

Dwight Englewood Cum Laude Address

by Jennifer Samet

Congratulations to all of you on this wonderful accomplishment. I am so honored to be here, and I would like to thank Carole, Peter, and the faculty of Dwight Englewood for inviting me to speak today.

When I think about my time at Dwight Englewood, eighteen years ago, there's one image that particularly resonates in my mind. It is sitting around intimate classrooms with the chairs arranged in a semi-circle, facing one another and our teacher.

Before arriving at Dwight Englewood, I went to a public junior high for a year. What I remember from there, really one of the only lasting visual impressions, was of a different classroom. The desks were arranged in rows, and since I could hardly see the teacher or friends' faces, I remember getting lost in thoughts about the other girls' bra-straps. I could see the impressions of the straps under their tops. Hmm. A bra. Was I supposed to wear one too? If I did, I must make sure those outlines showed through my shirt too. How would I broach the topic with my mom, and get her to take me shopping?

But anyway, I digress.

What I want to talk about is teachers. Sitting in those rooms the way we did, there was a sense of security and comfort that came from the realization that my teachers could truly see me, as well. There was a genuine interest in us as individuals. Many teachers, who I still remember, seemed to gather pleasure from

our unique growth as people and as scholars. Gone were thoughts of bra-straps, and even now I remember discussions about the Odyssey, Thomas Paine, and yes, Renaissance art history.

The highlight of my time at Dwight was the senior focus project, for which I decided to research feminist art. I remember there were discussions about finding our topic, something that truly was a personal interest. At the time, I considered women's issues and art as twin passions. I did some research and learned about feminist art, and women's cooperative galleries. Suddenly more than once a week I was traveling on my own into Manhattan, working at an art gallery, seeing lots of contemporary exhibitions, and even interviewing several of the pioneers of the movement.

I knew back then that I had a certain access to a time and a place that was really special. I am still nostalgic for those days in Soho, before it was taken over by high-end retail, and was still a cozy, quiet neighborhood with just artists, all dressed in black jeans and t-shirts. I really took that project and ran with it in a way that we hope for in all our pursuits, but that doesn't always materialize. I would meet an artist, she would recommend someone else to see or meet and even though I was 17, I was kind of part of something in a grass-roots way, not just a researcher. I realized only after it was all done that my teachers here had been worried about me; I took the independence thing to an extreme and forgot to check in with them, so involved was I with the work.

All was forgiven when I gave my presentation and it became clear how passionate I had become about the topic. They were truly shocked – in a good way –

by that presentation, and I was a little shocked, too, by their reaction. After all, it didn't really seem like work – I was just having fun!

One thing I have gradually learned as I've gotten older is about you, your own self, as the teacher. I practice yoga and at the end of the class you are requested to "bow down to your own true teacher, the teacher inside of you." Although they had worried about me, these open-minded and progressive teachers at Dwight had honored that in me. They let me be my own true teacher, and knew I would learn the best, the most, that way.

We all have our own path, and honoring that path is part of honoring the inner teacher. My own path is still surprising to me, and I remind myself, as I speak to you, to accept it with love, not just the final goal, but wherever I am right now, as an opportunity to learn something new about myself and about others.

Every art historical subject that I've become involved in since was a result of this path taking me along, revealing a kind of under-known artist or subject. The subjects weren't suggested to me, I just found them and became obsessed and had to learn more. So, during college at one point I was awarded a fellowship to do an internship in the arts. I was introduced to a curator and an archivist and they hired me to help archive the estate of a woman who was a performance artist and critic. Her name was Lil Picard. This meant, in practice, that I went every day to her former apartment in Greenwich Village, which she had left filled with towering stacks of art, documentation, correspondence, books, and junk. She had kept everything – every scrap of paper you could imagine. As we slowly tamed the stacks and made sense of it all, I had found a topic I wanted to know more about. There

were all kinds of papers related to an event called “The Avant Garde Festival.” Some of this material had little notes in perfect red pen handwriting, and always, little hearts – signed, “love, Charlotte.” Who was this Charlotte who wrote like a little girl but who was clearly organizing something on a really, really massive scale? It turned out to be one-day annual event in New York in public spaces that attracted hundreds of artists and was organized by Charlotte Moorman, a performance artist known as the “Topless Cellist”, because, well, she performed topless.

Charlotte Moorman and the Avant Garde Festival ended up being the subject of my college thesis. I had great teachers in college but there’s a few teaching moments that stick in my mind. One is when I wrote a very personal essay for an art criticism class, and was asked to read it aloud. When I finished, the professor simply looked at me, and at my classmates, saying, “You can see how well we say something when we truly have something to say.”

Another special teaching moment is related to that thesis. Towards the end of the semester when I was desperately trying to complete it, I had a meeting with my advisor and admitted how overwhelmed I felt. He just looked at me and said, “Really? But it’s in the bag!” Both great moments that showed how well we accomplish things independently when we’re confident, and when we have something to share. All we need is to trust that inner teacher.

A few years after I graduated from college, I was hired to direct a new non-profit space, which housed a private collection. It included the work of five painters from New York who all made representational work and were active during that same period in New York I had been researching – although they were part of a

totally different sector of the art world. I was amazed by the quality of the work, especially considering how under-recognized they were. I also especially responded to the conversations and interviews I had with a couple of the artists. They taught me to see painting in a new way. It felt like I had been given a key, and I suddenly couldn't believe not everyone had access to it. I loved curating shows for that space and we were lucky enough to get a lot of attention in the press. I went back to graduate school to get my Ph.D. and those painters became the subject of my dissertation.

Just as I was beginning the actual writing of my dissertation, I became a mother. With this, too, my path has shifted and evolved, and I've found new subjects. Early on I was struck by the difference between doing my intellectual work and raising my babies. I would leave the house for little pockets of time and head over to the gorgeous depths of the Columbia University Art Library to research and write. It was all so theoretical, nothing really existed concretely, it was a world of ideas. When I came home, I would have to attend to the most basic, mundane tasks like feeding the little one, playing with him, and cleaning up after him. Lots and lots of cleaning, and sweeping, and cooking. These two worlds were so different and yet I grew to like their very differences. My boys kept me firmly in the moment, it was all about the here and now, and the scholarly work, on the other hand, fulfilled my intellectual need.

I have found my own path as a mother, by tuning in to myself and to my children. When you become a mother you get a lot of advice and the only way you

can really absorb all the advice is to stop listening to it, and only listen to yourself, your intuition, and your inner teacher.

In recent years I've developed another passion, and that is childbirth. Through my own preparation for, and the birth of my sons, I've become involved in the natural birth movement and the problems in maternity care. I have started to do childbirth education classes and attend births as a labor support person. I've thought a lot over the past several months about what it means that I am doing this combination of work – with childbirth and art – which are seemingly unrelated. But it is coming together in some really fascinating ways. First of all I consider it a human rights issue and a feminist issue. Women's power has been taken away by the problems in maternity care, and I feel strongly that every woman has the right to an undisturbed, satisfying birth experience. Giving birth this way is empowering and positions a woman to be a confident, secure mother. It really does go back to the work I did here on feminist art at Dwight Englewood 18 years ago. It's a subject that is still surprisingly untouched by the feminist movement.

Very recently, I had the experience of attending a birth in the same time period as I was working on a catalogue essay about the work of a group of young painters. After the birth, I thought about the experience, being part of that unbelievable life energy. And I realized that I had something I could use in my writing too. As I wrote that essay, I thought, I would love to infuse this essay, and my scholarly work in general, with even just a drop of that life energy. The scholarly work had become a bit dry and lifeless. But, I could bring that intentionality – the visceral, the temporal, I could look at these artists in the same way I looked at the

mothers I was helping, through non-judgmental, supportive eyes. And I can feel it, I have renewed energy in approaching all the art historical writing I am doing now.

These are the kinds of lessons no one could teach me. But if we take the time to listen to ourselves we will know what it is we are supposed to do. As you go forward in your lives, I hope that you will take your time to listen to your inner teacher, and those outside teachers as well, who honor this path.

Thank you.