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"Clover, Bee, and Reverie": College of Saint Benedict Convocation Address, August 26, 2009

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“Clover, Bee, and Reverie”

College of Saint Benedict Convocation Address

August 26, 2009

Welcome. Whether you're a first-year student or a returning student, a member of the faculty, or the staff, or the administration — I suspect that the past few days of your life have been chock-full of people, messages, meetings, and to-do lists. Today, as classes begin, many of us are just about vibrating from that intoxicating brew of trepidation and excitement.

Between the hustle of the past few days and the first meeting of fall classes, I'd like us to focus for a moment on quiet — specifically, on reverie. By “reverie” I mean: becoming lost in thought, daydreaming. I urge you to find times when you can put aside the lists and the tasks, when you can turn away from clamor, to reverie.

Now it may surprise you to hear a professor encouraging you to daydream — so let me hasten to add that it would be wise to time your reveries judiciously; daydreaming during classes is generally ill-advised. . . .

I'm urging you to find time for reverie (when you're *not* in class, or operating heavy machinery). But by the end of the day tomorrow, when you've looked at a syllabus for every class you're taking, you may be convinced that you'll have time for nothing this semester except reading, writing, calculating, and reviewing for exams. Who has time for reverie? And why does that even matter?

I'll refer that question to American poet Emily Dickinson. She wrote a poem (only five lines long) about the value of reverie:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do
If bees are few.

Emily Dickinson claims that you can make a vast, richly varied, and thriving prairie out of reverie.

Now, that's a startling claim for those of us who live on the prairie. Here in the Upper Midwest, many people are involved in the project of making and restoring

prairie, and that project requires far more than daydreaming. To make a prairie it takes clover, bees, and thorough knowledge of indigenous plants, invasive species, soil composition, rainfall patterns, and seed dispersal. It takes hard, hand-blistering physical labor: ripping out plants that don't belong, replacing them with bluestem, blazing star, goldenrod, bee balm, brome. (These plant names — beardtongue? stinking lovegrass?) So after I thought about making a prairie, I wanted to tap Emily Dickinson on the shoulder and ask her what on earth she meant when she said that reverie alone would do. If you set out to make a prairie, you'd be up to your earlobes in seeds and dirt. How could you possibly have time for reverie? And again — why does reverie matter?

Well, Emily Dickinson died in 1886, so she just says the same thing over again:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do
If bees are few.

Since Emily Dickinson just keeps repeating herself, and I'm a literary critic, I get to step in here and offer an interpretation.

Maybe the poem is suggesting that we begin making something long before we know enough, and long before we pick up our tools. The beginning is reverie: reverie prompts us to make something where once there was nothing. It's when you're lost in thought, when you're daydreaming, that you will envision what you want to make. Then you'll discover what you need to learn, and find the tools, the seed, and the ground on which to make the life you dream of. Then you'll find in yourself the will to turn your labor to the demanding task of building that life, hour by hour and day by day.

When the Sisters of St. Benedict came here, they found the prairie already made. To make a college, they drew on what they had — and on a life that made space for reverie. And so they made something new on the wide expanse of prairie: a college for women.

I started by talking about reverie, and now I'm also talking about hard work. I'm sure you expect to hear lots of us urging you to work hard — and I doubt we'll disappoint you. . . . But reverie is the other side of work. Reverie is the time of waking dreams when you transmute the books you read, and the lectures you attend, and the papers you write — and all the rich experiences of these four years into a wild and thriving future, in whatever place you decide to live.

You have taken, and will take, a staggering variety of courses — you might study biology, art, psychology, and history in a single semester. The concepts, the skills, the habits of mind that you learn in your courses become the fabric of your daydreams, from which you will imagine and make your life. What you'll choose to do after college, we don't know; but these years of study and thought and experience will change you — and prompt you to dream new possibilities for your life and work.

Knowing one discipline will never give you enough material to make something vast, and rich, and full. That's precisely why St. Ben's and St. John's offer a liberal arts education.

The subject of liberal arts education brings to mind the words of artist Ben Shahn. When Ben Shahn was asked to speak to art students at Harvard, he commented that his advice applied not just to art students, but to all liberal arts students. Here is Ben Shahn's advice:

There is no content of knowledge that is not pertinent to the work you will want to do. . . . Listen well to all conversations and be instructed by them and take all seriousness seriously. Never look down upon anything or anyone as not worthy of notice. In college or out of college, read. . . .

“There is no content of knowledge that is not pertinent to the work you will want to do.” Here, you're preparing for the work you will want to do: by learning from many disciplines, listening well to all conversations, taking all seriousness seriously, never looking down upon anything or anyone as not worthy of notice, and by reading.

I'll give you an example of a St. Ben's alum who read Ben Shahn's advice and took it to heart. Mary Hark graduated with a degree in art, and she has spent many years learning, practicing, and teaching the art of making paper by hand. Mary makes paper from flax, and sometimes from prairie plants, garden plants — and, if the impulse strikes, from the vegetables in her crisper. In the past three years she's been traveling to Ghana, where she's been working with people in a rural area, called Kumasi, to produce handmade paper from local plants — especially from invasive species. There was no papermaking studio in Kumasi, so Mary improvised. Creating the studio required elements of botany, chemistry, and engineering — and all the years she has spent learning and practicing her craft. Many resources and many needs have come together in the Kumasi papermaking project: the ecological history of the area, the economic needs and available labor of local farmers, the papermaking traditions of Asia and the West. Artists' daydreams led to a collaborative project that turns the invasive kozo plant into beautiful paper that generates income for workers and provides material for local artists.

Knowing art, in the narrow sense of the word, wasn't enough for Mary's work. It will be true for you, too, that "[t]here is no content of knowledge that is not pertinent to the work you will want to do." At St. Ben's and St. John's, you will read widely, you will listen to speakers and conversations on an immense range of topics. Seize the opportunities. Even though you won't always know how ideas and experiences will be pertinent to the work you will want to do, trust that they will — and take time for reverie, for the daydreams in which you'll transmute all that you know, and believe, and experience into a varied, wild, and thriving life.

Cindy Malone is Professor of English. She delivered the opening convocation address as 2009 winner of the Sister Mary Grell Teacher of Distinction Award at the College of Saint Benedict.