

**Baccalaureate Address**  
***Encouragement, Discovery, Belief***  
**By Elizabeth A. Duffy**  
**May 28, 2011**

“Encouragement, discovery, belief” – those are the words that Naomi Shihab Nye used to describe the Lawrenceville community after she spent a week here in residence this winter as the Merrill Poetry Fellow. I hope that those three words – *encouragement, discovery* and *belief* – also capture your experience at Lawrenceville, and I’d like to suggest this afternoon a few ways they might guide your life beyond Lawrenceville as well.

\* \* \*

Ms. Nye wrote the poem that Alexis and Claire just read during her one-week visit here. From her daily conversations with Mr. Atlee on their drives to and from campus to the philosophical discussions around Mr. Eldridge’s Harkness table, from the ecumenical wrist band that Reverend Morrow’s Varieties of Religious Experiences class presented to her to the plant growing out of a book in Ms. McKay’s *avant garde* literature class – Ms. Nye found abundant examples of inspiration and encouragement during her visit to Lawrenceville.

Part of the reason I think that Ms. Nye noticed your caring behavior is because she herself was so generous. Not only did she spontaneously invite a faculty child to lunch who keeps a daily writing journal and graciously attend an evening book group despite a snow storm to discuss two of her collections of poetry, but she also read and commented on dozens of your poems each night after long, full days on campus. As Amy Glenn remarked at a recent “What Matters to Me and Why?” talk, “You tend to notice a good trait in others when you have that trait yourself.” Ms. Nye was impressed by your willingness to share your work with her. She said, “I think that’s very brave and it suggests a certain climate which is encouraged here at Lawrenceville, that is confidence, identity and mutual respect. For a student I don’t know well to give me something to read is a tremendous act of trust and I treasure that and appreciate it.”

If you were to make a list of people who have cared for and supported you during your time here, whom would your list include? The teacher who spent countless consultations reviewing math problems? Your friend who came out to every home game to cheer you on, even though your team struggled? Your roommate who both reveled in your successes and consoled you through the inevitable setbacks and disappointments? Your coach or music instructor who pushed you to perform to a higher level? Your housemaster or advisor who encouraged you to try a new activity that became a central part of your experience here? As importantly, who would include you on *their* list of caring, supportive people?

One teacher whom I know has encouraged and supported many of you is Mr. Robbins, who will “graduate” with you tomorrow after 48 years at Lawrenceville. For the trustees’ recognition of him, I created a Web 2.0 Wordle based on the articles that you had written about him in the special edition of *The Lawrence*. While many of the words that you would expect to occur frequently in your articles about Mr. Robbins appeared on the Wordle –*Latin, Lawrenceville,*

*school, years, time, classics, teacher, classroom, legend, and grumble*, the top 24 words also included *love* and *affection* –not words that I know you confer casually.

May Mr. Robbins and Ms. Nye be examples to each of you as you graduate from Lawrenceville and throughout your life. Treat others with kindness, respect and caring and they will reciprocate.

I too have experienced strong encouragement at Lawrenceville from my first days on campus eight years ago through all the travel of the Campaign and most recently this spring when I performed in the Spring Dance Concert. As you all saw, I am not an experienced dancer. Nevertheless, I didn't hesitate to appear in the show because I was confident that this community would be supportive. What I didn't anticipate was just *how* encouraging you all would be. Your classmates and the other students who traveled to Turkey with me were incredibly patient and reassuring as I struggled to learn the various dance steps, and I was amazed by how many students, faculty, parents and alumni congratulated me on my performance.

While encouragement often consists of such small, personal gestures, encouragement can also be part of the spirit of a place, that is, it can work at a community level as well as at the individual level. That community ethos is something that you've mastered as a class under the direction of Nathan, the Student Council and the many other leaders – both formal and informal – in your class. Indeed, over the course of this year, you have cultivated an unprecedented spirit of support, fun, and gratitude. From the revived Big Red Dog Pound to the first Donor Day shout-out, from the intensity of Splash to the joy of water balloon fights in the Circle and Bowl, and of course the Bicentennial extravaganza and your world-record breaking pie fight that not only raised \$16,000 for the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, but also captured the imagination of people around the world – you set a positive, encouraging tone on campus that was palpable. For the sake of the institutions that you will attend next and the communities in which you'll live and work as adults, I hope that you'll retain your child-like enthusiasm as you grow up and continue to create a positive spirit and supportive fun wherever you go.

\* \* \*

The second concept that Ms. Nye believes characterizes Lawrenceville is discovery. Again, Ms. Nye focused mostly on the intimate rather than the grand sense of discovery – what she called the “shared wilderness of daily discovery” and what your classmate Mike McDavid described as “the small things that slowly turn the leaves.”

At Lawrenceville, Ms. Nye discovered those small things in a variety of places – the library, the expanse between buildings, the lunch line at Abbott, and the friendliness around the Harkness tables. To Ms. Nye's list of inspiring campus settings, I would add the successive bursts of blossoming trees each spring, the stillness of campus after a snowfall, the first light of the morning as the sun rises over Irwin and the last light of the day as it hits the bell clock tower on Pop Hall. What are the places on campus that you have discovered during your time here which have shaped your Lawrenceville experience and left lasting impressions on you?

Much of both the value and the fun of discovery is the journey. Many of you learned here either in a theater class or through your participation in Periwig, a concept called the “moment before,” which is what happens to characters before they come on stage that influences their actions on stage. Such moments-before occur in real life too. Think back on your own experience at Lawrenceville. The pep talk in the locker room before the MAPL championship game, “passing the pulse” before taking the KAC stage, Colonel Schorr teaching those of you in Hamill House how to march early one Sunday morning in preparation for the Bicentennial house parade, baking cookies in Irwin for the snow day this winter, writing the new Carter House cheer before the House Olympics, turning the basement of Woods Mem into a haunted house for the annual Halloween party for local children, **your many ingenious prom asks**. Those behind-the-scene moments have been an essential part of the fabric of your Lawrenceville experience and such moments will be a part of your life in college and beyond as well. Revel in and relish them. Enjoy the journey as you discover more about who you are and what’s important to you.

Of course, the concept of discovery works on a grander scale too. This year’s Lawrenceville Medal recipient, Dr. Charles Carpenter from the Class of 1948, developed an oral rehydration treatment for cholera as a young doctor in Calcutta, India that subsequently saved over 40 million lives and that has been described as the greatest therapeutic advance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nobel Prize winner Muhammed Yunus P’95 who gave the Heely Lecture in September, created micro-lending, a new approach to banking, after he realized that with the \$42 in his pocket he could change the lives of 27 people in his native Bangladesh. The Grameen Bank he founded now provides over \$1 billion of loans worldwide and has served as the model for countless other social enterprises.

What both Professor Yunus and Dr. Carpenter have in common is an ability to see situations in unconventional ways and the courage to challenge the *status quo*. Professor Yunus credits the traditional banking system with teaching him what *not* to do. “We do just the opposite of big banks,” he explained. “They serve the rich, we serve the poor. They make loans to men, we give them to women. They work with people in the cities, we focus on people in the villages. They make people come to them; we go to the people who need us.” Similarly, in his acceptance speech for the Master’s Award, Dr. Carpenter acknowledged his teachers at Lawrenceville who taught him to “not accept the face value of things” and to listen empathetically to others. I hope that you’re leaving Lawrenceville with those same skills and mindsets, because as *Time* correspondent and CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria said when he spoke at Lawrenceville in April, “America’s great gift to the world had been its openness to new ideas and cultures. Diversity is our strength and we must maintain and celebrate who we are. Our challenge is to be true to that.”

\* \* \*

The final characteristic that Ms. Nye highlighted in her reflections about Lawrenceville was “belief.” By “belief,” Ms. Nye meant “your place in the world,” or what Ms. Rabin described as “a sturdy, solid way to be.” According to Ms. Nye, it’s “up to you to discover what makes your raft and balance on the tides.” Ms. Nye discovered her passion for writing as a young girl when a librarian encouraged her to submit a poem to a children’s magazine and it was published.

Fellow Lawrentian Aldo Leopold from the Class of 1905 turned his love and fascination of nature into a national, now international, conservation movement. May each of you find a vocation that allows you to do what you love and love what you do.

This spring's Licht lecturer, Reggie Van Lee, also urged you to pursue your passions. I was particularly struck by his contention that we all have two birthdays – the day we are born and the day we understand *why* we were born and discover our purpose in life. During the question and answer session at the end of Mr. Van Lee's talk, a student wisely asked, "But how do I find my passion?" As the students in the design class that Mr. Burns and I taught this spring can attest, a good place to start to find your purpose or highest goal is to focus on meaningful experiences that you've had in which you've felt completely in flow and ask why those experiences were so compelling to you. For their midterm, the students in our class were divided into five groups of three and challenged to create the most value they could in a week from a pack of post-it notes and a \$20 bill. Strikingly, none of the groups focused much on making money; rather, they designed projects to generate what they considered to be more precious values: memories, school spirit, awareness of social issues, friendships and enduring advice.

Belief has another important meaning, beyond passion or purpose, and that is confidence or conviction. Indeed, our beliefs not only provide us with a sense of direction and significance, but they can also be a source of strength when things get tough. Ms. Nye spoke about "words we hold close in our lives" and how her word – *simple* – "saved her when the world said complicate or you probably shouldn't or you really are a dreamer or it might not work."

I never had a chance to ask him, but I suspect that the word that anchored Josh Arcadia was *friendship*. As many of you know, Josh was a member of the Class of 2003, who served as an assistant coach for the varsity football team before losing his battle to cancer this winter. When Josh's cancer spread and he had to have his arm amputated, he could have given up or felt sorry for himself; instead, he spent the last year of his life doing what he loved to do – making people laugh through his stand-up comedy routines and helping to coach our football team to a MAPL championship.

While I know that the season-ending, championship-clinching win over Hill was the pinnacle of the football season, the turning point of the season, I would argue, came in one of the team's only two defeats – an overtime loss to Hun. Down 14-6 with just over a minute left in the game, the defense forced a fumble that was recovered in the end zone by Rhett. With the score then 14-12, Pat completed a two-point thread-the-needle pass to Beau to tie the game. Although we ultimately lost the game in overtime, you showed in that game that you believed in yourself as much as Josh believed in you.

The girls' varsity indoor track team exhibited that same grit and confidence at the state championship meet this winter. After Jillian was disqualified in the 800, the team entered the final relay 1 ½ points behind perennial contender Mt. Saint Dominic. The team could have consoled themselves with a second place finish. Instead the final 4X400 relay team, which was anchored by Jillian, exceeded their seeding and the team won the State Championship 101.5 to 101. That's belief.

Indeed, what those two stories perfectly illustrate is that even big triumphs and successes are made up of small steps – some forward and some backward. Think back on your own season-defining moments. Belief is both what helps you to get into a zone and excel, and it's what helps you to persevere when things are not going well by ensuring that you don't lose sight of where you're ultimately headed or give up.

Before founding Grameen bank, Professor Yunus approached the existing banks in his hometown and asked them to extend loans to those in the community who most needed them. When he failed to convince the bankers to change their practices, he left his full-time job as a university professor to become a micro-lender. As Professor Yunus said when he visited, "Any one of us here can change the world...just start with one problem and design a solution. If you can solve a problem for 10 people, it can work for 20 people, or 300..." or in Professor Yunus's case for tens of millions. Professor Yunus is particularly sanguine about the difference your generation can make because of your global reach. Just think of the movements toward democracy that young people have helped to start in the Middle East this year. Professor Yunus ended his campus talk with the following encouragement: "Through your grasp of technology, no generation before you has had so much power at such a young age. You are a lucky generation." I concur, and I look forward to seeing how each of you will use your Lawrenceville education and network to make a difference in the world.

\* \* \*

Towards the end of her poem, Ms. Nye wrote "Even though it's Friday, I don't feel the week is DONE. I'll still be here when I leave in the living room at McClellan House drinking tea, talking too much, cheered by your brightness and care."

On behalf of all my colleagues and the students who will return to Lawrenceville next fall, I'd like to end my remarks by echoing Ms. Nye's sentiment: Even though tomorrow is graduation, you'll all still be here when you leave in our hearts and our thoughts. May your life beyond Lawrenceville be filled with encouragement, discovery and belief as you each find your unique way to contribute to our shared future. Congratulations and best wishes.