

Frederick Buechner
from *The Clown in the Belfry*

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*The Emerald City:
A Commencement Address*

I don't know where you members of the graduating class were in the year 1932; but I know where I was. I'm not sure about 1931 or 1933, but 1932 I remember very clearly.

I was six years old at the time, and I was sick in bed off and on for more or less the whole year with a series of things wrong with me like pneumonia and pleurisy and tonsillitis and the like. Television hadn't been invented yet, and I don't think there was anything much on the radio to interest six-year-olds either, so the only thing I had for whiling away the long, dreary days was books, and the books I loved better than all others were the Oz books. They were still coming out at the rate of about one a year back in those ancient times; and either I read them to myself or got other people to read them to me, and the world they were about was so much more real and interesting to me than the world of nurses and doctors and croup kettles and mustard-plasters that the place I really lived that year was Oz. I came to know a great many of its inhabitants very well while I was there, and the one I want to present for

your particular consideration this Commencement Day is the Wizard of Oz himself. I'm sure you've all seen the movie even if you haven't read the book, so I'll get directly to the point and just tell you that the most important thing about the Wizard is that he was above all else a man of surprises. I'm thinking of two surprises in particular.

The first surprise comes, of course, when Dorothy and her three friends discover that he's not really a wizard at all. You remember the scene. Oz the Great and Terrible, as he liked to call himself, turns out not to be in any way either great or terrible. He is just a rather short old man with a bald head and wrinkles who stands behind the screen in the throne room working the machine that creates various illusions like an enormous ball of fire and a huge green head which everybody thinks is the Wizard himself until Dorothy's dog, Toto, accidentally knocks the screen over and the cat is out of the bag at last. The Scarecrow tells the Wizard he ought to be ashamed of himself for being such a humbug, and the old man makes no attempt to deny it. He says that he was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and that he used to be a pretty good ventriloquist. He also says that he used to go up in a hot air balloon to draw crowds for a circus, and that was how he happened to drift into Oz in the first place. The Wizard of Oz is not the kind of wizard that everybody thought he was. That is surprise number one.

Surprise number two is even more surprising, and it is this. In the ordinary abracadabra, presto-changeo sense of the word, the Wizard of Oz is not a wizard at all. But in another sense, he is not only a very great wizard indeed but the worker of magic which no one should be allowed to graduate from anywhere without knowing about. What

makes him such a wizard is that he has X-ray eyes, and what he sees when he looks at the three oddballs standing before him with their various problems is something that nobody else can see. But before I get back to that, take a look at those three oddballs themselves for a minute.

The Scarecrow, for instance. Everybody knows what the Scarecrow's problem is. His problem is that he doesn't have any brains, or at least he thinks he doesn't. That's the problem of scarecrows generally, of course, including any that happen to be graduating today. Some people go through school like a breeze. They get good grades without half trying. For them even something like calculus is a piece of cake. When a teacher asks a question, their hands shoot up before the teacher has finished asking it, and nine times out of ten they answer it right. They get their papers in on time. They apply for early admission to places like Brown and Yale and Harvard, and they get accepted. They win prizes.

If you're a scarecrow, on the other hand, you don't see how they do it. For you, nothing is a breeze. There's no such thing as a piece of cake. When teachers ask questions, you're as good at not catching their eyes as a waiter in a crowded restaurant. Even if you get a week's extension on a paper, you have a hunch it's hardly worth finishing because all the time you're writing it, you keep thinking how much better a job your smart friends would do. Whenever you get a crummy grade, it only makes you the surer that a scarecrow is what you are and a scarecrow is what you'll always be. If and when you ever get accepted by a college somewhere, you have the feeling you'll probably squeak by again with another diploma after another four years of grinding away at it, but then you see your real problems just beginning. What kind of a job

can a scarecrow hope to land? What kind of a salary can a scarecrow expect to earn? Where is a scarecrow going to end up in the great rat race? Life is a scary business for anybody let alone for people who suspect they have nothing but straw where their brains belong. It's very scary and it's also very depressing, and if you should happen to wonder why I speak with such feeling, it's because of course I've always been a scarecrow myself. I figure most people I meet have more brains than I do. If there are questions being asked, I always hope somebody else will answer them. I rarely if ever win prizes.

I speak as a scarecrow to scarecrows, and I also speak to any Cowardly Lions and Tin Woodsmen of either gender who happen to be among you. I suppose the mark of a Cowardly Lion is that you think about the great world out there and worry not so much that you don't have brains enough to handle it as that you don't have guts enough to survive in it. I remember when I was your age I'd look at people of my parents' generation and wonder how on earth they managed to do it. They kept the wolf from the door. They raised children. They acquired houses and automobiles and electric refrigerators and kept them more or less in repair. They held down jobs and got their taxes paid. Generally speaking they seemed to be in charge of their lives and independent and resourceful and able to cope with reality in ways that I couldn't believe I'd ever be capable of myself even if I had a hundred years to work at it.

And the Tin Woodsman? If you're a Tin Woodsman, you're convinced that you're a kind of a freak. The Tin Woodsman believed he didn't have a heart like other people, and you believe you're lacking something equally basic. For

instance, you're not sure you *feel* the way human beings are supposed to feel. Some of the things that make other people laugh make you want to cry, and sometimes the other way round too. You don't make friends as easily as you wish you did, and there are times when you feel like a creature from another planet. There are times when like E.T. you want to phone home, but you're not sure where you belong or exactly what home is. If you're a Tin Woodsman, you can be lonely even when you're surrounded by people you've known all your life. You wonder if anybody is ever going to love you the way you read about it in books. You wonder if you're ever going to find anybody you can love that way yourself. To one degree or another we're all of us Tin Woodsmen, of course, just as we're all of us Scarecrows and Cowardly Lions, too. We all have our moments of feeling out of place and left out.

And now back to the small bald man with wrinkles again, the one behind the screen. The first surprise happens when he turns out to be no wizard at all and the second when he turns out to be a very great wizard indeed because he has X-ray eyes. And the magic he can work with those X-ray eyes of his is to look at those three strange characters standing in front of him and, beneath what they're afraid they are, to see deep down inside to what they really are. And what he sees they really are, of course, is absolutely wonderful. The Scarecrow may not have a brain just like everybody else's—who wants a brain just like everybody else's?—but he has a wonderful brain all his own as everything he's done up this point richly demonstrates. Far from being a coward, the Lion is brave enough to act bravely even when he's scared half out of his wits, which is what true bravery is all about. And as for

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the Tin Woodsman, despite all his fears he has a heart so human and tender that they have to keep using the oil can on him to keep him from being rusted by his own tears.

But the greatest thing about the Wizard of Oz's wizardry is that he doesn't just see how wonderful the three of them are inside themselves but actually brings the wonderfulness out. He helps them to become as wonderful as they actually are. Do you remember that part of the movie? The Wizard gives the Lion a medal to wear. He gives the Tin Woodsman a sort of heart-shaped locket to hang around his neck. He gives the Scarecrow a diploma, appropriately enough. The things he gives aren't especially marvelous in themselves, but the magic of them is that they make it possible for those three odd characters to discover that they themselves are marvelous. By handing out his trinkets he goes beyond just seeing who they are at their best and in a way blesses who they are at their best. He brings forth in all of them the magic they already have and already are. And that is what education literally means. To educate (*ex + ducere*) means to lead or bring forth, and the whole point of education is to bring forth all the wisdom and courage and humanity that are part of who you are even though there are lots of times when you simply can't believe that they are. What you learn from books ultimately, or what you learn from them if you're taught right, is not just the riches of the past—of history, science, literature, and all that—but your own riches. The world is as scary as all get-out for all of us and maybe especially scary for you because to graduate from school is to come one giant step closer to getting out into the thick of things. Everybody is putting pressure on you to make your mark in this scary world, and most of all you put

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pressure on yourselves—to be smart, to be strong, to be successful and popular. But the absolutely fundamental purpose of education, as I see it anyway, is to show you that what's most important of all is to be the one thing that nobody else in the whole wide world can be except you, and that is your own unique and precious self. Whatever you do with your life—whatever you end up achieving or not achieving—the great gift you have in you to give to the world is the gift of who you alone are: your way of seeing things, and saying things, and feeling about things, that is like nobody else's. If so much as a single one of you were missing, there would be an empty place at the great feast of life that nobody else in all creation could fill.