

Lowell Speech: Dreaming Wide Awake
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Walking through Lowell courtyard the other day, I felt strange. There was a wonderful, churning happiness in my gut. The colors around me were sharper than usual. The air buzzed with electric excitement.

I walked out onto the street, and realized it wasn't just me: everyone there couldn't stop smiling or laughing; an irrepressible joy had washed over the world like an ocean. Then, as one, the ecstatic crowd looked up above the Lowell bell tower.

At that moment, a white rent tore the entire sky in half. Through it poured an unimaginably huge armada of majestic, fantastic, flying creatures. We watched as luminous beings of all colors and shape constellated the heavens. We gaped at the dark and welcoming figure of a huge dragon. We were witnessing the coronation of the new king of the universe.

This did not actually happen. But it felt real. It was a daydream.

I had daydreams like this almost every day when I was young, especially during recess in elementary school; dreams of epic heroes and stellar landscapes. Daydreaming was like watching an ever-evolving movie, with changing camera angles, slow-motion scenes, and even a soundtrack.

Imagine a little boy skipping around in the playground. His eyes are wide open but his thoughts are somewhere else. A scene of pure fantasy has taken him over. The hero he's watching in his mind's eye is flying across the ocean on a kite-shaped skateboard. The boy leaps into a celebratory sprint. That's what recess was like.

I still remember the shock of when recess stopped in junior high. Do you remember wondering why it had been taken away from us?

I refused. I clung onto recess and never let go. How? How did I manage to bring recess to high school, to Harvard? Daydreaming. I transferred all the creativity, running around, fun, tears, and laughter from recess to daydreaming.

Ever since it has been woven into my daily life and identity. I have become my own elementary school principal. When I look up from my papers, out of my school principal office window, and see Jeffery out there, needing a break, I reach for the button that rings the recess bell. And Jeffery will smile and return to the playground that he's preserved in his heart, and dream of talking with wolves, riding a dragon, or having a fistfight with a mountain.

This ability to take a real break whenever and wherever needed can be a real lifesaver. It is a moment of ultimate escape, emotion, and excitement.

And when I go back to work on a math problem set, I find myself more focused and balanced. When getting down to something creative, like writing an essay, my habit of daydreaming is the spark of inspiration I need to get going. And it goes beyond mere work; Daydreaming makes poems, art, and landscapes spring to sparkling and shining life.

Daydreaming was so fun, useful, and enriching that at some point I wondered if other people did it as well. So I recently asked an old friend I used to play and daydream with in kindergarten. In a “no big deal” kind of voice he said: “Daydreaming? Yeah that was fun. But I can’t do it anymore, I have lost that ability over the years”. I was crushed. We can lose the power of daydreaming? How?

Well, when I came to college, daydreaming did become more difficult. Many days I just think productivity. I think work, eat, sleep, wake up, and start again. On top of that, pop culture and social media often clutter up my mind. It’s easy to fill all my breaks with emails or Facebook, and let the time and inspiration needed for daydreaming get quashed. It seems that recess is long forgotten. In those moments it is hard to remember to look up, breathe, and dream, back in the playground.

Somehow, I keep on going there. And I think I have understood why I cannot give it up; why daydreaming has been so powerful. It is because daydreaming embodies my childhood. It allows me to stay young at heart.

So stop. Take a break. Go out for recess. And the next time your mind starts to wander, it could be the beginning of a fantastic trip with your imagination.

Look up. Close your eyes. Can you feel the joy the dragons sent falling from the sky?