

Madeleine L'Engle Salutes the Class of 1982

Madeleine L'Engle Camp Franklin '37, known to her readers as Madeleine L'Engle, has been writing and publishing books since 1945. Her most celebrated novel, *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) won the 1963 Newbery Medal for "the most distinguished contribution to children's literature." Producer Norman Lear, who bought the movie rights, will begin filming the story for the screen next year.

After boarding at Ashley Hall for four years, Miss L'Engle enrolled at Smith College, at Headmistress Miss McBee's recommendation, and was graduated *cum laude* in 1941. Miss L'Engle returned to her native city, New York, to work in the theater. She and her future husband, Hugh Franklin, met while acting in *The Cherry Orchard* with Eva Le Gallienne and were married while on tour in *The Joyous Season* starring Ethel Barrymore. While Miss L'Engle (Mrs. Franklin) has retired from the stage to write, Mr. Franklin continues his acting career as Dr. Charles Tyler in the television series *All My Children*.

At the invitation of the Class of 1982, Madeleine L'Engle delivered the commencement address which follows. Maria de Guzman, First Honor Graduate, preceded Miss L'Engle with her exhortation to classmates to live a life full of enthusiasm, "the key to perfection."

— The Editors

Nomasté!

Maria, I liked your words about enthusiasm. When you take that word apart what it means is that you are "filled with the spirit of God."

Not long ago I received a letter from a young reader who said "I understand that you enjoy new words and I have one for you." So, I give it to your class today: *Nomasté*. It's an African word and it means "I salute the spirit of God within you."

One night last winter I went out to walk the dogs. There was about a foot of snow on the ground, clean, and country white, reflecting star dazzle. The dogs went tearing across the field, chasing last summer's butterflies, and I stood there looking up at the sky, seeing the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, which is 3 point something light years away, (I did not win the math prize at Ashley Hall), and another star, 300 light years away, and another one, 3 million and 3 billion.... There I was standing in one small point in the space time continuum and seeing, not in a two dimensional way, but into the furthest reaches of time, unlimited by chronology.

Coming back to Ashley Hall is also a journey in chronology. (I graduated 45 years ago. That's absurd! 45 minutes is more like it!) Because just as — standing out in the snow — I was not bound by time, so we ought all of our lives to be free from time. I am still the Madeleine who spent four full, rich years at Ashley Hall, full of ups and downs, pains and joys. I was a boarder, and the boarders were expected to keep their rooms tidy, and I was so full of a million other more important things to do that my room was usually a mess. Miss McBee's sister, Miss Estelle, inspected our rooms, and if they were not to her liking she gave Order Points. At that time, in the junior and senior years, the boarders could be given an Honor Pin, which

meant that you could go into Charleston to the movies, or shopping, with a couple of other girls, without a teacher or a day girl's mother as chaperone. But, if you were given ten Order Points, you lost your Honor Pin. Each month my Order Points mounted: seven, eight, nine. Miss Estelle really didn't want me to lose my Honor Pin, and I'm sure that on the last few days of the month she simply failed to inspect our room.

One spring — it was my senior year — we were horsing around outdoors, and one of my day girl friends was chasing me, and I tripped, and fell right through a window into the basement, picked myself up in a shower of glass, without even a scratch.

Continued on page 9



Madeleine L'Engle '37 on the porch at the home of her L'Engle Family cousins of Charleston, Mrs. Ellison Williams and daughters, Miss Elizabeth ("Libby") Williams '34 and Miss Margaret Williams '34 (twins).



Mrs. L'Engle chats with Lower School students at Coke Party in her honor.

Continued from page 1

Another time I tripped, after a reception in the main building, carrying a large tin tray of forks, knives, spoons, and fell all the way down stairs (and you know what those stairs are like), making such a tremendous clatter that Miss Estelle assumed I'd killed myself. She was so relieved to find me unhurt and alive that she forgot to scold me and helped me pick up the silver.

It was also during my senior year that I decided that we had never had a midnight feast, and it was about time we had one. I had sense enough — since I was president of Student Council — to go to Miss McBee and get permission for five of us to go to the D.S. room — the Domestic Science room — at ten o'clock, after lights out, for a midnight feast, which was to consist of some of our favourite things: cold canned peas, cold canned spaghetti, and coke.

At that time there was a teacher who lived in the annex and who taught in the lower grades and who did not like me; she did not like me at all. She was constantly trying to catch me out in doing something wrong, so she could strip me of my Honor Pin and my other offices. And we had to go through the annex to get to the D.S. Room. My room was in the main building, on the third floor, the room with the balcony, on which we slept in the autumn and spring — the best room in the school. (I had it my

junior and senior years.) We made it past Miss — well, I'd better not give her name. Our nickname for her was Toad. So we made it past Miss Toad's room and on down to the basement to the D.S. Room, ate our delicious canned cold peas and spaghetti, and then the five of us, giggling, started to make our way back to our rooms in the main building.

I wonder why it was that I tripped, just in front of Miss Toad's door? She heard the noise and came zooming out. "Girls!" Then she saw me. "Madeleine!" It was a cry of triumph. At last! She'd caught me! "What have you been doing?" "We've been having a midnight feast, Miss Toad." "You will have to go to Miss McBee. At once." "But we have Miss McBee's permission, Miss Toad."

I don't want to lose any part of who I was at Ashley Hall. It's an essential part of who I am, now. I don't want ever to forget sitting high up in the limbs of a live oak tree and reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Or taking my journal my senior year and climbing into that same tree to record my father's death.

L'ENGLE AVAILABLE ON TAPE

Madeleine L'Engle's commencement address is for sale on cassette tapes. Proceeds go to the 1982 LOYALTY FUND. Send your name, address, and \$5.00 to: L'Engle Tape, Ashley Hall, Box 248, Charleston, S.C. 29402.

These years of high school are years of discovery and growth, of moving from childhood, where our thoughts are often second-hand, to adulthood, where we have to think for ourselves. I think you and I were lucky in having been able to spend these years in a girl's school, where we've been allowed time to find out who we are; where we have been allowed to write our own story.

Laurens van der Post says of the Kalahari Bushman, "The supreme expression of his spirit was in his story. He was a wonderful story teller. The story was his most sacred possession. These people knew what we do not: That without a story you have not got a nation, or a culture, or a civilization. Without a story of your own to live, you haven't got a life of your own."

You are going to have to fight to keep the right to write your own story. The world of college and the world out there

are pragmatic worlds. You are going to be given a social security number. I do not know my social security number. I have no intention of ever knowing my social security number. You are going to be given checkbooks and if you haven't already had checkbooks, you're going to discover that your signature on the check is of total unimportance. All that matters is that magnetic gibberish.

Those of you who may have read my book, *A Circle of Quiet*, know that one time I went to pay a friend \$10.50. Because I have a lot of French Huguenot blood, I am stubborn and I reached for an old checkbook which didn't have that cybernetic salading and he said "Come on, Madeleine, you know that check's no good." I said "Do you mean my signature, my identity, my ME means nothing?" He said, "Nothing at all."

Well, it was a wild, windy, rainy day and I looked out the window. Then I signed my check "Emily Bronte." My friend was not amused and I said "Well, if my name means nothing, play along with me and see what happens. So, he came in after lunch. He had his \$10.50 and no questions asked at the bank. "But," he said, "it won't go through on your monthly statement. It'll bounce." This, the second check that I wrote, was the one with the magnetic gibberish.

I now have cancelled checks signed "Emily Bronte," "Jane Austin," "Elizabeth Barrett Browning".... Not long ago, I got a letter from a woman in the mid-West with a photo-copy of her cancelled check which she had signed "Madeleine L'Engle"!



Making a point.

If you are limited to a social security number or a computer printout, you don't have a story. You have to have a name, your own name, to have a story. And here at Ashley Hall you have been known by name.

There are other schools in this country which give their students as good an education as you have had here, but by and large you are going to be better educated than many of your fellow freshmen next year, especially those of you who are going to a large state college or university. You have had other advantages, too, such as living in this city which is one of the most beautiful in the entire world. Some of you have known more personal tragedy than the classmates you will be meeting, but you have also had great and unusual privileges, and privilege carries responsibility.

And you live in a time when too many people refuse to accept responsibility. "I can't do it." "It wasn't my fault." "She made me." "I couldn't help it, because..."

But to refuse to accept responsibility is to refuse to write your own story, and if you don't write your own story but shuffle off the responsibility onto someone else, you are only half alive. And Maria is right about being alive, too.

At school here you have known involvement and concern. When something bad happens, people care, they want to help, they offer compassion. Unless you are going to a very small college you are going to be thrown into a world of anonymity, where by and large nobody is going to care what happens to you, whether or not one of your parents or close friends dies, whether or not you go to class, whether or not you pass or fail in your work or in your life. It is going to be up to you. You will have to make your own friends, set your own standards and disciplines, and decide who you are going to be when you grow up and leave college — and *who* you are going to be is far more important than *what* you are going to be, because if you are not an alive and vulnerable *who*, writing your own story, then your *what*, no matter what it is, is going to be destructive and not creative.

Now is the time when you are going to have to make the enormous decision as to whether or not you are going to write your own story and stay *alive*. I don't mean this in a literal sense. But I'm sure you all know adults who go through their daily lives, doing their routine jobs, and are still not, in any real sense of the word, alive.

To be alive means to be open to hurt, to be vulnerable. And unless you have been extremely unusual, you have already had some experience of what being vulnerable means. It means you have been hurt. Some of you have been hurt and betrayed by those to whom you have given your friendship. Some of you have fallen in love and discovered that you loved more than the person to whom you gave your love. Some of you have known the heartbreak of having the person you love turning from you to someone else. To be vulnerable means that you knowingly put yourself in a position where you quite possibly may be hurt. But unless you are vulnerable, you are not alive, not in any real sense of that word.

There's a story of several scientists standing in front of a giant computer. Lights go on and off, flash different colors, bells ring, and then the computer spits a print-out at them, and it reads, *I think; therefore I am*.

Computers can think, and a lot faster than we can. They are useful tools, and they are here to stay. But unless we remember that a computer must be programmed by a living and vulnerable human being, we are in danger of being taken over by something which is not alive. A computer can think, but a computer cannot take imaginative risks. When

I fly a plane, I throw the computer into a tizzy because it cannot cope with a last name which has two capital letters. Capital L, apostrophe, capital E. The apostrophe throws the computer into confusion, too. But my forbears who brought the name L'Engle from Europe to Charleston were alive; they took great risks; made great leaps of faith in sailing to this land. As a matter of fact, their ship was wrecked just off shore, and only the two small L'Engle children were saved. They were taken into Justice William Johnson's home, and they married within the Johnson family, and they are my Charleston roots, and why I still have kin in this extraordinary city. And they were vulnerably alive. They would have understood the lyrics which Stephen Sondheim wrote for his play, *COMPANY*, in a song called "Being Alive."

Somebody hold me too close,
Somebody hurt me too deep,
Somebody sit in my chair
And ruin my sleep
And make me aware
Of being Alive, Being Alive.

Somebody need me too much,
Somebody know me too well,
Somebody pull me up short
And put me through hell
And give me support
For Being Alive
And make me alive, make me alive.

Make me confused, mock me with praise,
Let me be used, vary my days,
But alone is alone, not alive.
Somebody crowd me with love,
Somebody force me to care,
Somebody make me come through.
I'll always be there
As frightened as you
To help us survive Being Alive
Being Alive
Being Alive.

That's what it's all about. That's what, more than history or calculus or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, your teachers have been trying to teach you. To be a Who, to be alive. No matter what you end up doing, no matter what your What is, it is your Who that is going to make you a good doctor, or a good wife and mother, or a good lawyer, or a good writer, or a good lover of sunrises and first stars and the amazing complexity of other human beings. You've had a good atmosphere here — even on the days when you didn't know it — of growing up alive.

Computers can think. But they cannot laugh, and they cannot cry. They aren't vulnerable.

To be alive is to be vulnerable, to be open to tears and laughter and wild enthusiasms. Don't be like the two caterpillars who were crawling along on the ground when a butterfly flew over them. And one caterpillar said to the other, "You'll never catch me going up on one of those."

I'll ride a butterfly any day.

I hope you will, too.

To be alive means risk, vulnerability, hurt, but it also means the beauty and freedom and enthusiasm of the butterfly, and it's worth all the pain, I promise you it's worth it.

So be alive, and take your aliveness with you, and share it with everybody you meet. That's what commencement is all about, being born into new life. Rejoice in it! *Nomaste!*

Madeleine L'Engle's graduation address has been reprinted with her permission. Copyright 1982 Crosswicks, Ltd.