

**Mary Wanser**

**Commencement Address Transcript**

**January 11, 2014**

**The University of Tampa**

Thank you so much for that generous welcome. And thank you, each one of you in your respective roles, for being here, especially to my fellow graduates donned in regalia that some would rather not have worn. Thank you for recognizing the specialness of this occasion and rising to it.

I am elated to stand here today as a very proud member of this inaugural graduating class of UT's MFA program! In fact, I've been so excited about this day that last night at what we called our last supper, I was unofficially dubbed the Goddess of Graduation. I like that title.

The invitation to speak at this hooding ceremony came with the suggestion that I consider what UT's MFA experience has meant to me, what I will carry away with me. I thought about it, jotted a few notes, and approached one of my writing mentors to ask for his input. He said, "Oh, what will you carry away with you? That's easy. You take with you a mountain of student loan debt." And that is the case for many of us, but today, in this moment, in this milestone moment, none of that matters because who can place a dollar amount on a dream?

Over the past two years, our required residency periods have been intense. They've been imbued with craft talks and panel discussions, seminars and screenings, workshops and readings. The one that stands out for me, the one most memorable, took place during this fifth and final residency. I am referring to the graduating student readings we gave last weekend. It was there that the value of this MFA in creative writing degree was, so far, most evident.

For all but perhaps a few of us, that was the first time we'd ever read our work publicly. The attention in the theatre was rapt, as over 100 audience members witnessed the fruits of our long labor. As I listened and watched, I thought back to our first genre workshops when timidity was high, voices were low, and few hands were raised when it came time to share from the write-on-demand exercises. I noticed how we had grown. I beheld with reverent awe the poise and the grace with which each one of us stepped up to that podium, opened our book, and whether through poem or prose, through novel or memoir, lay bare our soul. The word COURAGE comes to mind. I am profoundly proud of the thesis

manuscript that each one of us submitted. I look forward to the day when one or more of them is published and read widely. What better honor could we bring back to UT?

The value of this MFA program was also seen in the graduating student seminars we gave this past week. The classrooms were filled with newer students eager to hear what we had to say. So, with power points and handouts, with white boards and erasable markers, we stood before them and our peers and our professors, and we expounded upon those aspects of craft that most captivate us. The word CONFIDENCE comes to mind. Now recognized as masters of our craft, artists with credentials, we taught each other what we had learned. That, too, was a way of giving back.

From our numerous faculty members, writing mentors, and guest authors, I take with me from this program a clearer vision of an artist's life. They have given a glimpse of how we might fashion for ourselves a livelihood—some more plush than others—with art at its center, a life

that requires one thing – that we write every day. What grander calling could await us?

They taught me that even when I sit by myself staring at a blank page, on those long and lonely, trying and tiresome days, I am not really alone. The word COMMUNITY comes to mind, another added value that I take away with me from my UT experience. We've built relationships here. In fact, some of us girls were sitting in my hotel room last night drinking champagne, trying to figure out the details of this regalia, like how to keep the hood from sliding off our shoulders and where in the gown to stash a tissue and a tube of lipstick. We made a promise to travel to the city where the first among us would someday begin her first book signing tour. That's the type of support we have garnered here. And this community of ours will grow as each successive cohort graduates and joins us as UT MFA alumni.

We are a motley bunch, this first cohort. We come from diverse backgrounds and from different generations. But in addition to writing, we have something else in common. Of all the MFA programs in the

world, we chose this one, this brand new one, offered by the University of Tampa. We chose to be the inaugural class. We chose to brave that frontier and to set a standard. We did that, and it led us here to this moment, this milestone moment.

As we leave here and continue on our individual writing paths, let us not forget that along with our talent comes duty, a responsibility to the endowed flair, which is to present on paper the human predicament so that all can feel less alone and better understood, knowing that when we express our own truth, it strums a universal chord. May we make our alma mater proud!

In closing, one more word comes to mind-CONGRATULATIONS to us, the Class of 2014!

Thank you, and Godspeed.