Literary Pioneers – A Bowdoin Bicentennial

I remember my baccalaureate ceremony primarily from a photo taken that evening. In it, I am sporting a skinny tie that belonged to my father which I am wearing again today to honor him and my mother, and all the parents and family members (those here with us and those no longer living) whose love and support have brought, you, the class of 2025 to this moment of celebration and transition.

I am honored and humbled to be a part of this special gathering. Thank you, President Zaki, for your generous introduction.

Whenever I see you representing the college, I feel proud and hopeful for Bowdoin's future. And I would like to publicly thank you for your thoughtful and confident leadership.

By all accounts, it seems you are faring better than Bowdoin's president in the 1820's, William Allen, who one student described as *"a short, thick little lump of a man, with no talents, and, as I have been told, no extraordinary learning."*

That student, foreshadowing his talent as a literary portraitist, was Nathaniel Hawthorne, a member, along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, of Bowdoin's famed class of 1825. On the 200th anniversary of their graduation, I have been asked to paint brief portraits of these two illustrious alumni in the context of our times.

So, these past months, I have walked in their footsteps, visiting the homes where they were born and grew up, making pilgrimages to their gravesites, and immersing myself in their literary works and lives in between.

Let us begin by recognizing differences between their era and our own.

Longfellow was only 13 when he received word of his acceptance to Bowdoin and 18 when he graduated. The cost of one year's tuition was $24. During those years, there were only four buildings on campus and one of those, Maine Hall, the sole student dormitory, burned to the ground in 1822.

While at Bowdoin, Henry and Nathaniel were not particularly close. Hawthorne was three years older, they had different dispositions and belonged to competing academic societies which lent books to their members since the library was only open for one hour each week.

They hailed from families of different social circumstances. Hawthorne's father, a ship captain, died at sea when Nathaniel was three years old. His uncle paid his tuition bills, and after graduating, Hawthorne returned to his family's home in Salem where, for ten years, he worked to perfect his craft to little acclaim. During that decade, he read voraciously, rarely left his room, taking his meals on a tray, and walking the city streets at night.

Longfellow's family was prosperous, and financial concerns were never an issue. An academic standout, during his senior year, he so impressed the faculty with his Greek translations that the College offered him a named professorship at commencement.

Like Isabella, who just offered us such a delightful address, Longfellow was chosen to speak at his graduation. In his remarks, he observed that the United States had not yet severed *"its literary allegiance to Old England"* and he advocated for *"a new national literature associated with the beautiful scenery of our country – with our institutions, our manners, our customs, with all that has helped to form whatever there is peculiar to us and to the land in which we live."*

Essentially his was a young voice calling out from the edge of the Maine wilderness for a revolution in American letters, unaware that he and Hawthorne would emerge as two of its literary pioneers.

Longfellow tasted success first and, to his credit, used his status to promote Hawthorne's early work. During their lifetimes, Longfellow enjoyed more renown. Yet, over time, critics suggest Hawthorne's fiction has eclipsed his classmate's poetry.

A lesson we might take from Hawthorne's writings is the importance, when examining history, of not ignoring moments of tribulation and misjudgment.

Now, graduates-to-be, as you take the next steps in your life journey, I'm sure I'm not the only one here who hopes that does not include spending the next decade holed up in your bedroom and walking the streets of your town or city at night.

But biographers suggest for Hawthorne this germination may have been necessary. During those years, he grappled with the role two of his forebears played as Puritanical judges during and preceding the Salem witchcraft trials.

Some believe he changed the spelling of his last name to disassociate himself from these two merciless ancestors. Yet, in the end, his unique personal connection to that dark moment in our history would animate many of his early stories and later his first and most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter*.

As a young man, he was aware that his decision to write fiction would be displeasing to his forebears writing: *"Doubtless these stern and black-browed Puritans would deem my current occupation worthless, if not positively disgraceful. 'What is he?' murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other: 'A writer of storybooks? Why the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!'"*

And yet those "storybooks" have become an integral part of our literary canon addressing timeless questions concerning how individuals of conscience confront moral dilemmas within the reigning orthodoxies of their time.

Those questions are as germane today as they were for the townsfolk and civic leaders in Salem who stood by as innocent people were executed.

And they were relevant during Longfellow and Hawthorne's lifetimes when the debate over slavery dominated our national discourse.

A different lesson can be gleaned from Longfellow's poetry: how to use heroic moments from the past to inspire civic action in the present.

Longfellow loathed politics and looked instead for creative ways to use his literary voice to advance certain causes.

Perhaps because his 1842 volume, *Poems on Slavery*, barely caused a ripple, he was especially struck by the success of Brunswick's own Harriet Beecher Stowe writing: "*How she is shaking the world with her* Uncle Tom's Cabin! *At one step she has reached the top of the staircase up which the rest of us climb on our knees year after year."*

Spurred on by Stowe's example, and encouraged by a friend to *"write some stirring words that shall move the whole land*" on behalf of abolition, Longfellow crafted one of his most famous poems, *Paul Revere's Ride,* resurrecting the story of a forgotten revolutionary hero to prod the conscience of his Northern contemporaries and inspire them to consider risking their lives, like their forebears had done, should war be required to preserve the Union. While many can recite the famous first lines – *"listen my children and you shall hear"* it may be the concluding stanza that Longfellow would wish us to recall:

For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

Longfellow's son, Charles, heard that message. He fought and was gravely injured in the Civil War that did, of course, abolish slavery. Meanwhile Longfellow's poem, and its iconic midnight rider wakening a slumbering citizenry, galloped on as a timeless cultural marker.

In 1967, for example, three years after Martin Luther King, Jr. visited this campus, Reverend King suggested, *"We still need some Paul Revere of conscience to alert every hamlet and every village of America that revolution is still at hand."*

I hope these brief examples help shed light on the significance of Hawthorne and Longfellow's contributions to our national story. During a time of social upheaval, they illuminated the human condition through fictional characters and works of art which capture *"what is peculiar to us (as Americans) and to the land in which we live."*

In these divisive times, I should note that they belonged to opposing political parties and had different opinions about the impending Civil War. Yet those differences did not diminish their friendship or their regard for each other's literary accomplishments.

Despite the favorable reception to his works, Hawthorne needed to supplement his income through politically appointed positions in Boston, Salem, and Liverpool, England. After the latter posting, he and his family lived in Italy, the setting of his last novel, *The Marble Faun*.

Longfellow called it “a *wonderful book"* with *"the old, dull pain in it that runs through all of Hawthorne's writings.”*

To enlighten his readers, Hawthorne often plumbed the darker depths of his characters’ souls. Listen to how one, Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance,* eloquently describes the predicament of his generation.

“*It was impossible, situated as we were, not to imbibe the idea . . . that the crust of the Earth, in many places, was broken, and its whole surface portentously upheaving; that it was a day of crisis, and that we ourselves were in the critical vortex.”*

Longfellow experienced his share of pain, too, but he tempered his poetry with an optimism that befit a new nation. This may also explain why his poems have fallen from favor in our more cynical age. Yet as I read them, I appreciated his positive spirit which seems appropriate to this ceremony as the College prepares, with pride and expectation, to confer degrees to you under the same whispering pines and similarly portentous skies as Hawthorne and Longfellow faced two centuries ago.

Here’s an excerpt from his poem, *A Psalm of Life*, written in the aftermath of a personal tragedy, which Longfellow first read to a class of his Harvard students as a life credo:

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

After returning home from Europe and in failing health, Hawthorne took what he hoped would be a recuperative trip with his lifelong friend, Franklin Pierce (Bowdoin class of 1824) to the White Mountains where he died in his sleep on May 19, 1864. He's buried in Concord, Massachusetts on "Author's Ridge" in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery next to Emerson, Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott.

Longfellow was a pallbearer at Hawthorne's funeral and outlived him by 18 years. After his wife, Fanny, died in a tragic fire, he continued to write poetry and translate works like Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. At the invitation of Joshua Chamberlain, he attended his 50th college reunion here in 1875. Seven years later he died in his home in Cambridge and is buried nearby in the majestic Mt. Auburn Cemetery.

I would like to conclude by commenting on two speeches which seem applicable to the moment. Longfellow and Hawthorne's education at Bowdoin was integral to their intellectual and personal development and the same was true for me.

The speaker at my Baccalaureate ceremony was Bowdoin's President Leroy Greason. He shared a story from his student years at Wesleyan where he had graduated exactly 40 years earlier. When, as a sophomore, he discovered the exclusionary practices at the fraternity he had joined, he resigned his membership. He used that small act of conscience as a backdrop to his larger address concerning Bowdoin's pressing need to widen its ranks, recruit more female professors and senior leaders, and attract a more diverse faculty and student body.

He closed with these words to my graduating class which I extend to you: *"So much of what happens tomorrow depends on you today. When you come back for your 40th reunion, what will have happened to Bowdoin and to the world it both reflects and aspires to lead?"*

I did attend my 40th reunion last June. And I am proud of how this college has changed over time though I am concerned whether it and other institutions of higher education will continue to have the independence they need to chart their own futures. As to the world the college reflects, I am alarmed by its increasing divisions and, in a new hour of peril and need, by the fissures in our democracy.

It is to this last point that I wish to close. As was mentioned, I worked for most of my career at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

JFK credited his mother for his lifelong appreciation of literature. As a child, Rose Kennedy made weekly visits to Hawthorne's grave in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. As a parent, she required her children to recite poems like *Paul Revere's Ride* over dinner, introducing them to her favorite American authors to burnish the markings of their Irish immigrant past.

In October of 1963, in what would be his last visit to his home state of Massachusetts, President Kennedy dedicated the library at Amherst College, named for Robert Frost, and spoke on the role of writers and artists in a democracy.

The speech was given in the context of the Cold War, a worldwide competition between capitalist democracies and communist totalitarian states.

As you listen to his words celebrating artists like Hawthorne, Longfellow, Stowe, and Frost-- I hope you will notice the contrast JFK makes between democratic and authoritarian rule. Reading the speech today, it takes on new meaning for me, for here at home those distinctions have begun to blur.

"Our national strength matters but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much," JFK remarked that day. *"And artists, when faithful to their personal visions of reality, become the last champions of the individual mind against an intrusive society and an officious state."*

"We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth. In a free society art is not a weapon and it does not belong to the spheres of polemic and ideology."

"Artists are not engineers of the soul. It may be different elsewhere. But in a democratic society, the highest duty of writers, composers, and artists is to remain true to themselves and to let the chips fall where they may. (For) in serving their vision of the truth, artists best serve their nation."

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow served our nation honorably by being faithful to the truth as they perceived it. And through their pioneering literary efforts, they gave their age strength to confront the challenges of their times.

To the graduates of the class of 2025, our hopes for you are manifold, including that the lessons you have learned here will empower you as individuals of conscience to remain true to yourselves – no matter the prevailing winds. Your very presence in the world – full of talent, persistence, and idealism – fortifies our age with vitality and hope.

I imagine, over these past four years, most of you spent more than one hour a week in the Hawthorne-Longfellow Library. And each time you entered, you walked past the portraits of these two authors on either side of the entryway. And now as you graduate, they look over your shoulders, like other members of this community, past and present, and join me in wishing you well and wishing you courage as you seek to make good on the promise of a Bowdoin education and live lives of conscience and integrity.

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