to get going – but alas, I really wanted to read it to you. But I congratulate you anyway – and I blew a big kiss to the graduates” and tripped off stage clenching my fists at my colleagues in their
two rows at the side of the stage.” And then Bruce, following me to make the next intro, suddenly realized I’d walked off with his notes and had to come down and get them and reported, back at the podium that I had them – whereupon I stood up and made some sort of remark to the audience like “You see I’m teaching everyone how to lose things” —not sure what I said exactly, I was in too much of a state”.

But many of my colleagues, several parents and students (one sad she wished she could have heard the poem; another said she knew it!) thanked me most heartfully and warmly, many of them citing how “inspired” I made them. And when I kept apologizing to colleagues for its simplicity they all said no, no, it wasn’t that at all, it was something that needed to be said. And Casey Charles came up to me shouting (in my ear) that all through it he’d been saying “Why is she going? We can’t let her go, she’s got to stay>” And Dee, whose introduction was not only sweet (“our beloved poet”) but smart and well written as usual, seemed to really mean her remarks about how good and clear and needful and, yes, “inspiring” it was.

To Future Readers of this After-the-Fact version of the speech: too often I remember only the bad things, so I am making a conscious effort here to remember the good things as well!!!)

3:30 PM 5/17/03

(But here’s the poem anyway:}
We use our bodies to imagine something we don't and can't know personally. For instance – here's an experiment I like to do when something you can do when you're in a room full of strangers, say, and wondering what sort of life the person opposite you leads – just try looking at how that person is sitting. Are his legs crossed? What is she doing with her hands, how does he holds his mouth -- and then try to feel in your own body what that

And then just the other day I was walking across campus when I saw a most extraordinary sight. A biology instructor and an instructor in secondary education had brought a large class of students out onto the lawn, and the students were milling around a most curious structure: A sort of "river" had been outlined by a long rectangle of orange tape. On one side of it was a sort of "staircase" of a few students bent on all fours in a row. At the beginning of the river were two students swinging a large and menacing looking rope, beyond which were two students wearing odd headpieces, one with a big beak and feathers, the other with a cardboard but nevertheless frighteningly grizzled snout. And finally there were two other, rather large male students waving their arms threateningly about. Then all at once a large number of laughing young men and women began running up the river, ducking through the swinging rope, (the turbine, I later found out), stumbling over the bodies which represented the fish ladder, trying to dodge the grizzly bear and the eagle, and finally trying to escape being tagged by the outstretched arms of the two fishermen. By the end of the experiment, alas, the largest number of students had retired to the sidelines, and only a small group remained safely swimming around at the top of the green river.

For the running students were of course supposed to be salmon trying – and mostly failing – to get upstream to their spawning places. A curious sight indeed, on a sweet spring morning to find the campus littered with two legged, mostly dead salmon. Later on I discovered that this experiment had been devised as a way of teaching
secondary school students about the life cycle of salmon, above all the obstacles, most of them manmade, they must surmount in order to keep alive. But a secondary result of this extremely sympathetic identification with the salmon was, I'm certain, that all those who took part in the experiment would first of all always remember it in their own bodies, and that secondly they would in future be much more likely to be able to imagine ways of helping the salmon population of the world survive.

Which brings us to the other result of using the imagination, which is of course, first of all to begin to understand ourselves, and then, almost at the same time to understand others. First, by asking ourselves simple questions such as what do I really feel like about such and such or so and so, and then answering the question by quite quite literally using the five senses, we can come up with some quite surprising — quite surprising and revealing things. For instance, if someone asked me what kind of vegetation I think of President Bush and his current policies towards the United Nations and Iraq, after I'd said a Shrub, I might possibly say a mighty and sheltering oak tree — or I might say poison ivy, or stinkweed, or loco weed — whatever. In either case neither you nor I would have any doubts about what I really feel about President George W. The same way if, supposing she were a fruit, what kind of fruit would she be and she, thinking of the absolutely virginal purity of the Amanita Verna mushroom, said that was what she thought she was like — well, you'd be well advised not to come anywhere near her! Because of course she'd forgotten, in her zeal to show one side of her opinion of herself, the other, the under side of the image she used, which is that the Amanita Verna is also known as the Death Angel. Nevertheless, if you happened to point that out to her, she might be surprised — or not surprised — to see that her real feelings about herself were much less innocent, and far more potentially dangerous to herself and others than she thought.

Because that's the amazing thing about learning to think in images, about learning to use one's imagination: we learn, not only about ourselves but about others. Because, in the end, we are all one body. Though we don't know very much of anything about who Shakespeare was in real life, it seems to me pretty certain that he
probably knew himself better than any other person in the world has ever done. Why? Because he was so successful in imagining what it’s like to be another. A King. A murderer. An adulteress. A Fool. A jilted footman. An old man, a passionate lover — and so on and on and on.

Even more important, Shakespeare must have been a master of the art of forgetting himself. Of feeling his way into the hearts and minds of others without ever trying to judge such people, without trying to say to them, you’re wrong and I’m right. Don’t you see? This is the fact of the matter, this is the way reason tells us things work.... The great English poet John Keats recognizes this in a letter he wrote to his brother, in which he describes “that quality” which “Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

And that, as far as what I’m talking about is concerned suggests another of the wonderful side effects of learning to use one’s imagination, which is that, even as one learns the real truth about oneself, (i.e. what one feels about oneself, not what one thinks — because everybody else says so — about oneself), one also learns to have the courage to doubt oneself. To think, “Well, what if I’m wrong about this or that?” What would a picture of the future look like then? And then, by comparing the two pictures — or quite likely many many pictures of a possible consequence of an action, one might possibly find a much different and maybe even better way to proceed. And not only for oneself, but for others.

And now to go from the heights to the lowlands, I’d like to finish by reading you a poem for all of us here at this commencement. It’s from my book, THE TONGUES WE SPEAK, and it’s called For All the Sad Rain”.

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. Maybe your daughter is wondering if she really looks as weird in her hat as she thinks. Maybe that’s what I’m thinking! Maybe a father is thinking how intelligent his
son suddenly looks. Or the friend two rows away from you can't wait to get out of here, who knows. We may guess, but really we will never know anyone.

And that's what I want to talk about today: Imagination, the ability to, as the dictionary says, "to form a mental image of something not present".

Which, when it comes to communicating with each other, usually involves words. But where do words come from? They come from the body, and when it comes to something like imagining anything, imagining the future, say, they come from the

from the way A lot of what I want to say about it I'm afraid is going to sound pretty basic to the poetry majors among us, but that's only natural, because poetry is like life in that, as Stanley Burnshaw once said, "poetry (and I would add, life) begins in the body and ends in the body" - and what can be more basic than that?

Just look at the word "imagination" itself: right at its heart is the word "image", Even many of the most important words we use in philosophical and scientific discourse - "before this", "above all that", that the "underlying" meaning of the Constitution is "on the other hand", this or that - are based on our kinetic perceptions of the world. We learn that some subjects are "too hot" to bring up from our first memory of getting burned, and so on and on. We knew what the cold war was because we know, with our bodies, what it is to be cold. We named our latest new method of communication "the internet" because we've all of us watched spiders weaving their webs, played "itsy bitsy spider" with our mothers, and felt how inter-connected everything is in our own bodies.