2003 Commencement

THOMAS LYNCH

2003 Commencement, University of Michigan School of Art & Design

Thomas Lynch is a poet, author and undertaker who lives and works in Milford, Michigan. Mr. Lynch's collections of poems include Skating with Heather Grace, Grimalkin & Other Poems, and Still Life in Milford. He has also written two books of essays. The first, The Undertaking - Life Studies from the Dismal Trade, received the prestigious American Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award. His critically acclaimed second book, Bodies in Motion and at Rest, won the Great Lakes Book Award. Prior to their appearance in book form, many of Mr. Lynch's moving and thoughtful essays were first published in The New Yorker, Harper's, Esquire, Newsweek, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Irish Times, and the Times of London.

In addition to his writing career, Mr. Lynch has taught and lectured at writers' workshops, and been a visiting author at universities and literary centers throughout the United States and Europe. Here in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan, he has been invited to teach graduate level courses for students in the creative writing program while he continues to direct his funeral home in Milford. He also serves as a consultant to the popular HBO series, Six Feet Under.

Thomas Lynch is an undertaker, as was his father before him, and as are three of his five brothers. It is a profession that has allowed him to bear witness to the intense emotional experiences of grief and loss. It has also infused his poems and essays with the myriad small wonders of life and great mystery of death. While thought provoking and insightful, his work is also often quite humorous. Richard Bernstein of The New York Times has described Mr. Lynch as "a cross between Garrison Keillor and William Butler Yeats."

I should thank Dean Rogers for that, I think, tastefully hyperbolic introduction. It is always nice to hear such kindly things said about one's self in the present tense, and to be, you know, upright, for the hearing of them, when you consider the alternatives.

When Patrick Young invited me to speak today, I asked him if there was a topic I should talk about. He told me "about fifteen minutes if the weather holds." So in as much as the day is bright and blue, I'd like to talk to you about time.

It was an honor to be asked to be here today — to speak with you. All the same it strikes me as slightly curious that they should invite a funeral director to give a commencement address. The day is after all, about beginnings, about fresh-faced beings sallying forth into the future with their hopes and dreams and expectations. Truth told I'm better at the Ends — better at elegy than commencement, better at saying what was done than what is to do, better at remembrance than projection, better at obituaries than resumes. I measure time in counterclockwise turns. Maybe they should invite a funeral director to give a commencement address. The day is after all, about beginnings, about world-class educations, here on a blue Saturday in April, here on the brink of what seems the golden future — maybe they wanted someone schooled in final things and last details, to remind you that every moment becomes in a moment, the moment lost, the minute past, the past which in a few years outweighs your future; that commencements and funerals have much in common, that every passage is about, well, Time.

One morning last month I was at what the Victorians called the "duties of my toilet" when my youngest son came running upstairs saying "Dad, come quick, Time Magazine is on the phone." Now, because I'm a writer and a funeral director, I am often contacted by the media to give pithy commentary on matters mortuary. And I wanted my son to know that that's the kind of Dad he has, a really reliable, kind of Go-To Guy when it comes to glossy magazines and big-time media. I wanted him to know that while I might be an internationally unknown poet, I'm more or less the dancing bear of the funeral trade — like a cop who sings opera or a wrestler who becomes governor. I've written after all for the LA Times and the Irish Times and the New York Times and the Times of London and it was, by my reckoning, about damn time that Time Magazine was calling, after all. So I put on my most professorial voice and, holding the towel around myself, took up the phone and spoke into it: "This is Thomas Lynch", I said, "how can I help you?" And the woman on the other end said, "Is this Thomas Lynch of Milford, Michigan?" and I said "Yes, Yes it
is, and how can I help you?”, and she said “Mr. Lynch this is Time Magazine calling” and I said “Yes, yes, I know, what can I do for you?” , and she said “Mr. Lynch, for this week only we can offer you fifty percent off the newsstand price for 52 weeks of Time Magazine.”

At just such times I am pleased not to have a speaker phone. I simply said, “No, I could not possibly do it for that little stipend”, and hung up the phone. My son is yet to be disabused of his sense of my grandeur and greatness. But it reminded me of what my mother used to say — that we are given two ears and one mouth for a reason; and two eyes, so we would stop, look and listen. *Stop, Look and Listen* was among the first formal lessons of my education. I imagine it was the same for you. *Stop, Look and Listen*. And if you listen close enough and long enough, if you keep your eyes peeled, what you will begin to apprehend through the din and random images of the culture with its sound–bites and blather, garish graffiti, and what seems the witless and ubiquitous news of the world, is your own voice and your own vision — the one that was given to only you by your Maker and parents and teachers, one and all. Your own voice and your own vision — the record of the way you see the world, its shapes and colors and designs, its media and images and metaphors, its words and ideas — your art — that you must contribute to the conversation each generation of artists carries on with the one before it and the one behind it.

Each generation passes to the next the old oxymorons: whether there is any such thing as Holy War, Free Love, Safe Sex, Smart Bombs, or a Good Death; whether more choices lead to better choices; whether less is really more, whether size matters, whether God, whoever she is, is on our side or not?

Some things change. I am not the first to observe this. Some things never do. Our life expectancy in 1900 was 47 years. By 2000 it had increased to 76 years and your children and grandchildren will maybe all live past a hundred. But the death expectancy has never really changed. We die; we disappear; we quit breathing and get very quiet. It is in our nature irrefutably. And the voice inside you, your voice, yours only, if you listen it will tell you, if you close your eyes you'll see it — that your studies, your education, your parents sacrifices and your best efforts that have brought you to this place — what it is all about, as I was trying to tell the woman from Time Magazine, is about time.

About the time that many of you were being born, in 1980, when my father was the age that I am now, he had a small bronze plate engraved with his name and numbers on it. *Edward Lynch*, it read, *1924 – 1999*. He put it on a bronze casket in our casket showroom to demonstrate how the up-market units could be customized. It was a sales aid. He was a funeral director, too.

The nod to his mortality, full of Cagney-esque bravado, was instructive. Someday, he seemed to be saying at fifty–something, he'd be dead. He was right. The numbers are, after all, convincing on this, hovering as they do around 100%. What he also seemed to be saying was that he would only inhabit the twentieth century. He was right about that part too. And more’s the pity. He and my mother are both dead now, together forever in heaven and Holy Sepulchre, spared the worries over Y2K, end times, any more wars or rumors of wars.

Still, the deeper I get into this new New Age, the keener I feel this odd little ache, just now articulated, that they have become “the former things” in a way that days or years or decades changing could not make them. Mean time, it turns out, has its gradations too. You were children of the old millennium. You are citizens of the new.

To have lived in two centuries is a fine thing. To be alive in two millennia is a much, much rarer thing. Genghis Khan didn't do it, nor Mahatma Gandhi nor Mother Theresa nor Edna St.Vincent Millay nor Martin Luther nor Charles Manson has and Slobodan Milosevic and, thanks be to God, Seamus Heaney and Pavarotti and another six billion of our species–mates. The notion is laden with portent and omen. Or maybe it means nothing, nothing at all. Still, waiting for time's advancing tidal wave we wonder what can be saved from the almost certain flood.

"And it's time, time, time that you love", Tom Waits croons in a tune I love.

And why wouldn't we? For time bears its burdens effortlessly — our loves and losses, hopes and remembrances, our parents and babies, good laughs and good cries. Time heals and holds us in its embrace. The future is a place we can travel lightly into, hopeful and afloat — all of our unfinished business finished by default — time runs out, runs on, with or without us.

Use your time well. When the world insists that it is this way, or that, stop and look and listen for your own voice your own vision, your own sense of the way things are or ought to be. Read more poems. Dream with abandon. Love fiercely. Say your prayers. Godspeed, God bless, God keep you on your way.
I'll finish with a poem.

For years I was in the habit of writing sonnets — you know 14 line poems such as Shakespeare made famous. Think "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Our poet laureate Billy Collins has a poem called Sonnet that begins,

"All you need is fourteen lines, well thirteen now..."

It is the literary equivalent of a miniature painting of the Spanish Armada or the Fall of Rome or The History of the Universe. It seeks to say, like all poems, a lot for a little. The older I get, the less I count, which explains this 15 line poem written in my 52nd year entitled Refusing at 52 to Write Sonnets.

REFUSING AT FIFTY-TWO TO WRITE SONNETS

It came to him that he could nearly count
How many late Aprils he had left to him
In increments of ten or, say, eleven
Thus: sixty-three, seventy-four, eighty-five.
He couldn't see himself at ninety-six —
Humanity's advances notwithstanding
In health-care, self-help, or new-age regimens —
What with his habits and family history,
The end he thought is nearer than you think.

The future, thus confined to its contingencies,
The present moment opens like a gift:
The greening month, the bright week, the blue morning,
The hour's routine, the minute's passing glance —
All seem like godsend now. And what to make of this?
At the end the word that comes to him is Thanks.