

First-Year Welcome, August 2008

Good evening and welcome to you all. We are delighted to have you, the class of 2012, with us here at Wooster. Your first day on campus has been a beautiful one, but it's also been full and intense, and I gathered from your responses to Dean Holmes this morning that sleep was in short supply last night. So I promise not to keep you too long, but I do want to take a little time to talk with you about what it means for you to be at this beginning point, starting out in college and as students and learners at this College.

This morning, when President Cornwell spoke with you and your parents, he talked about how you are joining a community of teachers and scholars that has been engaged in liberal inquiry since 1866. He also emphasized how important it is for you to know and appreciate that a liberal education isn't something we can give you; it is something **you** have to pursue. Building on these twin ideas of a community of learners and the importance of your commitment to learning, let me look forward with you and anticipate what lies ahead as you set out on your academic journey here. And let me do so in the context of the opening sentence of Wooster's mission statement:

The College of Wooster is an independent residential liberal arts college offering a rigorous and comprehensive education to students with the capacity and motivation to become educated leaders in a complex society.

As is customary in mission statements, these are lofty, even abstract words. But what do they actually mean for you and how will your academic experience at the College bear them out? To answer those questions, let me turn to your summer reading book, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. I'd like to focus on three themes from the memoir: first, I'll start with a subject many of you explored on the class blog – Ishmael's multiple senses of

family. Then, I'll touch on the ways in which the civil war in Sierra Leone dissolves the connections that hold society together and how this breakdown affects Ishmael's very sense of himself. And I'll conclude by looking at how Ishmael creates meaning for himself through the texts to which he has access. Overall, using these three lenses to examine the memoir in these ways, I'll try to suggest what his experience can illustrate about the enterprise you're now beginning here at Wooster.

Just a couple of hours ago, you said your good-byes to your families, and they left you to begin your new lives here with us. Given the ways in which coming to college is often one of those great turning points in a family's life, I was not surprised to see how many of you responded to the question about Ishmael's family that Dean Bostdorff posted to the class discussion list. Nor was it a surprise to see how many those responses connected Ishmael's changing understanding of the nature of family with what you're currently experiencing. One of your posts summarized nicely what many of you discerned, describing how Ishmael's "churning persona [is] seen in the sheer variety of 'families' that he sees himself as a part of over time." Although reading the book would be a powerful experience at any point, that experience has been shaped for you by coming at this specific juncture as you have been making the transition from lives centered in your own families to lives as part of this class of 2012. Six months ago, it would have been a different book for you. Six months from now, and you'd see it differently again. And this takes me to a larger point about the way in which, especially at a college like this, knowledge is constructed contextually. As you read Ishmael's narrative, express your own responses through the list, see how others react both to the text itself and to your ideas, listen to tomorrow's faculty panel, and explore the memoir in

your First-Year Seminar groups, you are becoming part of a community of learners. And, as you go forward, you will find that our entire community is built on the model you've already become a first part of, one in which your own voices and your engagement in small classes and in discussion of ideas are foundational to learning.

Now, that characteristic of your learning may not be fully apparent to you just yet, especially as you go through the dislocating experience of transitioning into the College, and this takes me to a second point about the memoir and learning at Wooster. Not long into the book, Ishmael describes how what is happening to him is undermining his entire sense of self. "One of the unsettling things about my journey," he writes, "mentally, physically, and emotionally, was that I wasn't sure when or where it was going to end. I didn't know what to do with my life. I felt that I was starting over and over again. I was always on the move, always going somewhere" (69). We're not surprised when we read this, given what he has already shown us about the ways in which the civil war breaks down customary patterns of respect, trust and hospitality. During his very first encounter with the rebels, for example, as one of the soldiers terrorizes an old man, Ishmael realizes that his culture's traditional expectations of politeness and, especially, respect for the elders have vanished. "Before the war," he writes, "a young man wouldn't have dared to talk to anyone older in such a rude manner" (33). This first experience sets the pattern for the future as every meeting with a new group becomes a decision point between life and death. Even more disturbingly, it becomes a pattern that Ishmael internalizes, as we see most tellingly when he is rescued by the UNICEF workers. For, even then, freed and relatively safe, he finds himself deeply resentful of what he calls civilian authority (138)

and, for a long time, is unable to allow himself to trust Esther, the nurse and counselor who works to restore his health.

What is terrifying about Ishmael's experience is that he seems to be largely a victim of it and to have no power to shape his sense of self in relation to what is happening to him. In the discussion on the list, several of you wondered what would have happened to you, were you put in his situation. Although a few of you do come from countries where horrors similar to those of Sierra Leone have occurred in your lifetimes, most of you have been blessedly free from such experiences and, these next four years at Wooster, you will have a very different environment in which to evolve your own sense of selfhood. Research into how young adults develop during their college years shows a broad three-part pattern of movement: from seeing the world in black-and-white terms on arrival, on to regarding it as wholly relativistic, and on, finally, to understanding it with matured judgment, weighing the merits of different values in terms of their underlying assumptions and the arguments and evidence for and against them. Our academic program allows and encourages you to explore for yourselves: the flexibility of the curriculum gives you enormous freedom to delve into whatever interests you, and our faculty are at a college like this because they have chosen to dedicate their careers to teaching you and the generations of students who came before and will come after you. Unlike Ishmael, you have the opportunity to wrestle with ideas and with the ways in which your ideas and your very sense of who you are connect most profoundly. This is a great gift. Seize it. Make the most of it.

My final point about *A Long Way Gone* has to do with its representation of culture and globalization. You may remember how, during his rehabilitation in Freetown, a

turning point comes when Esther the nurse gives Ishmael a Walkman and cassettes of the hip-hop music he loves so much. Her gift is an intriguing one, for it reconnects him with music that has had enormous power for him and yet it also points to larger ways in which Western culture permeates the consciousness of his entire society. Right at the start of his memoir, this music was literally life-saving: the day the rebels attacked the village, Ishmael, his brother, and their friends were away participating in a talent show as a rap and dance group. Then, throughout his account, rapping and dancing continue to save him: first, by winning over people who might have otherwise have killed the wandering band of lost boys and, secondly, by providing Ishmael with a sense of continuity: hop-hop, with its sense of defiance in the face of arbitrary oppression and incomprehensible violence, is one of the few constants in his life. But hip-hop is also only one of several examples of the way in which Western culture is present in Sierra Leone: from the rebels wearing Adidas sneakers and Nike t-shirts, to the army soldiers psyching themselves up by watching Rambo movies, to, most incongruously of all, that Shakespeare-reading lieutenant with whom Ishmael trades quotations from *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. In all these ways and more, Ishmael's journey is framed within the context of a globalized culture that he can only experience in a profoundly fragmented sense. At the same time, and set against these fragments of Western culture, he remains connected to the traditional African art of story-telling: we remember the stories Musa tells of Bra Spider to comfort the boys in the dark nights of the forest, for example, or the deeply ambivalent story of the hunter and the monkey with which the book ends.

Put all this together, and what we have is a text that shows a life shaped in complex ways by cultural knowledge and globalization. On the one hand, Ishmael

snatches fragments of knowledge to build a conceptual framework that brings some coherence to the inexplicable horror of his life. He uses learning to find consolation, make sense, and create meaning, synthesizing unlikely combinations (Shakespeare and Run-D.M.C.???) to maintain a sense of identity and resist the grotesque evils that surround him and in which he participates. On the other, as readers from the West, we must wonder about our culture's role in this conflict and the whole legacy of colonialism that underlies it, whether that be in providing the AK-47s and RPGs that actually do the killing or in the Rambo movies that provide the soldiers with models of behavior and attitude. Earlier, I quoted from the College's mission statement about Wooster's dedication to helping you become "educated leaders in a complex society." An essential part of that process will be the ways in which your education here helps you understand the complex nature of global engagement, the role of culture in serving power, and the capacity of independent thinking to free the individual.

Your lives are at a very different place from Ishmael's, of course, but what is wonderful about this point at which you now stand is that you have the opportunity to learn and explore very much as you choose from now until you graduate. As President Cornwell put it to you this morning, try asking your parents whether they would like to have four years of freedom to explore things that fascinate them! And this is not just an opportunity: it is a privilege and even an obligation, for you are being given the freedom to set out on a path of discovery that many in the world can only envy, a path that will help prepare you for the larger social responsibilities you will take on in the years to come.

That journey begins this evening, with the introduction to First-Year Seminar that comes next and will end the official part of your first day. The thirty-eight seminars are enormously varied, but what they all have in common is captured in the title of one of them, for they are all about “Being Human in the Twenty-First Century.” Each of them, that is, focuses upon the critical thinking that goes into any meaningful consideration of what it means to be an individual and a member of society in a world that becomes ever more interwoven, complex, and challenging to our humanity with each passing year. In addressing these questions this first semester at Wooster, you are going to have a range of experiences. Yes, you will be an independent learner which, to be sure, is a key part of the experience. But you will also be a member of a small group learning much more and much more effectively through learning together with others. FYS will give you your first intellectual community at Wooster, and you and your group will together go through the transition to college learning. Your group will be a first reference point for you, peers with whom you will begin to define yourself as a college student. Though your circles of fellow students and friends will inevitably widen the longer you are here, this first community will be an essential prelude to all those that follow in the years to come. And, as you meet people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, you will think for yourself most profoundly when you encounter the experiences, thoughts and beliefs of those who are most different from you.

First-year seminar, then, will initiate you into your Wooster education, and the inquiring minds you will develop in these next months will serve you well as you move on through the curriculum. As you know, that education will culminate with your senior project, the Independent Study, but even before you get to IS many of you will take

earlier opportunities to explore various kinds of research projects, learning by doing and engaging your chosen fields with other students and in close collaboration with your faculty mentors. You may already have had this kind of experience, or perhaps one of the reasons you choose Wooster was because you knew you would have such opportunities here. Whatever your previous experience, your seminars this term will be a foundation upon which you will build over the next four years.

So, while today is an end of one part of your lives, it is also a beginning, and as you start your first-year seminars you will, individually and together, be setting out on a journey of discovery, exploring the river as it unfolds ahead of you. Let me close, then, by wishing you well both as individual voyagers through this universe around us and as new members of our college community. We are delighted to have all of you here, and may each of you have a rich, wonderful, and transforming experience at Wooster. Thank you.