

The Magic of Words

Speech to Hamline University MFA Graduating Class

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- The only certainty about writing: It is **humbling**.
- The experience: 32 rejections on first novel; “Dear Sir/Madam.”
- Day job, still writing; forged **letter from Madeleine L’Engle**.
- Quit job; partner gave me card: “**This is my therapist.**”
- Now, **20 years and 24 books later**, all sorts of good things. But still...
- Kids’ letters: “**Still alive**”; “**Not very smart after all.**”
- Also humbling in a deeper sense:
 - The power, the magic, of words—more magic than Merlin!
 - **Heartlight** story: “**Just the right word.**”
- So what is this magic? Best I can do to describe it: **3 metaphors**:
- **Making Music**
 - Aeolian harp, plucked by wind. Romantic poets kept them as reminder of **the purpose** of poetry (and all writing) is to find language that will **vibrate in the winds** of human experience...and make **music** in the **heart**.
 - **Ode to Joy** (from Beethovens 9th): Triumphantly joyful. [Play ~ 30 sec.] But its **words** go a level deeper...to a profound sense of **gratitude** (How’s that for “just the right word”?)
- **Weaving**
 - Centuries of stories, luminous tapestry—but with **gaping hole: his youth**.
 - My goal as a weaver: to add a few new threads.
 - They needed **to match** perfectly. But even more—

- **Each thread must feel true.** (Good fiction, paradoxically, is true.)
 - **All 5 senses.** Plus, deeper level—**human spirit.** (I ask: “What is your secret?)
- **Example:** Opening scene of **LYM:** Boy washes ashore—**far from a wizard.** No home, no identity, **no name.**
- **Planting a seed** (usually in the form of an **idea**)
 - Like all seeds, needs **careful tending:** Sunlight, water, nutrients—and **time.**
 - From seed of dream about a boy who washed ashore...5 books, in over a dozen languages, plus 2 related series, companion volume: **17 years.**
 - In many ways, the high point of the **LYM** books (in ***Mirror of Merlin***): Merlin’s most surprising journey—and meets **his elder self.**
 - Tell the story, ending with: “**And a life...the power of its dreams.**”
 - **Another example of seed:**
 - Visit to Anne Frank’s house, 40 years ago. Long journal entry; **Hero’s Trail;** the Prize.
 - **And another kind of seed altogether:** children, with native wisdom.
- **Where is Grandpa?** How my kids’ stories saved me that day.
- Daughter’s question (age 12): “How is making a story like making a life?”
 - **You are the author.** Take whatever materials you have; make choices.
 - **Make it the best story you can!**
- **There you have it: Making music; Weaving threads; Planting seeds. The magic of story.**
- Now, a word of warning: Ours is a very **materialistic society.**
 - Remember you are not just **making a product.**
 - You are **making art—making magic.**

- Don't be **a consumer**..but be **a creator**. (And help kids everywhere realized they can do it, too.)
- Creators of **their own lives, their own futures, their own worlds**.
- Especially important today: Confusion **Celebrity and Hero; Separation from Nature**.

So today, as you embark on your own wondrous creative journeys...

- I wish you—**the power of music, the sensuousness of weaving, the mystery and magic of a seed**.
- And, above all, every once in a while...**just the right word**.