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## **The Childhood of Your Imagination    by Wendell Minor**

I cannot begin to express my great pleasure and pride in standing before you today. I wish to thank President Michael Hogan, the board of trustees, and all the members of the faculty and staff. I congratulate the mothers and fathers, and other family members, friends -- and of course, you... the graduating class of 2010.

I am truly honored and humbled by this moment, and pleased beyond words, that my adopted home state and its great university have welcomed me as one of their own.

And what a great place to be today--Gampel Pavilion, or as I like think of it, the home of passion, persistence, perseverance, and good old fashioned perspiration. In other words, the home of our great UConn women's championship team.

### **Congratulations Huskies!**

Do you remember when you were very young, taking a family road trip, and asking the question, "are we there yet?" -- I'm certain your parents remember. They would continually assure you that you would soon be there. Those trips seemed to last forever, but today you have finally reached one of the major destinations in your life. Not only are you happy, but so is your family-- do I hear a collective sigh of relief?

As a children's book author and illustrator it is only natural that I would want to take you back to a simpler time when the things that I was passionate about as a child turned out to be the foundation of my world today. My love of the natural world, American history, and all the people who have played a part in it, have become my source of ideas to create children's books for the next generation.

It has been said the finest practitioners of my craft never really grow up.

I certainly haven't, and never intend to!

Eric Carle, the creator of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," believes his ability to draw on his childhood experiences has aided him in simplifying complex ideas.

Seeing the beauty of simplicity, being curious, spontaneous, creative, and believing that anything is possible are hallmarks of your childhood -- and they can continue to be a guide for the rest of your life.

The legendary children's book editor, Ursula Nordstrom, didn't have a college education, but her creative vision launched the careers of authors and illustrators whose books many of you have cherished for years: Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*, Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Thing Are*, E.B. White's *Stuart Little*, and Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves* to name but a few.

Nordstrom was once asked what qualified her to be an editor of children's books, and she replied: "I am a former child and I haven't forgotten a thing."

My friend and colleague, Anita Silvey has recently edited a book called *Everything I Need to Know, I Learned from a Children's Book -- Life Lessons from Notable People from All Walks of Life*.

Here are a few examples:

At the age of six, historian David McCullough gained much from reading *Ben and Me*, by Robert Lawson. It is a book about the life of Benjamin Franklin,

as told by a mouse named Amos, who lives in Ben's fur hat. David learned that in the writing of history and biography, one has to call on imagination.

Television journalist Judy Woodruff fell in love with the book *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, when she was nine years old. The strong, independent, creative character, Jo March, inspired her to dream that anything was possible in her own life.

William DeVries, the cardiothoracic surgeon who implanted the first artificial heart was inspired by the words of the Tin Woodman from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*:

“ I will bear all the unhappiness without a murmur, if you will give me a heart.”

In following your heart you will find the key to your future -- a future that will continue to change with increasing speed. But never forget that the books you read throughout your life are the software for your brain, and it takes only 26 letters to keep that most powerful computer, the one between your ears, upgraded. And in a world that depends more and more on visual communication, let's not forget visual literacy: three basic shapes found in nature--the circle, square, and triangle; and three basic colors of primary red, yellow and blue make up the visual alphabet, to help us see the world around us in a new light.

My sixth-grade teacher, LaVerne Gilkey, brought the beauty of the written word and my visual imagination together by reading aloud to our class the works of some of America's great writers. Jack London was my favorite. I will never forget *The Call of the Wild*. Mr. Gilkey's deep voice made the words come alive with images of the frozen Far North. It was at that moment my visual world and reading came together, and I believe that experience led to my future as an

author and illustrator of books. It was therefore a great pleasure to paint full-color images for a Scribner's Modern Classic edition of *The Call of the Wild*, published in 1999 -- 96 years after the book's first publication.

My illustrations for the new edition are dedicated to the memory of LaVerne Gilkey.

As a schoolboy growing up in Illinois, my imagination was also captured by the lives of two giants in American history: Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain.

Lincoln believed that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing, and Twain said he never let his schooling interfere with his education.

My friend and fellow collaborator, Robert Burleigh, recently sent me this poem:

A boy grows up in a no account town.

He makes up adventures. He plays the clown.

Life seems a joke. Now what should he do?

A printer? A miner? He hasn't a clue.

A riverboat pilot? A soldier? He quits!

He tries this and that — but nothing quite fits.

He becomes a reporter but won't stick to the letter.

He can't write the truth if a lie would work better.

Some question his grammar. Some question his diction.

At last, he decides, I'll dabble in fiction.

A failure, you're thinking? Take care what you say —

'Cause someone quotes Mark Twain every day!

Here's one of my favorite Twain quotes:

***A person with a new idea is a crank - until the idea succeeds.***

Abraham Lincoln had less than one year of formal education, but his passion for reading and pursuit of knowledge is legendary. He would walk 50 miles in any direction for the privilege of reading a single book.

In closing, I'd like to read a page from my picture book, *Abe Lincoln Remembers* written by Ann Turner. The book is written in the first person voice of our 16<sup>th</sup> President as he remembers his very humble beginnings, and his long journey to the White House. One of my illustrations in the book pictures young Abe stretched out under an oak tree as he rests after plowing the fields. As he looks up from the book he is reading, Abe thinks back to his early years and his struggle to learn.

*Lincoln recalls:*

“I did learn to read, though, got some history and my numbers.

I’d practice them on the back of the fire shovel, for soot and ashes  
make a fine slate.

And I would do anything for a book.

I read any chance I got and dreamed of freedom, of rising like  
a hawk into the sky to some fine, high place.

To you, the great UConn class of 2010 -- it is now *your* time to fly -- to some  
fine, high place.

**I wish you blue skies and a great flight!**