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English Department Virtual Convocation Speech

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Good evening faculty, fellow students, and family members. Congratulations! It’s a pleasure to meet with everyone tonight to celebrate all of our achievements.

I would like to begin by thanking the English department for taking the time to organize this ceremony. We really have one of the most amazing groups of faculty and staff who all clearly care about the hard work and well being of their students. Even during these difficult times they continue to show their dedication and tireless efforts to ease the burden on students and maintain the integrity of the English department, and I truly thank you for that.

I am also extremely humbled to be chosen to speak tonight. For those of you who have taught me or been in class with me, I’m sure you know that I’m a very quiet person (although I’m sure my parents would disagree), so you could say that it was somewhat of a shock when I received the email asking if I would speak. I’m honored nonetheless, and I thank you all for listening.

Even though I’m an English major, I actually used to dislike reading when I was younger. Even though my parents read to my two brothers, my sister, and me every night and used to visit the library and come home with a stack of books taller than me, I thought reading on my own was boring. I couldn’t really get into any books, and even though I really wanted to be someone who read, it just wasn’t happening for me. It wasn’t until my mom and sister recommended that I read *A Dog’s Life* by Ann M. Martin, my very first “chapter book” as we used to call it, that I started to actually enjoy reading. The story was mesmerizing and took me on a journey through the eyes of a stray dog, and I couldn’t get over how much it moved me. In fact, I liked the book so much that I read it twice, which was huge for me. Fast forward years later and who knew that I’d read Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* four different times and write four drastically different papers on it.

But anyway, my love for reading continued in middle school when I started getting into book series like *Percy Jackson* and *The City of Bones*, but it really hit its peak in my high school honors and AP classes. It was at that time that books were no longer just characters, settings, and plots, but became something more with added layers that took hard work to uncover. I’m talking, of course, about my introduction to analysis, something I once dreaded but now absolutely indulge in. I remember reading *The Scarlet Letter*, the very epitome of symbolism, and I just could not wrap my head around how a rose bush could possibly symbolize Hester. It all seemed very mysterious and confusing to me, but at the same time I was extremely fascinated by all of the possible meanings behind the symbols and at how clever authors could be.

It was this same fascination and curiosity that eventually built over the years and made me want to major in English. And my very first college literature course the fall of freshman year at Montclair State did not disappoint. Not only was it my first English major course, but it was also my first World Lit course. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and countless others were strange, crazy works, and like nothing I had ever read before. The discussion from the class, the close readings of passages, the arguments over different interpretations—though I myself was a little hesitant to join in, just listening was eye opening and allowed my mind to get lost in the maze of words and language, to dive into the sea of metaphor and figurative language. I knew I had made the right decision, and I couldn’t wait to take more classes.

And even though I initially didn’t enjoy reading, I always loved writing. While I wrote essays in high school and took a creative writing class, I was really able to take my writing to the next level in college. To see how much progress I have made, how much more nuanced and detailed my writing has become, is really amazing. My professors have always pushed me to do my best, and my papers and poetry are all that much better because of them. Even though I sometimes have a love-hate relationship with writing, spending hours editing and re-editing and then editing again, at the end of the day I couldn’t imagine a life without it.

As a double major in Economics as well, I can honestly say that the one thing that makes literature courses so unique is their focus on discussion. There’s just something about the bouncing of ideas that fuels the brain and allows for a higher intake of information. I’ve learned so much in my English courses than I ever thought possible, and not just about books. Learning about the political atmosphere of the slave trade and sugar industry that shaped the writings of the Abolitionist Movement, the history of Ancient Israel that influenced the composition of the Hebrew Bible, the conditions many authors and poets were writing under, and so much more, I have gained so much knowledge about so many different things and have become a well-rounded individual. And as I’ve now also delved into the world of Master’s English courses as part of the English Department’s five year, BA/MA program, everything in my undergrad classes has been intensified. The discussion is more intense, the literature is more complex, and I’m learning more than I ever have. As I continue on in my final year as a graduate student, I hope to continue learning and, of course, reading! And I hope to see some familiar faces in my classes as well, hopefully in person.

Thank you again to all of the professors for your knowledge and inspiration, and to everyone involved with the English department for making tonight possible. And thank you to my family for giving me the support I’ve needed these past few years, I owe all of my accomplishments to you. I congratulate all of my fellow students and wish you all good luck in your future jobs, schooling, and lives. We have all worked extremely hard, and I think we all deserve to enjoy our accomplishments and how far we’re come in these past four years. Stay healthy, stay safe, and congratulations!