

# Letters to Young Scholars

Maryanne Wolf

*Juniata College's 133<sup>rd</sup> Commencement Address May 14, 2011*

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First, my thanks to President Tom Kepple for inviting me to Juniata College, a place that has been very special to me for a long while. For many years I have followed the many contributions your college has made to the study of peace and the role that citizenship plays in our society. I know that students from Juniata are uniquely prepared to make our world better by their being there. Second, Juniata is the place where my very first Tufts Ph.D. student teaches and just received tenure and promotion three months ago. I am so proud of her, Dr. Kathleen Biddle, and you her college. Next, my heart-felt greetings and congratulations to all of you gathered here: parents, deans, fellow-faculty, and students. If you Juniata students are like my own dear students, the only people who worked as hard as you did to get here are — your parents. Never lose an opportunity today to thank them from your heart.

But now to my speech. When I was first asked by President Kepple to speak to you, I was gleeful, my mind filled with a hundred speeches that I have fantasized wildly about giving over the years— usually, to be sure—during the many graduation speeches I have had to sit through! I promptly agreed, and then, full realization dawned. First, almost no one in this entire audience will know who I am. Second, for the few who do know my work, they will expect me to speak about my research on the reading brain!

“Hmmm,” I gulped frantically, “Reading, global literacy, and the evolving brain: now there’s a topic that will have every relative out there gripping the edge of their seats!”

Then at last a different realization came: I am a teacher. I would speak about the things I always wanted to say to all my own students but that never quite fit within a syllabus — the things I wanted them to hold on to long after they were gone. And so, in the tradition of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, I write to all of you three brief letters about being citizens and professionals— in the deepest sense— in a twenty-first century world. With the help of some of your professors and administrators I have chosen four students from the class of 2011 to represent all of you in these letters.



May 14, 2011

Dear Yao Li,

I would like you to think of these letters as my graduation gift to you -- not for today because today you will barely listen to them -- but to store for a later time, when you might need something in them quite unexpectedly.

John Steinbeck once wrote that human beings will be measured at the end of their lives not by the riches they have acquired or even the achievements they have attained, but rather by whether they've lived "a decent life." I once thought that "decent" was such an *ordinary* word, holding little challenge and even less glamour. But after I had met and known a hundred times a hundred people, failed with regularity to be wise or good or even fair, I came to realize that decency was a *discipline* as demanding as any Olympic marathon or academic subject. I came to think that the *discipline* of decency and the *practice* of virtue are two sides of the best of human coins. For, "decent" is secular shorthand for **deciding well** the constant, difficult *choices* you will be asked to make in your daily lives in your future professions. This begins with what I'll call a combination of the Socratic-principle and daily triage. Yao, you will be confronted every day with a hundred requests and a buzzing teeming existence of conceptual and corporeal juggling. You have, however, been very prepared by your parents and teachers for 16 years.

There is a turret of the mind that is inside you now. Every morning go to it, Yao, look out upon your day, and order that day according to what is truly most important to do. Ask yourself: what is the first priority of the little jot of time I have been given on this earth today? How do today's choices fit within two ongoing perspectives: the larger perspective of your potential contributions to the larger society, and the smaller but equally essential perspective of being good and decent to those you love and who love you?

Organize everything accordingly with care using both those perspectives, and you will experience the extraordinary beauty and gift you give to yourself in the practice of decency and virtue **every day**. You, dear Yao, and all your classmates, will be able, at the end of your life, to look back and think kindly on all of your days and the thousand choices within them for good or ill that you have made *with "all your intelligence."*

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maryanne Wolf". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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May 14, 2011


Dear Jacqui Johnson,

I know you and many of your fellow students in Psychology and Social Sciences have studied human development, cognition, and even some cognitive neuroscience. This second letter uses research from all of these areas on how the quality of thought changes over time. I want to use this literature to ask you each a very personal question at this unique juncture in your lives. **How do you THINK?** How has your thinking changed after all the knowledge and information you have gained these last four, achingly fleeting years? I would like you to look at your own thinking and the differences it has undergone over your lifetime, almost as if it were on your own petri dish.

I want you to be able to see that only a short time ago, you judged the world, as most young adolescents do, through a binary lens, where the world could be neatly divided into binary systems of black and white, good and evil, them and us. And then, in later adolescence most of you had a fairly relativistic view of the world, where everything resembled the cerebral equivalent of "California girl speech" and everything was "alright," and most judgment vanished. However good any of those individual thoughts were and may well still be, they belonged to others: they were not carefully formed, selected, and constantly revised by you. Then as you grew into the young scholars who sit before me today, you experienced the opportunity of a lifetime: you learned how to hold several contrasting viewpoints in mind at one time and evaluate their worth, not based on what others think, but based on your own honed ability to think for yourself with all your intelligence.

At this moment in your life, however, I want to sound a cautionary note, Jacqui. Education prepares you to think, but it never assures it. It is for all of us much easier to fall back into the cognitive developmental stages that just preceded you, where binary thinking and tidy categories rule, or where the pleasant stuporific relativism of late adolescence prevails, and you don't have to judge. I ask you today, Jacqui, never to be satisfied with either binary or relativistic thinking as you leave Juniata. I ask that you discipline your thinking just as you practice your sense of decency. I ask you to be daily aware of your potential for the highest levels of thought and the need to CHOOSE according to your most critically analytic capacities and your highest principles and priorities. With this combination, Jacqui, you will conquer the world!

Sincerely,

  
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May 14, 2011

Dear Tyler Morelli,

For me and for all the parents in this audience, all things on this earth pale in importance next to the lives of our children. I have singled out two of you, Tyler and Erin, because you represent those who teach and serve our children; often times with insufficient remuneration, too little status, and less visibility.

But today you and your fellow teachers ARE visible to us all! I want my last letter here to be the equivalent of a human shout to you who teach and serve others. For, society's teachers at every level are the guardians and transmitters of the best of human knowledge and something even more. To do this well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, there are things that you must know and think about that go beyond the knowledge of any generation known before us. You must teach the next generation all that they need to survive in a digital world...and also all that they need to think critically, analytically, and at their deepest levels. For, it is only when we deepen our understanding of the implications of all our increasing information that it can be knowledge that can be applied in wise manner.

We who teach reading (at last, I had to find one place to include my own research!) know that the expert reading brain is the acme of our species' achievements to date. But will this particular brain survive if it is only given information and knowledge, and not taught to go beyond surface information to reach the next novel thought, the next insight? We who teach need to transmit a mode of learning that is not content with the ever more immediate, ever more passive reception of information, but seeks to go beneath, above, and beyond.

Aristotle once wrote that a good society has three lives: the life of productivity and knowledge; the life of entertainment; and the life of contemplation. So, too, the "good reader." We can read for information and for entertainment, but will the good reader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ever learn to read, to think and contemplate? The poet T.S. Eliot framed these questions for us years before neuroscience imaged the reading brain. He asked: "Where is the wisdom we have *LOST* in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" You who will lead us further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, never let the distinctions among information, knowledge, and wisdom be *lost* to your next generations: we must preserve all three!

To do this will require, however, the reflected incorporation of Aristotle's third life with its emphases on *time to contemplate*. And here I will tell you things we have learned from the study of the brain about the critical importance of taking time. I hope President Kepple is smiling a little now, for my last words to you each will be after all--a lesson on the human reading brain. You see, reading is only a little about decoding the letters; the heart of reading provides us with our best known bridge to the deepest of thoughts and the most profound of feelings. The reading brain as it has evolved propels and rewards the arduous task of attaining both, but only if we train it to do so year after year--your loving task, Tyler and Erin, and all of you who work with our youth.

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Yao Li, Jacqui Johnson, Tyler Morelli, and Erin Schillinger, you are representatives of all your classmates, and you, their Juniata families, are representatives of all families. May you each become the best of the Aristotelian “good readers,” and in so doing, may you contribute to the “good society” around the world all the days of your lives.

Godspeed, Class of 2011!