

The Common Wages of the Most Secret Heart

Good evening. On behalf of the English Department I would like to thank all of you, parents, colleagues, and especially the student members, both new and old, of Omega Psi chapter of Sigma Tau Delta for coming to tonight's banquet to initiate the new members into the National English Honors Society. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Kevin Murphy, and—as the guy who's been around the department longer than anyone else—I can attest that this has been a very busy year for the Omega Psi chapter, and it's very much due to the energy and imagination of Addie Davis and Julia Catalano, with a large dollop of credit thrown in for our new faculty advisor, Chris Matusiak.

Just ticking off the events of the first semester is pretty impressive—two coffee hours in which students and faculty schmoozed away about erudite, and not-so-erudite, issues, two faculty presentations by Lily Sheehan and Hugh Egan with another one by Chris Holmes already planned for the spring, a book-to-give and a book-to-take exchange set up on the common table of the third floor of Muller, and two readings by Kirsten Wasson from her new book of poetry, *Almost Everything Takes Forever*. The first reading was up at Ithaca College, but the second was down at the Buffalo Street Bookstore, and it marked the first time that we had a Sigma Tau Delta event outside the campus, moving out into the real world, so to speak.

I'm not sure what to expect next from Addie and Julia to get everyone involved. They'll have Lily Sheehan set up a fashion runway, with our chair Claire Gleitman taking an elegant stroll in the newest finery. Now if that don't fetch them, I don't know Arkansas, as the Duke says in *Huckleberry Finn*. Or how about a departmental basketball team with Chris Holmes and Hugh Egan starring as opposing centers? On the other hand, I remember, when I once asked Jim Swafford to come over to the Fitness Center with me, he said whenever he thinks about exercise, he lies down until the thought passes. When you're dealing with literature types, who really pride themselves on being *different* from one another, you have your work cut out trying to imagine what we all have in common.

But then I thought about the Buffalo Street Bookstore event again—because it didn't end with Kirsten's reading, as lovely as it was. Addie and Julia had arranged for an Open Mic session to follow the reading. They had invited everyone and anyone to come up to the mic to read their own work or poems they found especially meaningful. As it happened, lots of people did. As Bart Comegys and Zack Anderson, Michael Watson and Tyler Noreika, and Addie and Julia themselves, one after another, got up to read pieces they had written or poems they found especially memorable, I was struck by their willingness to overcome a natural shyness to read publicly, never mind actually speak out loud those thoughts and emotions that most of the time remain private and secret and unshared.

It was then I was reminded of something they all had—that we all have—in common, something that Dylan Thomas had written about in a poem back when he wasn't too much older than they are. He was thinking about why he writes, or why he even thinks the way he thinks. Here's what he says:

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

The common wages of their most secret heart. Now I realize, as the whole country tries to dig its way out of the Great Recession or whatever we want to call the high unemployment slump we're in, that whenever you hear the word "wages" it immediately bring to mind jobs and salaries. But those words surely are terms which, alas, few people associate with the English major. Even for those of you who decide to find a direct path from literature to employment by means of teaching, I'm afraid that I have to report that, no matter how noble that vocation may be, the wages you'll receive will never allow you to break out of the 99 percent.

Of course, Thomas wasn't talking about jobs and salaries; in fact, he wasn't talking about wages the way we usually think of them, as some reward you receive for some work or activity you do. Like all poets, he wants to make words work harder, to include all their nuances, and in this case he means wages to imply something that you *pay* as well as something you receive. So when he says he writes for "the common wages of their most secret heart," he means to include in those wages not just the exhilaration and joy but also the sorrow and pain that comes with the territory of the most secret heart. That's why, it seems, he has his lovers lie abed "with all their griefs in their arms." The question that Thomas seeks to address in his writing is the same one I think that draws us all to literature: what is the reward—and what is the cost—of being human?

Now that's not a question that can be answered quickly or glibly; in fact, it seems that each time we find the question fully put in our reading or in the circumstances of our lives, we find ourselves piqued and prodded to ask it again in further reading and thinking. It's a process

that continues way beyond the confines of a particular book or an English class or, for that matter, the four years of college. Out in that so-called real world, when you have to make large decisions about the shape and direction of your life—how finally to grow up (it takes a long time, if you really pay attention), who to share your life with, if you are lucky enough to meet someone and are smart enough to make that commitment, how to earn those other kinds of wages that will keep you and those you love secure—this process of attention and reflection will be key. Even more, I can assure you, no matter how you make those large decisions, there will be times, difficult times, when it will be very helpful for you to have read and remembered what others have thought in the face of physical or emotional or spiritual crises. And at those times something as impractical as a novel by Charlotte Bronte or a poem by Dylan Thomas may suddenly provide you with a way to articulate your grief or your exhilaration, to hold it and to understand it. So in that sense the labor dedicated to the common wages of the most secret heart can and does pay its own dividends.

By the end of the poem, Thomas acknowledges that the lovers for whom he writes, caught up as they are in their own emotions, will pay no praise or wages for what he writes or thinks. But fortunately tonight we have the opportunity to take a moment to acknowledge the value of such work. We are, after all, gathered here tonight not just to acknowledge a common interest but also to recognize your uncommon achievement. Each of you has demonstrated in your sustained response to books and poems and plays an exceptional dedication and appreciation, and your initiation into Sigma Tau Delta is a clear and visible demonstration of that accomplishment. But keeping in mind those interior motives which fuel our love of literature, I'd like to propose a dual toast to end my remarks. Here's to the common wages of your most secret heart, and, much more publicly, to your entry into an uncommon and distinguished society. Congratulations!

La Tourelle, Ithaca
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