

Abbreviated version of Commencement address delivered by Denise Levertov - 1969

Title: SERENDIPITY AND THE ACT OF COMMENCEMENT

(Note: For reasons of space it was impossible to include that part of Miss Levertov's speech which referred to a recent poem, Relearning the Alphabet, or the poem itself; it will, however, be appearing in her next volume, due to be published in the spring of 1970.)

... it is possible that this is the first occasion, here or anywhere else, that a college graduation address has been given by someone who never went to school at all: not to kindergarten, not to grade school and not to college.

It is this circumstance that suggested to me what I would like to say to you.

Never having gone to school used at one time to seem to me perhaps to have been a disadvantage. ~~xxxxxxx~~ I certainly enjoyed not going at the time! - But when I was around 30 - before I had become a college teacher myself - I used to imagine the brilliant lectures and the disciplined courses of ~~xxx~~ study in philosophy and history and classics which I might have enjoyed if I had led a different life. Even after I first began to teach, a few years ago, I had for a while the feeling that being a student was a more attractive way of spending the years from 18 to 22 or so than the way I spent them; working at odd jobs - landgirl, nurse, bookstore clerk, etc. - and reading, writing, and going to museums in an entirely haphazard fashion. Even now I think student life in unusual colleges like Bennington, or Immaculate Heart in L.A. (made famous by the former Sister Corita) and a few others may be preferable... But as I - rather slowly, because I was naive about it - began to realize some of the things students at most colleges and universities are up against, and have been up against from the time they were elementary-school kids: the systematic stifling of curiosity, the enforced study of material either uninteresting or seeming uninteresting because enforced, and the pressures of competition for grades, and of excessive amounts of reading, and of formal papers to be written, and of exams - then I began also to understand the tremendous advantages of my informal education.

Soon after I received the invitation to speak here on this occasion, I had a letter from a former student of mine who said that what she had most enjoyed about our poetry class was that I was 'a serendipitous woman'. I can't tell you how much that pleased me. Serendipity, as you probably know, is defined as 'the faculty of making desirable but unsought-for discoveries by accident'.

t cards for those books whose titles intrigued you? Catalogues are not stimulating, and the hassle is discouraging. You wait, you wait, and finally they come and all you the book is out anyway. The glorious leaps and bounds of serendipity, from shelf to shelf, from book to book, writer to writer, can't take place under that striction. Some of you will be going to graduate school, some of you will work the field of education, or marry people in that field: please do something about this problem, among all the other problems.

It is certainly by serendipity that I have lived as a poet. The kind of poetry I write, which I have called a poetry of organic or exploratory form as distinct from a poetry of predetermined metrics and from free verse, is a poetry in which one line, one image, leads to the discovery of the next, the form of each line and image being revealed to the writer by way of an intense ~~xxxxxx~~ attention to 'content', but each line, as it comes into being - into substance of sound - coming likewise a part of that content; so that the total form arrived at is an inscape, an accretion of organically related parts revealed to the intelligence through a serendipitous ~~xxxx~~ openness rather than by the operations of the will.
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... What serendipity means ~~xx~~ goes beyond the dictionary definition: it implies living by intuition rather than by will. ... The intuition does not make plans but it sees where it is, what flowers and stones are at its feet.

Someone will say, 'But isn't the ecological mess we're in, or the architectural aspect of our urban mess, for instance, the result precisely of planning?' I think the answer is no, these messes are due rather to the mean, crown shortsightedly methodical planning of greedy and wilful men attempting to exploit the earth and exploit other men. They are 'out of Tao'. The paranoia that calls itself 'defense' and leads to war is another kind of wilfulness, of elaborate planning that makes its moves in a deadly chess game - always trying to outwit, to out-re. But when one is in a serendipitous state of grace, he is freely open to discover not only the inscape of particular experiences (or ^{of} ~~particular~~ poems, if he is a poet) and, ^{but the inscape nature of his own life:} ~~then~~ there is no need for him to score, and paranoia does not develop. ^(accepting this) If this is true for individuals, there is no reason why it should not be equally true for groups.

A serendipitous life must, from my observation, be particularly hard to lead in graduate schools. Lots of young men have to go to graduate school because they have not been able to decide on any other way to beat the Draft. For

girls, grad.school often seems more gratuitous, though there are of course professions for which it is genuinely necessary and may even be interesting. However, to any young woman who is going to graduate school in English mainly because she enjoys reading and perhaps writes too, I'd say, Don't do it. Or if you ~~xxx~~ do do it, and find it as deadly - as destructive to your experience of literature, and to your own work, as I'm warning you it can be - then have the courage to drop out; don't stay in school just because you planned to, willed to go, programmed yourself to get those degrees: don't stay to save face.

But though grad.school is a hard place in which to attain to a harmonious intuitiveness, an ideally serendipitous life would truly be a life of continuing education. If you look up the origins of the word education you will find it comes from 'to lead out' - and one 'desireable but unsought-for discovery' leads always in and out (or in) to another; so that if one could ^{learn to} exercise the faculty continuously one would fulfil Emerson's famous injunction, 'Only connect!' In that state....all that one hears and sees and stumbles across reveals its relatedness, that, in fact, the experience artists know in their work-processes extends itself to other aspects of life. It's a drugless high, to put it another way. And it's accessible to anyone if - and only if - ~~they~~ live in a free environment.

~~xxxxxxx~~ It happens that I have prepared this talk in rather peculiar circumstances. The greater part of what I have just said was written during the battle of Berkeley. For days, while I ~~xxx~~ would come in from the streets or the campus to write down a sentence and leave again, police helicopters were constantly coming overhead. One woke to that sound in the mornings. My first page had been drafted just before ^{the police attack} ~~that~~ began - at a point when I had been working with some of students in the original People's Park, which was such a beautiful, spontaneous expression of the impulse to be joyful even in these dark times, and to share that joy; of people's determination not to wait for someone else to begin but to live generously here and now. Before I had reached the second or third page, the notorious fence had gone up around our park, and we had experienced the terror of marshall law, of clubs and of teargas - teargas dropped from helicopters - of sheathed bayonets an inch from our bellies or throats, and of guns fired in the streets of Berkeley at an unarmed crowd of people like you and me.

Many of my students and ~~xxxxxxx~~ my husband's students soon experienced also the grotesque barbarity of the Santa Rita prison. Last summer many people felt that police brutality in this country had reached an alltime low during the Democratic Convention in Chicago (though black people, in the south and in the northern ghettos, knew that this was nothing new - it was only the white middleclass targets

in demonstration at these events see the New York Times of June 19th 72

hat were new). At Berkeley in May of 1969 that brutality escalated - and I think have to face the likelihood, even the certainty, alas, that there will be further escalations - more guns turned against the people - in the near future. ~~War comes home to roost.~~ Does this make my words about serendipity, about learning to live intuitively, and not by will - does it make them an idyllic irrelevance?

I don't believe it does. And the students and street people and the older people, who faced that terror and who did not give up, would not, I believe, think them irrelevant either - for they themselves were living serendipitously, both in the creation of the park (and its later annexes) and in their non-violent resistance to a destructive and repressive force. They were not frightened away. James Rector was killed and Alan Blanchard (an artist) was blinded and many people were wounded by bullets and many more by the swinging clubs of the police. But every day there were more people out on the streets, unarmed and unafraid - seeds in their pockets and plants tucked under their arms ready to plant in any piece of waste ground they reached before the Blue Meanies caught up with them. ~~And~~ ^{More} People's Parks are being created every day; at the very moment I'm ^{writing} ~~speaking~~ there are hundreds of people digging and planting and watering them, and children swinging and making sandcastles, and other people dancing and making music and rapping - in the face of the continuing presence of the National Guard and their bayonets and theameda County sheriffs and their everready guns.* And this whole movement in all its spontaneity and inventiveness is an example of that very openness to discovery that I've been calling serendipity and that Paul Goodman recently termed 'incidental learning' and that Peter Maurin years ago called making one-man revolutions.

... Yes, I believe both the events in Berkeley last month, and the attitude of generous inventiveness, of belief in the possibility of unplanned community, that underlies the impulsive seizing and using of a piece of waste ground to make a place for the enjoyment of all, ~~xxx~~ by no means invalidate, but rather reinforce, my earlier remarks; and that there is a closer relation between them which is of the most relevance for us all. I don't mean that this one activity - the making of parks out of neglected lots - is going to save the world. But the implications of that activity - its positive and life-loving nature, its desanctification of private property, its defiance of the power-structure, its communal voluntarism - point the way to the only chance we have of remaining humanely human in a dark time of neo-Fascism; and of learning to cope, while there is still a chance to do so, even with the terrifying ecological problems that loom so near now.

Only in freedom can the imagination develop, and only by means of the imagination can compassion come into being - for compassion is a function of the imagination. ~~With the imagination, the only way to the future is through the imagination.~~

imagination. But we can't wait for someone else to create the condition of freedom for us, that we may act ~~xxx~~ with imagination and compassion and develop the faculty of serendipity. Each of us must start here and now to make it, in and around us, any and every way we can. The uptight people have the guns, the gasses, the napalm, the bombs and the prisons; and they are polluting the sea and the earth and all the creatures that walk and swim and fly therein with their atomic waste and their ddt and their oilslick - and are on the oint of polluting the moon too... But there are more of us than of them. We still have a chance to live and thereby - by our millions of one-man revolutions - to make life possible for each/other and desireable for a future generation.

What collective form could ~~xxxx~~ one-man revolutions add up to here at Bennington? After a day here I can see you have little to justly beef about. You are an élite. But that is precisely what you should protest. Insist that your admissions office lets in people who have never had a share of all most of you take for granted. (And don't let yourself be conned into thinking open admissions necessarily lower standards - there is plenty of ~~evax~~evidence of the phenomenally rapid 'catching up' of the underprivileged student in a stimulating environment.) The argument will surely be advanced that open admissions are economically unfeasible - but I believe that if all concerned were willing to lower their ⁿstand~~ard~~ of living a little, and put the money that might have gone towrds \$50 sweaters, a sportscar, a European vacation, for instance (and of course this goes for faculty too) ~~xxxxxxx~~ into a common~~e~~ fund - if in fact a place like Bennington would turn itself into a commune - then a very real possibility for ceasing to be an élite and yet not losing the very advantages you should be sharing would open up.

Let's commence.

Dennis Leventov
