

Graduation Address June 2, 2007

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"To Be of Use"
from *Circles on the Water* by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shadows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
they seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek head of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
but the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they are made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.

Poems often clarify and simply the complication of life as the reader tries to see the forest through the trees. New England poet Robert Frost was fond of saying that "poetry is a momentary stay against confusion." As I read this poem, I see Paul Squibb agreeing with the logic. In 1932 he looked out at a depressed country, a world

order that would soon be threatened by the terror of war. He considered the needs and the availability of resources. In all the confusion of his time, he went to work and created a useful model for our time. Midland's climate for learning is sustainable, effective, evolving and emerging. Our graduates share a common understanding through an uncommon experience. The members of the Midland community develop relationships with each other and with the natural world which cultivates their inner resources.

Environmentalist Bill McKibben, author of *Deep Economy*, says he has stopped considering whether he is optimistic or pessimistic about the current challenges of climate change. What I need to hear in that position is that it may not matter at all if we are optimistic or pessimistic or how we want our world to be. "Don't be afraid; the world is what it is." Today I can hear Squibb and McKibbin, "We need to get on with it Graham, hand out the diplomas there is so much good work to do. And you...seniors, enough, go be useful, you are ready, we have no more to teach you." Or maybe they say, "There is an urgent need for you Midlanders in the world. The job is clear, the daily work difficult, you know what you must do...enjoy it." Thanks Paul, thanks Robert, thanks Marge, thank you Bill.

It is time for us to let go of the class of 2007, and it may not be as easy for me today as it may have been a few weeks ago. The seniors submerged in the daily tasks this year. Whether in muck or mud or on sunny fields or on hikes, they found their rhythm. Of course there were times of dust and botched set backs, but there was also joy, and jobs well done. They have their experience to take with them, and when I look out on this landscape next September, I will see what they have left behind.

In my minds eye there will be Charles with his briefcase, Izzi in her Zebra suit, Jackson in his fur collar, Nathan telling stories, Sumner battling opponents, Sterling charging about, Ryan taking three breaths, Adam singing Elliot Smith, Aidan with his heroes, Jay yelling "dishes to Dish House." Manuel smiling and bobbing, Bum being kind, Bianca moving gracefully, Mickey looking down from Grass Mountain, Amelia looking out at the ninth grade girls from beneath her Santa hat, Evan being right where he wants to be. I see Jasper taking his final bald-bow, and Nora may still be here for all I know.

Seniors, you have touched us, and you have been touched by Midland. You will draw on your experience when you need it. You have lived with less. You know how simple it is to be useful, and how useful it is to be simple. God knows there is real work in the world to be done and real "Squibbing" left to do. Come back and see us when the time is right. We NEED to know how you are doing; we WANT to know how we have done.