

## PHI BETA KAPPA SHORT TALK

Muhlenberg College

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To quote a headline from a recent *Wall Street Journal* article: "I'm a poet. Yes, that's a real job." Now, do I make a living off my poetry? No, and never will. But this is my life's work: to play with language; to crystallize my thought process on the page through sound, imagery and rhythm; to find the right imagery to make an idea sing; to, quite simply, create. Poetry is at the essential core of who I am, it is the lens through which I see and process the world, it is a big part of what defines my identity. And yet I haven't always been a poet.

From a very early age I wanted to be a painter, an illustrator, someone engaged with making images. When I entered Muhlenberg I was certain one of my majors would be the visual arts. And then something funny happened: I fell in love with writing about art thanks to Jadviga da Costa Nunes and a survey class in Art History. And as for the poetry? I had my first flirtation with it my senior year of high school when I was exposed to Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot and Edna St. Vincent Millay. But it wasn't until my first year here, when I took a contemporary poetry class with Alec Marsh and was exposed to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, Jay Wright and Laurie Sheck, that poetry fully took hold of my heart. One could say, to quote the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, that it was at that age poetry arrived in search of me. And I would say it was at that age I let myself be found, that I haven't stopped since, and that on some very fundamental level I have, through poetry, written myself and my identity into being.

If you were to pose the question "why do you continue to write poetry?" especially when there is no money in it, I would say, I have more to discover about myself and the world. This is why I went to a liberal arts college. This is why I cherish my liberal arts

degree. As a poet, I sample from every discipline, every body of knowledge. It all informs my work.

The provenance of the liberal arts degree does not fall to the poet only. Regardless of what you do, what path you take, what careers you hold, the broad base of knowledge you have acquired here while beginning to specialize in the areas that obsess and compel you will take you on paths you can't even foresee. Take me, for instance. I'm not just a poet. I have a day job at a global financial firm in midtown Manhattan. It's administrative work, metrics and data-driven. My ability to write and think analytically, skills I learned and honed at Muhlenberg, not only helped get me this job, but helped me shine on the job resulting in my promotion to the manager of my group. I am a mentor to my team and help train all of our new hires, allowing me to use my teaching skills in a corporate environment. Yes, I used to teach. I even taught here one semester. But I made a decision to move to New York, to find a day job very different from my creative life to preserve my creative life. Plus I have bills to pay.

I should also say: it's not as if I'm writing a poem every day. There are plenty of little distractions that come with daily living. But I do try to carve out at least one moment a day where I heighten my focus, whether that be on the smallest detail from the world around me, say, the shape a bird's wing makes as it dives from a telephone wire; or on the words I'm putting together in an email or in my journal; or both. You see, sometimes an image or idea gets so stuck in my head that I have to keep turning it over and over, attacking it from as many angles possible; there is no peace until I write my way through what is obsessing me.

Our obsessions guide our work in life. For me that's everything from the images you'll find on the walls at MoMA to the images you'll find from a Wii video game console and everything in-between. It's all fair game as subject matter. I can write a poem with as much wit and passion about He-Man and the Masters of the Universe as I can for the

performance pieces of Marina Abramovic. Sometimes in the same poem. The great New York poet Frank O'Hara taught me this, that pop culture is a valid reference point, that "high" and low art can co-exist in the same poem, just as the poet Alice Fulton, one of my biggest influences, taught me about fractal poetics, the splicing of high and low language in the space of the same poem.

And when I'm truly obsessed to the point where I'm working on a book-length project, you'll find me on a writing jag, rushing home from the day job to get back to work, sometimes writing on the sly at the day job. When I'm in "that zone" as one of my first poetry mentors, the late Len Roberts, used to say, nothing else matters. I feel more present and grounded than at other moments in my daily life, as if the true self, call it the mind, call it the inner voice, is suddenly struck in high relief by this concentrated act of pulling and placing words together. Some have described this timeless state when in meditation or prayer, but the difference for me is that I only feel it when I'm engaged in the mental act of trying to create a poem: getting the right words down in the right order.

And though I do not write poems every day I remain engaged with the process every day, whether that means testing out sentence rhythms in the countless emails I send (I revise emails like crazy), or the notes I jot down on the backs of my bookmarks when a snippet of overheard conversation seems to resonate, or an image I have witnessed burns itself into my retina. Even the reading I do on my subway commute, to see how others go about the dance. Reading is the other side of the writing coin. When you learn how to close-read a text – and let's face it, you all do, you're about to be graduates of Muhlenberg – you'll find all the world is a text to be analyzed. The process of close-reading never stops.

Process. If I had to pinpoint what it was about writing that keeps me doing it I'd have to say it's the process. Don't get me wrong, I love the end product when the formal

choices of word-music and rhythm and imagery all click together in a crystallized poem state, but I love living in the process for as long as I can. The white page never terrifies me. One, I always work from notes. As long as I have those raw materials, a handful of words, I can spin in any direction: rhyming and chiming, deciding which cadence conveys the meaning best; all the pleasures of crafting a form that captures the actual process and takes the reader along on all the twists and turns of thought, the choices made along the way.

For ultimately that is why I write: to create snapshots of the brain in motion, to document the process of thinking, thinking about feeling, about the emotional states in which one finds him or herself, making sense of the experiences we have with each other, with the world at large, and that ongoing conversation with the self. A self that is, on some level, in constant marvel at being a sentient being, of having consciousness and conscience. And doing this all within the constraints of form, setting down my individual way of seeing in a construct that will last, that will allow another to step behind my eyes in that ultimate empathic act of reading and understanding a poem. This is why I write. And this is why poetry matters. To remind you of the strange, beautiful, paradoxical world around you, of those secrets and feelings hidden in your heart, of what it means to be human. So come with me and see if some of the loops and twists my mind has taken when getting words down on the page helps you see the world in a new way, to see the world shine in a slightly different light than it did a few hours ago.

*-Matthew Hittinger*