

2011 Moore College of Art and Design Graduate Commencement Speech

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President Fernandez, Moore College of Art and Design, Administrators and Trustees, Distinguished Guest Street Thoma, Professors, Parents, Family, and Friends and most especially Graduates:

Thank you for the honor of me having an opportunity to share this celebration with you at my Alma Mater, Moore College of Art and Design. To help recognize and applaud Moore's first graduating class to earn the degrees of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts ; and the Master of Arts in Art Education with an Emphasis on Special Populations.

That's why, in addition to this day being special for you, August 13, 2011 also is a special day in this college's history.

By the way, Moore is the only college in the country to develop such a needed and progressive degree, and Moore has always been the place to have studied Art Education! I send all my BFA students, who want to be teachers, to Moore, and they rave about the program!

I hope most of you recognize that it took many people for you to reach this stage in your academic life. As Hillary Clinton wrote, "It Takes a Village to Educate a Child." Well, it takes a Village to accomplish almost anything worthwhile! Your village includes your family, friends, and perhaps even the dog-or cat that faithfully laid by your feet during those late nights while you completed art work. Former teachers, professors and administrators, and now your fellow graduates, are also part of the Village that continues to support and congratulate you in attaining your goal.

You will never be able to repay all the people in your Village for the many resources and time they provided for you as you pursued your art-quest. But what you can do is share your experiences, successes and celebrations with your Village.

For instance, there are several people from my Village here today who have supported me over 30 years of professional teaching and art making. They include my mother & father; both of them empowered me with their belief in my ambitions. Becky Desmond, my high school art teacher, later teaching colleague and friend for mentoring me in so many ways; Cole my 14 year old nephew who is now helping me deliver artwork; and Hank, my steadfast husband of 38 years, the best feminist I know. He has provided substantial help, like framing and generously giving up his private time with me so I could have adequate studio time. Best of all, he can cook!!

When I graduated from Moore in 1972, the graduation speaker was Lucy Lippard, now a well-known New York art critic, writer and artist. As she walked to the podium looking disheveled and tired- The first thing she said to the undergraduates was that she had spent the night in jail with the composer Leonard Bernstein for protesting cuts in the Federal funding of the arts. Ms. Lippard went on to say that she knew the parents in the audience would not be happy about what she was going to talk about, but that she owed it to the new graduates to tell it like it is. What she said was: “It is really going to be tough out there as an artist, especially for a female artist!”

I braced myself for battle and never forgot those words from that 1972 commencement speech. Now, almost 40 years later, things are better in the gender wars. But, it is still an uphill struggle for all artists with the current cuts by the Federal & State Government as well as private foundations. These cuts affect schools and art centers, as well as Universities and Colleges. At West Chester University, where I teach, the budget has been slashed 18%, causing an increase in class size, the canceling of classes, and the layoff of adjuncts. The Union of the 14 State Universities has agreed to freeze salary increases for one year.

So what can you do to make art colleges and programs better funded in America? You and your Village can e-mail, text, phone and even send letters by snail mail to your legislators with your concerns about the future for the arts.... for you, your children, your community, your state and your country. Who better than you has a greater vested interest in the state of the arts. If you aren't motivated enough to speak up, who will?

I consider myself a soldier from the trenches with 15 years in the public schools and another 20 years in a state university and this is what I know for sure.

1. Be Versatile

As a new high school art teacher, I was assigned and prepared to teach all fine art and craft courses and a related arts lecture course. In addition to those subjects, I was assigned 3 classes of Jewelry? I told the chair that I had no training in jewelry or metals, and he handed me the jewelry book and said, stay one step ahead of the students! So, my first year, I taught myself how to solder, saw and sand metal.

At the university level, as a new tenured track professor in 1991, I was hired to teach foundation art courses, an art education course, an art appreciation lecture and Architectural Drawing? I told the art dept chair that I had no background in architectural drawing and he said “If you want the job, you'll learn how to teach it” and so I did.

2. Learn to Adapt

One of my West Chester University colleagues, a first year art history professor from Princeton University, told the art chair-she couldn't function before 10 AM, when she was assigned an 8 AM class three times a week. Therefore, she added, she couldn't possibly teach an early morning class.... She didn't last long!!

If you get hired as a new professor, part-time or full, your duties will cover three different areas: you will be expected to expertly teach, to create art and exhibit on a regular basis both regionally, nationally and internationally; and serve on department, university and community board committees. It is a juggling act while running full speed!

Teaching in public school is second in intensity only to Air Traffic Control!

You probably will teach six large classes a day and will have 29 minutes for lunch. There are no scheduled bathroom breaks! But here's the good part, you'll learn how to do more in those 3 minutes between classes than most people can do all morning. You'll grow eyes in the back of your head, not to mention developing the alert hearing of a fox. There will be snowballs thrown at the back of your head during bus duty. However, lucky for you, teachers no longer have lavatory duty or lunch room duty as I once had. And while women could not wear slacks, and men could not sport beards, mustaches or turtle-necks in 1973, you will have greater freedom in choosing appropriate professional attire.

3. Technology: Gift or Curse?

When I look down onto campus from my second story office window, I no longer see the faces of the students. The face of the campus has literally changed; 80% the students' faces are buried in their smart phones as they walk to classes.

After I say Good Morning to my classes I also say "And please put the technology away, away", meaning do not monitor your smart phones or use lap top computers with split screens: ½ for notes and the other ½ for Face Book.

As educators, we must help our students stay connected to the moment of here and now or they will lose the ability to appreciate the aesthetic awareness around them and have only the virtual world to draw experiences from. Imagine how that will limit their artwork!

4. Friends and Friend-Enemies in the Workplace

Become best friends with all the custodians and the secretaries. They know everything that's going on, and they have the keys to all the closets, doors and gates.

Remember that just because a colleague acts friendly does not mean he/she is a friend. Especially in higher education, where you are in competition for grants, committee assignments, promotions, offices, classrooms and graduate assistants. Don't depend upon any one else to have your back but you. Look for a mentor in other departments or colleges. Remember: "When You Swim with Sharks -- Don't Bleed."

Also, each art department has its own culture and hierarchy. It is important to respect those processes, and do not slight or jump over anyone when searching for authority.

This next suggestion took me a while to believe in its importance, and I still have to write myself reminders in order to incorporate it in to my teaching: SMILE at your students

Smiling shows confidence, it shows that you are glad to be in the classroom, that you love what you teach and that you care about the students and their artwork. It has its own kind of energy.

The experience that demonstrated to me how important smiling is occurred when I received an e-mail from one of my college students. She asked me why I always looked angrily at her and had she done anything wrong. I explained to her that teachers often are so concerned about covering enough material in a short period of time that their demeanor becomes one of intensity and concentrated passion for their subject, which could be misconstrued as anger. So after many years of intense and serious teaching, I added the smile as an essential element within my presentations, in and out of the classroom. For many years, I believed that my teaching was all about the art. Now I know that it is all about the-student and you reach them through the art.

5. What do you do if you don't land a full time job? Or, My Life as a 10 Year Adjunct.

In 1979, when I completed my MFA, the tenure track college job market was closing down because many colleges and universities were hiring more adjunct professors for economic reasons and many tenured, senior professors were not yet ready to retire. I knew that I needed more college teaching experience to be seriously considered for a tenure track position. So for 10 years, I taught in the morning at the High School, at Widener University in the late afternoon, and then a

night class at the University of Delaware. During the last three years of “My Adjuncting Decade,” I also added two classes at West Chester University. These classes were spread out over a week except for Tuesdays when I had to be at all 4 places! This teaching load kept me running fast for ten years and I practically lived out of my car. I also knew that I needed to make substantial art and exhibit on a regular basis. I wanted to be prepared and resume-heavy when the tenure track job presented itself.

On top of this was life. My husband and I were renovating a 100-year old building on the weekends –so- My 30’s was an extremely intense period of my life. I was on fire with creative energy and the harder it got the more determined I became. Arriving home from teaching at midnight and starting the next day at

6:00 AM, Six hours of sleep? Bring it on...no problem! If you have enough passion, you can do anything!

Finally in 1991, a tenure track position opened up at West Chester University and I got it! That was 20 years ago. And yes, it was worth it.

6. So how are you going to run this race?

If you don’t land a K-through 12 job, become a substitute in a school district. Introduce yourself to Principals, Vice Principals, Art Teachers and Director of Elementary or Secondary Education, go to the art shows at the end of the year.

After you land a teaching job, you will have to justify your art supply budget; what you cannot say is that art is important because it’s a FUN subject.

When your principal asks you why you need more art supplies for your classes or why the students should have art all year instead of half a year, you cannot say because art is fun. The principal will respond “the students can have fun at recess.” You must be prepared to explain that:

Art is work that requires discovery, perseverance and evaluation. Art develops linguistic skills by teaching students to describe, analyze, and interpret visual images. Art expresses the highest aspirations of the human spirit and involves dealing with human concerns and values.

Elementary and Middle school teachers-- offer to integrate art projects into academic subjects; you want art to be seen as part of the school program, not apart from it.

To help my students remember this concept on a moment's notice, I use the phrase "Deep and Wide." Art will add depth and breadth to the understanding of any subject.

7. Now, let's address getting a job in Higher Education:

If you can travel anywhere in the country, you'll probably find and land at least a part-time college job. It is not unusual for professors to travel to other states to teach several days a week while sleeping on an office couch or in a friend's apartment. In addition, you must have a stellar record of exhibitions to compete. You must also write for grants and start to network with people at conferences like the College Art Association.

The people that you are sitting with today are no longer your classmates. They are your New Colleagues. Today is the beginning of your art network. Stay in touch and help each other. Those of you who land a college teaching job, invite your colleagues to present a guest lecture about their work or give a guest critique. Attend college and university art openings, get acquainted with the gallery director and the other faculty, do the same thing with museums within a 100 miles radius. Be a Pathfinder.

8. Be prepared for your goals to take longer to attain than you expect.

Stay the course and enjoy the process of aspiring.

9. The most important decisions that you'll ever make:

The two decisions that will influence your career life the most are: who you choose as a spouse or significant other, and if, when and how many children you have. You'll have to carve out studio time in a consistent way if you sincerely intend to be a professional artist. As the saying goes, "Professionals work all the time, amateurs work only when they're inspired." There is no universal solution for finding enough time for the work. Sometimes there are interruptions and sometimes life has to be attended to.

But, whether you work your life around your art or your art around your life, it will be a challenge.

To end: I encourage you to bask in the glow of those magic moments when they occur in your studio or classroom as you transcend technique, performance anxiety, fear and fatigue.

Making art allows us to transcend mundane reality. It helps us connect with the mystery, the truth and the beauty that we seek as artists.

MAY THE *MAGIC* OF CREATIVE LIGHT, SHINE DOWN ON YOU OFTEN.