

# BENNINGTON COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by  
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June 4, 2004

*you shall above all things be glad and young  
For if you're young, whatever life you wear*

*it will become you; and if you're glad  
whatever's living will yourself become.*

e.e. cummings wrote these lines just after this school was founded—1932, the Jazz Age, the heart of the Modern Era. Bennington is and has always been a modern college. Inspired by John Dewey and many other artists and thinkers of the time, its founders were convinced that it wasn't simply the content of typical university classes that needed to be reformed, but the very way students were taught. They dared to weather the odds of the Great Depression, in their belief that a school founded on principles of creativity, individuality, and personal discovery was not only possible, but necessary.

Most of you were probably still sleeping, with some sort of freshman/jet lag/transition-hangover on that Monday morning in September of 2000, when April Bernard attempted to prepare us for our time here. But those who remembered convocation was happening—and collected the energy to locate Greenwall—might remember what she said. She challenged us with these words: “Reclaim your innocence. Approach every new work of art, every new area of knowledge, as if it might contain the news that will save your life.”

In our first weeks of school we quickly forgot her words of advice, and started proving to people all that we already knew, sometimes pretending to know what we didn't. Recalling this advice four years later, I realize how important it is to the ways we have learned at Bennington.

One of my first classes here was figure drawing. If any of you have tried it, you understand how difficult it can be: to look at a figure and really draw how the neck muscles intersect the collarbone, or how the fat of the heel presses into the ground. We can't rely on some watered down image or memory of what a collarbone looks like. It requires looking at this strange form as if it were an ancient woodcarving, recently unearthed. This kind of seeing, we were asked to do in all of our classes, whether studying a piece of art, a political conflict, or a yuppie fish mating ritual.

But in a figure drawing to make the picture come alive we must discover through our markings, along with our eyes. We must learn through process. A certain poetry teacher up in the Barn always tells his students, “Your poems are smarter than you are.” Most of our teachers have insisted that we discover and learn through the actual words, gestures, and markings that tumble out of our mouths, bodies, and hands.

Working in these ways, we often surprised even ourselves. What we came up with was usually more interesting than we imagined it could be because it was not a simple regurgitation of the known past. It was something new.

Although we’ve acquired some concrete skills, most of what we’ve been doing here goes far beyond our ability to use a camera, or to properly collect the temperature of snails. The meat of our education has been to push ourselves to discover, both externally and internally, and to make our ideas materialize.

Some of us came to Bennington with the knowledge of what we liked to do; most of us bounced around until finally we bumped into something, or many things, that we just couldn’t stop doing. But asked to actually do the things we study—along with analyze, think and talk about—we have had to confront which activities we truly enjoy doing. Do I actually like to sit in a darkroom with chemical fumes for most of the day? Or do I prefer to place bacteria in dishes, jotting down their reactions? It might be sexy to imagine oneself as a novel writer or poet typing at a computer till your eyes burn blue, and the cigarette smoke consumes the room. But turning on your computer and writing every day can register, depending on who you are, on a sliding scale from exhilarating to grueling. Some of these grueling activities we kept at because they helped us do the things we wanted; others we omitted.

For those of you who don’t know, Bennington is a giant smorgasbord. There is so much to eat that you don’t even know where to start, when to stop, and how to consume it all in one sitting. Each term is like a meal we must put together—should the salad come first; should I skip the carbs? (I think those would be the sciences). We learn what happens when we take too much, and either can’t eat what’s on our plate, or end up shoveling it in; those terms we lie comatose on our parents’ couch for two weeks afterward. And then there is taste: cultivating a sense of personal preference and style. *Does Schoenberg agree with my palate, or do I prefer free jazz?* Over these four years, we have become acutely sensitive to our own digestive processes.

It seems strange that feeding oneself, a basic instinct, requires so much figuring out and practice. But it has proven helpful to have some guidance. I think we all have benefited from the advice of our advisors and teachers, who pushed us to try new things, helped us stick to the ones we already knew, and made sure that we internalized at least some of what they taught us. For that, and everything else, we thank you.

I realize you parents out there are maybe listening skeptically to all this stuff about learning through our hands and mouths, about finding our inner calling. You’re probably wondering where the money to support your retirement and grandchildren is going to come from. All I can say is that I hope you have another child going to Harvard Business School. But for those of you not that lucky, who have placed your only hopes into Bennington—(sorry Mom and Dad)—I have a little inspirational thought. Do not fear. The reason that any of us are sitting here today is that we have learned to make things happen, or at least pretend to. When there wasn’t a class offered in our curriculum, we created a tutorial. When there wasn’t an opportunity to study art history, a bunch of us whined loud and long enough that the College implemented a lecture series. We have weaseled our way into classes, proposed new and improved deadlines, and repeatedly managed to persuade funding committees of the feasibility and brilliance of our projects. Every year, in our plan meetings we have convinced our teachers and the Dean’s Office that we knew exactly what we were doing at Bennington, and why we wanted to do it. This kind of creativity and initiative might not guarantee a retirement mansion in Florida, but it likely means that—even with the economy as it is—we will find something to do, something to pay the bills. And if we don’t, we’ll make something up. As things have usually gone, someone will be wise enough or gullible enough to take us on, and maybe even pay us. So don’t worry, we’ll be fine, at least in this regard.



One of the many things Admissions forgot to tell us when we applied to Bennington is that it is not a four-year college. We naively believe we're graduating tomorrow, but we're actually just moving on to phase two: the How Phase. *How do I bring what I've been imagining, thinking, and doing here on this hill in Vermont to the places I'm about to go?*

Tomorrow, at approximately 11 o'clock, we will reenter our lives—and by this I mean our postmodern, post-Bennington lives—returning to those histories that make each one of us different economically, socially, and culturally. Some of us will return to fancy apartments in the Upper East Side, others to potato farms in northern Maine, and still others to far off and foreign countries such as Jamaica, Pakistan, Nepal, Kenya, and Mexico. For four years we have been living, sleeping, and breathing Bennington together. We have not only shared a common lifestyle, but we have connected, collaborated, and learned from each other. Wherever we are going and whatever we're about to do—living with our parents in Pakistan, renting a dingy apartment in New York City, and yes, working on a cruise ship on the Mississippi—I hope we bring a bit of Bennington with us.

I don't mean *Bennington*, like the stamp of some exotic country in our passport, nor the culture of this place (although I admit to fantasizing about roller skating parties in abandoned Ames parking lots). Let's not turn our real and unique strolls through this college into a harmless, cute memory. Let's not put it in the past like a summer camp—"the good old days of midnight breakfasts and Kilpatrick parties." What I want all of us to take with us is our eyes, our hands, and our lips.

Outside of the Bennington bubble live the realities of our lives: family dramas, piles of debt, a dwindling job market, a network of corporate control, a nation at war, and a government teetering towards fascism. Our initial impulse is fear—followed by waves of panic.

*I must ask all my teachers to convert their eloquent evaluations into grades for grad school.*

*I must quickly learn all the skills I was never taught.*

*I must secure a job with health care benefits.*

*I must chat with gallery owners with elitist ideas about art.*

In fear, it is easy to forget and perceive these norms as the only option.

But the founders of Bennington College, who spent a decade of their lives imagining this place, had a hope for it: that it would teach its students to envision a different way of interacting with the world. After four years, give or take, of living in this place, taking its quirks and philosophies for granted, we would be truly selfish to leave here without taking that vision with us. We are not entering into the world as it is; we are entering into the future as we will make it. Do not accept the world as you have always seen it, or as others think you should. War is old, poverty is old, sexism, racism, and class systems are old. Look, question, learn from your experiences; get dirty.

My final wish for all of us graduates under this tent tonight is this: Keep it Modern. By this I mean meet each person, idea, and situation as if you have never come across such a thing before, erasing all preconceived notions about it. Find a deep, personal dialogue with it and what you do in your lives will be a continuation of what we have learned here. I can only imagine that it will also be an original, positive addition to the world. I think this wish is not just mine, but also that of our teachers, administrators, founders, and all those people through the years who have become deeply connected to Bennington. So let's get to it. Thank you.

*Iona Bruckner is a 2004 Bennington College graduate. As a student, she studied a wide variety of subjects including political science, sculpture, biology and philosophy and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. She spent this summer working at an architectural firm, a passion she discovered while attending Bennington. Iona believed that architecture was the best way to fuse her skills as a visual artist with her deep commitment to social and political issues.*