

PLAY YOUR FLUTE

(SPEECH AT THE RIVIER SCHOLARS CONVOCATION, MARCH 18, 2006)

Sheli Petersen*

Associate Professor, Department of Arts, Rivier College

Today is a day of celebration for your accomplishments. You've achieved those accomplishments through your commitment to your education. All of you—Nursing, English, Mathematics, Business, Psychology, Communications, Studio Art and Criminal Justice majors—took a big risk in investing a lot of time and effort not only your in studies, but by juggling your academics with part-time jobs and personal obligations. Sometimes this meant you felt like you were run into the ground. Other times, you knew you were flying high, so great was your satisfaction in excelling.

Your success thus far has meant long hours invested in preparation—staying up to the wee hours of the morning to write that paper or study for this exam or finish that project. Despite the fact that you are here today because you've been working so diligently the best times, those moments in life when you know you've arrived at some crucial juncture, are not designed, planned, or manufactured. But, at the same time you've got to be ready to receive whatever it is about those moments that energizes you, redirects you, gives you inspiration—that's where all the hard work comes in: to persevere even though you're scared, or maybe uncomfortable. Sometimes it's a specific project or a course that doesn't come easy—maybe it's even your least favorite thing at the time—but there's something about it that helps you arrive at the right solution to a difficult problem, or a new way to navigate the unknown, conquer a new situation. It's the work that saves you, and anything worthwhile takes a lot of work.

Often people work because they want a guarantee, a well-paying job or some kind of security—they put their “faith” in the notion that the job or the major is going to buy them a ticket to success. You are used to seeking answers—what you need to know for a test—and now that graduation is only a few weeks away—what you need to know to land that first professional job. Answers are privileged, but it's the questions that are at least as important. There is not a lot in American culture that supports this process. Our society demands solutions; and there is an enormous amount of pressure to succeed. In our culture success in work is often privileged over spirituality and valued in monetary terms. But, the work is valuable in and of itself. Work ethic doesn't necessarily pay off in dollars and cents. It also pays off in a fuller, deeper life. You see, true faith doesn't have much to do with being sure about whether the course of study you've pursued is going to guarantee your future success financially or otherwise. It's more of a state of mind, a life-long process, and it takes a huge investment of time and dedication. Often your understanding is made richer when you least expect your hard work to amount to anything—or your experience is made sweeter with a body of knowledge or skill that you thought was the least important. That's where the “miracles” come in, when and where you least expect them. If you don't make the investment of time and energy, you'd never even recognize those moments when you realize it's all coming together and making sense.

Case in point, one of my favorite contemporary humorist David Sedaris, in his essay “Me Talk Pretty One Day”, tells how he took an introductory course in French, while he was still living in New York, in preparation for a move to France. Upon his arrival in Paris he enrolled in other class to acquaint himself further with the language (182, 188). The teacher immediately excoriated Sedaris because of his

miserable French (186). To that point, he had eagerly practiced his new tongue all the time, but now he became too embarrassed even to speak (187-188):

“I was convinced that everything I said was wrong. When the phone rang, I ignored it. If someone asked me a question, I pretended to be deaf ” (188).

“Though we (the students) were forbidden to speak anything but French, the teacher would occasionally use us to practice any of her five fluent languages. ‘I hate you,’ she said to me one afternoon. Her English was flawless. ‘I really, really hate you.’ Call me sensitive, but I couldn’t help but take it personally” (187).

Sedaris’ only comfort was that his fellow classmates empathized with his pain in his lack of proficiency with the language. He recalled a conversation in tortured French with his peers (188).

“Sometime I cry alone at night” (188).

“That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty. People starts love you soon. May be tomorrow, okay” (188).

Even though they encouraged each other, it was difficult for Sedaris or his classmates to believe that they would ever improve their French (188). Desperately wanting to show his teacher that he could master at least something of the language, Sedaris spent long hours pouring over his lessons—practicing, studying. Despite all of his efforts, one day in class the teacher singled Sedaris out (189). This is what she said:

“Every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section” (189). Sedaris reflects, “...it struck me that, for the first time since arriving in France, I could understand every word that someone was saying” (189).

Sedaris continues: “Understanding doesn’t mean that you can suddenly speak the language. Far from it. It’s a small step, nothing more, yet its rewards are intoxicating...” The teacher continued her diatribe and I settled back, bathing in the subtle beauty of each new curse and insult (189).

“You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts with nothing but pain, do you understand me?” (189).

Sedaris concludes: “The world opened up, and it was with great joy that I responded, ‘I know the thing that you speak exact now. Talk me more, you, plus, please, plus’” (189).

So, maybe you weren’t crazy about some of your classes, but sometimes understanding comes in mysterious—and most unexpected—ways. But allow me to give another example of what I want to tell you today, from my own work. As an artist, I can best make my point with a story written by my Mom, Patricia Petersen that I was fortunate enough to illustrate. This tale, *Voladores*, is based on a very old Mexican tradition of the flying men. The practice is so ancient; no one is exactly sure when the custom began. Four men with ropes tied around waists, or sometimes their feet, climb up to a revolving

platform, suspended by a tall pole. Their ropes are carefully wrapped around the pole. As the platform turns, the men leap into the air and bungee-jump, making thirteen revolutions until they gracefully reach the ground. You can imagine the artistry and athleticism it takes to keep from slamming into each other as they return to earth. Voladores begin practicing at a very young age, when they are still boys, to achieve the level of precision needed to perform the custom. This story, adapted by Patricia Petersen, based on the tradition of the flying men takes place in the time before humans forgot the language of the birds. People still knew how to speak to the animals and the flying men, The Voladores, could really fly.

VOLADORES



Rotating Platform



Soaring from the Sun



The Scheme

The young hero of this story, Tigre, yearns to fly like his uncle Teo, a Volador, and give honor to Sun, without whom all living things would perish. But, since Tigre is not quite old enough to fly, he is only allowed to play his flute—like his other uncle Quiché, the poet. Quiché consoles him and assures Tigre that one day he will need his flute. For a while all goes well for Tigre's people. Every morning the Voladores soar to the sky to honor Sun while Tigre and his uncle Quiché play a beautiful song on their flutes.

But, Volcano and Rain take notice of the people's homage to the sun and become jealous. Since they both know they are not powerful enough to defeat Sun, Volcano and Rain hatch a scheme to separate Tigre's people from the Sun. First, Volcano shakes the earth and sends smoke to cover Sun for twenty days. Then, Rain sends heavy clouds and a deluge to cover Sun for twenty more days. The Voladores try to fly and plead for Sun's help. Wings scorched and feathers drenched, they fail, defeated by Sun's rivals.



Volcano Burns Their Wings



Rain Sends a Deluge



Flute-Play



Tiger and Eagle in Flight

The elders of the village hold council to figure out how to get Sun to break through the clouds. Since the people cannot reach the sun, they decide that someone must fly to the House of the Wind and ask him to blow away the clouds. Who can go? The bravest of the Voladores, Tigre's Uncle Teo, is too sick to fly after catching the flu from falling into the lake. Everyone else in the village is too scared to make the journey. Tigre, who has been practicing flight in secret with his friend Eagle, volunteers himself. The elders and the people grant Tigre their blessing. Before he leaves with Eagle, Tigre plays a song on his flute with Uncle Quiché. Then, he tucks his flute in his belt and soars into the evening sky. Tigre and Eagle fly all night to Wind's House. At dawn Tigre greets Wind, bowing low.



Play for the Wind



Sun Breaks through the Cloud

Wind is grumpy, and doesn't want to have his breakfast interrupted by Tigre's request. "What will you give me for blowing the clouds away?" he asks. Tigre offers the only thing he has—his flute. He plays the most beautiful and saddest song he knows for Wind. Wind, as he munches on his morning meal, appears unappreciative of Tigre's heartfelt playing. But Tigre is determined to get an answer. He walks slowly up to Wind's table and asks, "Well, do we have a deal?" Wind, is so impressed with Tigre's courage that he accepts the flute. Tigre and Eagle return home and as they alight in the village center, the sun breaks through the clouds.



Give Me Your Flute

Tigre prized flying above everything else. But it was his long hours of flute-playing, while others flew, that actually that saved his people. Tigre could have flown all that long way to Wind's house, but without his flute-playing he would never have had the knowledge—or even the courage—to strike a bargain with Wind.

You probably have picked up on the analogy I'm drawing here. You are Tigre. You want to fly, and your talent is flute-playing. You have the talent; you have the desire or you wouldn't be here today. But, from this point forward the thing that will bind talent to desire is *vigilance*. By vigilance I mean your openness to that moment when the known and the unknown, the tried-and-true and the scary, come

crashing together. Who is Sun in your life, and who is Rain? Wind? What are the forces that you need to play off of each other to get to where you want to be? You cannot control Wind, or Rain, or Sun—you can only do what you're best at doing: play your flute, and sometimes, maybe often, if you want to, you will fly.

Reference

Sedaris, David. "Me Talk Pretty One Day." *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. Thorndike, Maine: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000.

* **SHELI PETERSEN**'s art career began at three with crayon drawings of the solar system. In high school, she earned money doing portraits of various friends and celebrities. After receiving a Bachelor's of Fine Art from Southwest Missouri State University (Springfield, MO, 1990), she worked as a graphic designer and illustrator for Kansas City's art and entertainment magazine, *Pitch*. For two years, she managed all the art direction for Smith Advertising (Kansas City, MO). She earned her Master's in Fine Art in Illustration from Savannah College of Art and Design (Savannah, GA, 1996). In graduate school, she concentrated on children's book illustration. Her thesis project, *Magali—An Aztec Legend about Good Fortune*, is published by Laredo Publishing (Beverly Hills, CA). Her other published work includes *Itza—The Boy Who Rode a Jaguar*, written by Leonard Bernard, *Voladores* written by Patricia Petersen, and *Gigi and the Birthday Ring*, written by Giselle Fernandez. Sheli is an Associate Professor of Art at Rivier College (Nashua, NH). She is the recipient of the Children's Choices Award, the Society of Children's Books Writers and Illustrators Most Professional Portfolio Presentation Award, and the Savannah College of Art and Design International Art Award.