

Wendy Moffat
Curley Chair Installation, 2-3-17
“The Texture of Teaching in a Liberal Arts College”

Enveloped in the benign haze of this moment, I feel a bit like Tom Sawyer eavesdropping at his own funeral. It’s lovely to see you all—my students and colleagues from Carlisle, and Trustees and alumni of the College, family and friends who have come from afar. It is a great honor to have my three decades of work here affirmed with such fanfare, and I’m delighted to follow Sylvie Davidson as the second incumbent of this Curley Chair. Above all, I’m deeply grateful to Ann and John Curley for this concrete sign of their love of this place. They are and have been extraordinary benefactors. But in another sense the Curleys are also quite typical of the Dickinson students I have come to know. In this place, learning embodies a beautiful paradox-- the simultaneous discovery of *being* and *becoming*, finding who you are *and* how you will realize yourself in the world. John and Ann found themselves, and each other, at Dickinson. Their experience here honed their restless curiosity. And the challenging support of faculty awakened them to who they could become.

My students now are, as always, both discovering and becoming their true selves. But as a college we have a keener sense of our identity, of our place in the wide world than in decades past. When I began teaching in 1984, students circling my First Year Seminar table came from Altoona and Syracuse, Bethesda and

Bergen County. Last fall, in the same room students from Doylestown and Harare sat beside students from Mill Valley and Ho Chi Minh City. The composition of the student body now is manifestly more diverse and global; but by some miracle, Admissions has consistently discerned the core character of our students across the decades-- that perfect ratio of smarts and hard work to humility. Our students are fun to work with, open, human. This brings me to a second paradox: we are completely different than we were, and utterly the same.

John and Ann Curley gave back to this place, because Dickinson *translated* them. Translation is the marrow of teaching in a liberal arts college. The word has a rich array of meanings, both essential and transformative. We faculty work with students to *transmute* and *refine*, to *manifest* and *interpret* ideas and-- in the archaic meaning of the word translate-- to *enrapture* students with the love of learning. We do this by refusing to distinguish between the work we do as scholars and our teaching. We let students in on the magical secret that we are exploring with them. Even we geezers remember being students too: the heady thrill of seeing your teachers take words and ideas so seriously, and the exhilaration of being taken seriously in the hard business of writing what you mean. Ann Curley beautifully described the durable pleasure of learning to love learning. She wrote, "I could not have imagined how the support, enthusiasm, and scholarship of our professors would continue to inspire my interest in learning through the rest of my

life.” (The last time I saw Ann and John, they were poring over first editions of *Paradise Lost* in our archives, with students as their guides.) The special pleasure of teaching on this humane scale is that we faculty keep learning too. To conjure students through teaching is a creative and reciprocal process.

This *being* and *becoming* is a kind of displacement, even discomfiture. The space where certainty used to reside is supplanted by discovery and self-discovery. Here’s one example. When I directed the program at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, I sent 28 bleary jet-lagged students out to little hamlets to scout in pairs. From Caistor St. Edmund and Spixworth to Aylsham and Cromer (now I’m having fun)—they reported back to the whole group. Their opening phrase became a running joke: “I was standing at the corner of Hanover and High Streets, when I walked toward Pitt...” The strange was revealed to be familiar, and the Old World linked to the New in startling ways. Displaced, my students came to recognize *home*. But they also learned how to *bring home the power of this insight*. In Norwich, one awestruck student told me: “when I get back to Carlisle, I’m going to stand at the square and ask ‘why are THESE churches HERE?’ ” This shock of discovery—of knowing *how to learn*—is immutable. A young alumna wrote me last week: “I think of you often, because the cornerstone of my business is a slide design method that I teach, where I encourage people to create strong visuals and drop ..in.. text. You once said to me in a Yoda-like observation right before

graduation ‘The visual thing is strong with you.’ And I now spend most of my professional career working with engineers to help them develop visuals for ...presentations. How did you know?” I didn’t know what she would become. She made that happen.

We teachers and students are knit together by the continual renewal of our shared enterprise in profound ways. In recent years, I have officiated at the wedding of two smart, sweet recent grads, and eulogized the life of a vibrant young global citizen, a New Yorker who spent her junior year in Cameroon, killed in an accident at 23 while teaching in Thailand. (Writing her thesis, she confided to me: “I’m having trouble deciding which information belongs in footnotes and which belongs in the body of my [chapter] because *everything seems important...*”) And former students become valuable colleagues: the editor at Houghton who taught me how to find an agent for my Forster biography; my expatriate Parisian friend, who leapt over linguistic and cultural barriers to help me research American Army hospitals in France in World War I; the curator at the Morgan Library whose casual invitation shaped my syllabi for two courses last term----She emailed: “I have a big Charlotte Bronte exhibition coming up in the fall (marking the bicentenary of her birth), complete with one of her dresses and the manuscript of *Jane Eyre*! Come visit?” YES.

Consider these unsolicited messages of magnanimity and connection just from the last month. An offer of an art gallery internship in New York City. A “save the date” for the wedding of a student who went from rural Pennsylvania to Norwich to South Korea to City Year in Cleveland to Harvard Law. An English-major physician, the head of comprehensive cancer control at the CDC, offering woman-to-woman advice to a senior in my Austen class on how to choose among med school offers. News of his first solo classes from a grad student at Brown, feeling “very lucky” to teach at a Quaker high school. Or “Howdy Professor, Good news... I will be zipping through Carlisle next week... Any odds you and I could meet? What’s your coffee order?” This 2014 grad is the PR Coordinator for the Detroit Symphony, and a proud Detroit homeowner. Or, walking across the quad, bumping into a recent grad back from Japan quite by chance in front of Stern. He’s now a freelance translator, light as a dandelion gone to seed—“I don’t know what country I’ll live in next month, but my email address is always the same. “ What interesting people our students become!

Now more than ever, we must cleave to the promise of our commitment to global education. We need to be welcoming, and to *get out there*. Ann and John’s gift supported a trip to the UK in January, where my scholarship led to the University of London medical archives and my service to Oxford to confer on current students’ progress and prospects for the next class we send to Mansfield

College. We all need to remind ourselves, and our students and alumni, that these rich human connections will be possible only if we cherish and cultivate them. The texture of teaching in the liberal arts binds us together in perpetual discovery and community. I am so happy to be a steward of Dickinson's engagement in the world. Thank you.