Convocation Address
Elizabeth Roach
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The Art of Conversation

In one of our conversations this summer, my daughter Hadley told me that everything she learned about how to engage with people, how to think, question and understand – in fact, her whole approach to life – she learned in her classes at St. Andrew's. I was immensely curious, of course, to hear more from her and asked her to explain what exactly she meant.

She said that it all came down to how we teach our students to be collaborative learners, how we encourage our students to be attentive listeners, to help their peers be better writers, sharper thinkers and problem solvers, to be open to criticism so that they can re-evaluate and strengthen their own thinking, to resist defensiveness, closed-mindedness, and competition, to practice using a tone that invites conversation, thought and reflection. In these moments, we cannot hide from each other; we are open, vulnerable, exposed, to an extent; they are moments that we cannot fully control but rather moments in which we need to be fully present and open and real, moments that may lead to new ideas and new understandings about ourselves and the world around us.

In essence, she articulated an approach to learning – to living and interacting with people – that keeps us thinking and rethinking our own ideas, our own beliefs, our own selves. She didn't talk about the substance or the material that she learned at St. Andrew's, although she certainly didn't minimize the value of the knowledge that she acquired in her courses. Rather, she insisted on the importance of conversation. By definition, conversations are unscripted, unplanned – that's precisely why we need to listen so carefully, why we need to allow our thinking to unfold and develop in the moment, and why, in the end, conversations are opportunities for creativity and the imagination, for innovation and possibility. We often emphasize the importance of how we interact and engage with the many texts we encounter every day of our lives. These texts are books, newspapers, television shows, symphonies, art exhibits, presidential debates, and plays, but the most important texts that we engage with are people. Yes, people. People are, in fact, texts: layered, complex, nuanced. We are sometimes transparent, sometimes mysterious, sometimes enigmatic, sometimes in agreement with others, sometimes in tension with others – but always living and breathing and thinking and feeling and changing parts of our lives every single day. So it is essential that we learn the most effective, empathetic and generous ways to engage with these particular texts, with the people that we will respect, honor and appreciate for the rest of our lives – even when, especially when their voices disagree with or challenge us.

Our conversation made me think of a poem by Adrienne Rich that I had studied years ago in college, a poem about the difficulties of communication. In some ways, it didn't make sense that Hadley's reflections made me recall this poem, since it actually stands in contrast to her thoughts. But, then again, perhaps that is exactly why I went searching for this poem that echoed in the back of my mind. I remember being struck by the desperate, wrenching tone of the speaker as she explores the power and complexities of communication through both silence and words.

We feel this urgency in the first stanza as she contemplates the best way to connect – through conversation or through the words of her poetry. She is looking for, yearning for, dreaming of a "common language" that will bring us together:

> *A conversation begins with a lie. and each*
> *speaker of the so-called common language feels*
> *the ice-floe split, the drift apart*
> *as, if powerless, as if up against a force of nature*
> *A poem can begin with a lie. And be torn up.*
> *A conversation has other laws recharges itself with its own false energy.*
> *Cannot be torn up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself.*
> *Inscribes with its unreturning stylus the isolation it denies*.

Rich asserts here that conversations can be difficult, hurtful, often dishonest attempts to communicate, even when we share a "so-called common language." As she suggests with the image of the ice-floe splitting, conversations can divide us; they can also do damage in deep and lasting ways – they "cannot be torn up" but instead "infiltrate our blood," "repeat" and "inscribe." They might leave us isolated, even in the presence of someone else. We feel Rich's frustration and sense of powerlessness as she shrinks nest to this "force of nature."

In her third stanza, she explores a different form of communication: silence.

> *The technology of silence*
> *The rituals, etiquette*
> *the blurring of terms silence not absence*
> *of words or music or even raw sounds*
> *Silence can be a plan rigorously executed*
> *the blueprint to a life*
> *It is a presence it has a history a form*
> *Do not confuse it with any kind of absence*

Here, Rich shows us just how powerful and strategic silence can be: "a plan rigorously executed." Silence is, in fact, a "presence" not an "absence." It has weight and meaning, a "history" and a "form." Silence, she suggests, can often say more, and perhaps even do more damage than words.

So if both words and silence can be so painful, can hurt and damage and separate people, how do we communicate? As Hadley suggested, at St. Andrew's, this is precisely the question we are answering every day in the way that we live and learn on this campus. We are here, together, to find ways to communicate, to connect, to think, to live in productive, vibrant and generous ways. This is much harder than one would think, as Rich so powerfully illustrates in her poem. We often us words and silences – both intentionally and unintentionally – to divide and hurt. We have to, in fact, work really hard to do otherwise. And because we live in such a close and intimate way on this campus for nine months each year, we need to be fully aware of how we are communicating with each other all the time, how we not only use words and conversations, but

how we use silences as well. At the end of her poem, Rich – after great angst and exploration – wishes, hopes for full fruition, a ripeness, an answer to her problem, a completion:

> *what in fact I keep choosing are these words, these whispers,*
> *conversations from which time after time the truth breaks*
> *moist and green*.

It seems that she has found a way to resolve the problem of communication she poses. She "chooses" a way to communicate with "words, whispers and conversations." I love the gentle "whispers" that she includes here – whispers are quiet, not hurtful or destructive; instead, they suggest and inoffensively communicate. And as a result, "time after time the truth breaks moist and green." It's a beautiful final image, an image suggestive of new life, potential and possibility. Rather than the "ice floe that splits us," this image gives us the sense that we find ourselves through words, whispers and conversations with others and perhaps even within ourselves in the internal conversations that we have.

What interests me then is that the way we communicate at St. Andrew's is an unusual attempt to resolve the problem that Rich explores; the language of her final couplet speaks to the ways in which this can happen and does happen at this School. Her dream of a common language is, I think, actualized at St. Andrew's. For me, Rich's poem resonates with the way we learn and communicate and connect, the way we actually teach and learn from one another both in academic settings in our seminar or exhibition discussions as well as in non-academic settings, such as in dorm rooms, common rooms, the dining hall. These settings allow for the cultivation of "words, whispers, conversations" that can lead to the unplanned collision of ideas; they are, as Rich's final image suggests, rich and fertile ground for insight and new understanding.

In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle articulates the problem of connection and communication we all face today with the onslaught of technology in our lives. She posits that because human relationships are rich, messy and demanding, we clean them up with technology, editing, deleting and retouching ourselves into the selves we want to be; we have, therefore, she says, "sacrificed conversation for mere connection." We think that we are connecting with others when we are texting and emailing and facebooking (and in fact, we are connecting on some level), but we are not connecting in the ways that we need to connect through real conversation, conversation that is sustained and thoughtful and face-to-face. She writes:

> *These days, insecure in our relationships, and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways*
> *to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time… Technology allows us to*
> *edit and project the self we want to be.*

Turkle argues that we use technology as a way to control our relationships, to control the image of ourselves that we wish to project to others, to imagine that we are actually connecting with one another because we fear loneliness and isolation. It's an escape from ourselves, from facing and deeply engaging with our internal lives as well as with others. As she so beautifully articulates: "technology offers us the illusion of companionship without the demands of

friendship." So we are "connecting but not communicating." She insists that we need to have eye contact, face-to-face conversations in real time that cannot be controlled, edited, deleted and retouched. Because, she says, we need conversations with each other to learn about how to have conversations to learn about how to have conversations with ourselves – we simply cannot compromise our capacity for self-reflection, the sill that is "the bedrock for our development as human beings."

In July, Mr. Roach and I were fortunate enough to be able to travel to Seoul and visit our Korean students, alumni and parents. It was a visit filled with new food, wonderfully warm and generous mothers and fathers, the unusual feeling of being seemingly the only blonde person in a city of over 10-million people, and new sights – the Royal Palace with Josh, Andy Kwon and Brian Seo, museums with Josh, Ricky and Andy Jeon, shopping with Sangmin, HoChan and Julian. I have never been treated so well, been so warmly welcomed, had so much fun and learned so much in four short but jam-packed days. This experience is worthy of a talk all its own, but I wanted to share one of my favorite moments during our visit. On the final night of our trip, the Korean families all came together for a St. Andrew's reception – the best St. Andrew's reception, I think, that I've ever attended. And this is why: after an amazing evening, each student (past, present and future) and his or her family went to the podium and microphone and talked about what it meant to them to be part of the St. Andrew's Family, complete with a collage of photos for each on the large screen at the front of the room. The students were eloquent, thanking their parents for the opportunity to study so far away from home. They were self-possessed, articulate, funny, confident, thoughtful and clear about their experience at St. Andrew's. And they gave each other advice. This advice mostly centered on encouraging each other to live St. Andrew's fully, to take advantage of every opportunity available at the School, to learn as much as possible, to leave behind the competitive approach to education by collaborating with their peers and talking to and getting to know – really know – as many people, both other students and teachers, as possible, to embrace a deeper, more meaningful approach to learning. In essence, they too were advocating for the same approach to learning and life that my daughter, Sherry Turkle and Adrienne Rich all articulate in their own ways.

So the message is getting through, evidently. I'm here today simply to make each of us more aware of what we're doing here day in and day out in the classroom. Why we emphasize the importance of group problem solving, lab partners, exhibitions, art/music/theatre/film workshops and critiques. In the New York Times a few weeks ago, Dwight Garner wrote about the importance of critique in our daily lives, saying: "It means making fine distinctions. It means talking about ideas…It's at base an act of love. Our critical faculties are what make us human." This is precisely why we ask you to keep you cell phones in your rooms, and why we push you to turn off video games and go out to the front lawn. I suggest too that you take what you have learned in your classrooms about conversation and apply it to your lives as much as possible. We want you to make "fine distinctions," to be "human" through these "acts of love." So, even when you are in your dorm rooms and can have your computers and cell phones open and active, shut them off instead. Sit and look at each other and have conversations and debates and arguments, arguments about issues that will help you clarify and deepen and perhaps even change your own thinking. Continue the conversations you've had in your classes – about books, current events, scientific theories – in your dorm rooms. Get to know, really know, each other, not just the edited versions of each other. The amazing thing is that you will get to know yourself better as

well; you will not have to hide behind a polished version of yourself – your friends will allow you to be awkward and unfinished and still a work in progress. Take full advantage of the many smart, interesting, diverse minds on this campus by engaging in spirited, imaginative ways with one another. We're here to make each other better, and in doing so, we make ourselves better – better listeners, better scholars, better people.

This is not just a student phenomenon. The adult community here is doing the same thing. For me, the past four years of my teaching have been the most exciting, the most rewarding – and not by accident – the most collaborative years of my 32 years of teaching. I have found that many teachers are eager and open to this kind of collaboration. I taught several tutorials with Monica Matouk, and in the past few years, I've had the opportunity to co-teach a course with Emily Pressman, a brilliant historian and teacher. From this work with Ms. Pressman, I have rethought novels that I had taught for many years; I have taught new novels and read and thought about and discussed primary sources and historical perspectives that I had never considered before; I have learned how to lead discussion and listen and think and rethink and correct papers and teach and debate in a completely new way with a friend and scholar always sitting next to me. Ms. Pressman helps me sharpen my thinking; she helps me become a better listener and a better teacher. We spend hours together, not only in the classroom but also preparing for class, preparing for exhibitions, correcting papers, writing feedback, evaluations and comments. These hours outside the classroom are filled with conversations about moments in class, ideas, books, articles and plays – they are my favorite part of teaching with and knowing Emily.

I've also had the opportunity to co-teach a tutorial with Ana Ramirez, another extraordinary teacher who loves to teach Spanish and is also passionate about literature. One of the best teaching moments of the year for me last year occurred during our tutorial last spring. We were reading The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes with our six seniors; it's a complex and disturbing short novel about memory, the way we remember, often distort our pasts and live our lives blindly and irresponsibly. We had invited Eric Finch to join us in the teaching of this novel because we wanted – and needed – his mind to help us interpret a mathematical equation in the novel that would help unlock the mysteries, contradictions and ambiguities in the first person narration. Ms. Hastings and Mr. Robinson had recently read the novel so they joined us one night as well. Together the eleven of us – six students and five teachers – worked together to gain some understanding of the layered, complicated psychology of the narrator. It took all of us to unpack, to discover, to unravel, to learn. We were exhausted and exhilarated by the end of the class.

So this is all to say that the art of conversation is lifelong work, but it starts here, today. It is an art that we can all practice and refine, and it starts with the people sitting all around you. It starts every time you prepare for class,, every time you listen, think, talk and engage in your classes. It is a way of living, and it is a journey of discovery. Adrienne Rich entitles her poem, "Cartographies of Silence." She suggests that we need to navigate and create a map in our approach to silence, to communication, to conversation with others. The terrain, I know, is sometimes difficult and awkward and unsettling, but we need to, we must engage in these real conversations. It's the only way to live fully, to know, really know ourselves. She envies "the pure annunciation to the eye," an image that we can actually enact at St. Andrew's, an image of face to face connection with one another. Turkle urges us to "find places to have conversations,"

both with others and with ourselves. Those places, those spaces are everywhere at St. Andrew's – seek them out. Find places to be alone, to think and reflect. Find places to be with others and, as Turkle says, "listen, make eye contact, stumble, lose words" and in the process we will learn and discover, create and innovate, and we will also find ourselves.

Finally, I'd like to turn to another writer, one of my favorites – Jane Austen – because she understood this process of communication and self-discovery so well. She is, quite simply, brilliant and timeless in her rendering of people and how the extent of our self-knowledge depends upon how we read or misread others in relation to ourselves. The novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, explores the ways two dynamic characters come to see the world, each other and themselves in completely new and different ways. Early in the novel, Elizabeth Bennet believes Darcy is arrogant, self-centered and haughty, and it is only later that she begins to see that her first reading is too hasty, too simple, too certain. She lets her own ego, her own pride, her own need to be in control, and her own insistence that she is right to get in the way of evaluating others accurately, and she willfully disregards others – Charlotte Lucas, her sister Jane, and her aunt – when they advise and admonish her. She is adamant about her opinions and therefore remains blind, not only about others but about herself as well. She lashes out at Mr. Darcy, she is far from right about him either. The worst thing she does, however, is communicate with him in an aggressive, defensive, closed, rigid and arrogant way. Imagine how damaging it would have been had she been able to text him! For many reasons, some of them valid and some not, she misreads Mr. Darcy as a text (and for that matter, he also misreads her), and it is not until he writes her a letter – a literal text – that she can begin her rereading of him. Interestingly, Austen shows Elizabeth read and then reread the letter over and over again, and with each rereading, with each rethinking and re-interpretation, she begins to understand not only Mr. Darcy better and more accurately, she also understands herself more fully. Elizabeth exclaims to herself:

How despicably have I acted! I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities!

who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blamable distrust…

I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment,

I never knew myself.

The relationship evolves from this point as they try to communicate a different version of themselves through words, actions and tone.

It takes acts of generosity – both literal acts as well as more subtle, less tangible acts - from both Darcy and Elizabeth to mend their relationship. They open themselves to new interpretations and readings of each other; they put their egos and prejudices and presumptions and defenses aside and look and listen and communicate. They also have to have, in the end, a face-to-face conversation, one that is a bit awkward and unpredictable but also honest and real and open. Thankfully, they did not have the option to email each other or put a message on each other's Facebook page; they had to resolve the messiness through listening and the reciprocity of full sentences to each other while walking through a garden. And from there, as Rich suggests, the "truth breaks moist and green."