

2008 Faculty Promotion & Tenure Ceremony Southern Connecticut State University Prof. Brian Johnson, President of the Faculty Senate

Welcome, colleagues, and well done! This is a moment of great joy, and also great relief. We're here to recognize that you've been through something, something draining, at times harrowing, and yet, somehow, wonderful. You've disembarked. At last. You've pushed through the heavy doors, you're standing on the island. Tenured. Associate. Full. I hope you can feel the magic of the term working on you, working in you, like a breeze, a massage, a sip of rum, sunlight... And please don't feel guilty if you're tempted to giggle a bit, to exult. You've arrived; hail to the victor, farewell to the applicant.

I'm going to insist, today, that you all see what has happened, and glory in it, because here at the university we all know—more or less—how to be professional, and we all know very well how to be professorial, to look at things with critical detachment. We stand back, we exercise our reason... Yes, let us consider that point... If we reexamine her claim... On the other hand... But, and perhaps, and however... The conclusion rests on flawed premises... A crucial point has been overlooked... Ours is an enterprise, a life, of tenacious

subtlety; we've all learned how, in the words of Pope, to grind the butterfly upon a wheel...

But this moment needs no work. Your new title does away with analysis, and brings on the childlike fact. Tenure is a butterfly. Associate, full—also butterflies, different kinds of butterflies, with a slightly different sound and resonance, but still part of an innocent moment. And I mean this without any irony. If you don't feel lighter, nimbler, more colorful, if your mind is not a bit quicker in the classroom, then your promotion has not achieved its desired effect. For academic freedom is the perfect and serious willingness to play, not only with ideas, but also with the sense of what is possible, for yourself, for your students, for the larger society that surrounds the university.

And if you think you were given this freedom because of the thousand-page weight, the bureaucratic thoroughness and nice tabbed dividers of your P & T file, then you've underestimated yourself and misunderstood your peers. What really happened is this: you told a story, your story, and you told it with twenty-two readers over your shoulder, and while you were telling it you felt at times like crying, for the story would never be good enough, there were holes in it,

limitations, failures. It was an incomplete story. And what happened next is this: the readers, the gargoyles, the boogymen, liked your story, liked it so much that they wanted it to continue, and were convinced it would get even better in the next chapter, and they wanted to give you every chance to write the ending.

So here we are, in the very middle of the story: what your peers are

honoring you for, and what they saw in you, was neither absolute perfection nor mere competence. What they saw in you was the continuing ability to inspire, and to be inspired, without which none of us could teach, do research, or serve; without which the university would only be a set of buildings and a system of course numbers. It was inspiration, that daily willingness to receive and entertain and spread ideas, and to do all three with other people, that produced the work that built the file that told the story that gave birth to a title. Tenured. Associate. Full. I urge you all to wear your crowns happily, but lightly, since they are the outward sign of an inner state, and remain only as long as that state persists, as long as you cultivate it, with feeling, making the love of teaching and thinking at Southern central to your life. You have arrived, yes, but let us not see this place as outsiders do—as the end, as the land of deadwood professors. Instead, as Eliot was right to point out, in your end is your beginning; and today we welcome you, we send you off, to fulfill the deepest promise of your freedom: to teach, to move, to bring the light.