

Alla's Words at Trevor's Memorial 12/1/08

I have never given a speech of this kind and I'm not all used to speaking in front of crowds, so I thought I would write you a letter and just read it to the people who gathered to remember you today, all those who love you, Trevor, whose lives you touched by your own very short life. But I want you to know that the letter is for you, and you are my first and most important audience today. For some reason, I believe it matters that I talk to you out loud like this for the last time – I think you can hear me.

I was on a plane a week ago, prepared to take off from Colorado Springs, and the sky was gorgeously bright as the sun was setting behind the mountains. The clouds were pink and fluffy; they looked like an edifice, a castle in the sky. I thought it looked like your new home, Trevor, and it's a breath-taking place, from what I could see from the ground. Since you've been gone, several of your friends asked me where I thought you are now. I see you up there, above the highest mountains, in the fluff of the clouds, dancing, laughing, acting, joking . . . Plato wrote of Socrates' last day in his *Apology*. Socrates was asked if he was afraid of death. "Why should I be?" he demanded. "I will have such a great time talking to Homer!" It's not Homer Simpson, in case you didn't catch it, Trevor. It's The Iliad and Odyssey's Homer, and I don't know if he ever was a person you wanted to meet, but I'm sure Johnny Cash is, and so is Exupery.

It was Exupery's *The Little Prince* that brought us together in Philosophy, remember? Here is the quote we discussed, you liked it very much:

"I am looking for friends," said the little prince. "What does that mean – 'tame'?"

"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."

"To establish ties?"

"Just that," said the fox. "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But, if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world. . ."

"I am beginning to understand," said the little prince. "There is a flower . . . I think that she has tamed me . . ."

"It is possible," said the fox. "On the Earth one sees all sorts of things."

"Oh, but this is not on the Earth!" said the little prince.

The fox seemed perplexed, and very curious.

"On another planet?"

"Yes."

"Are there hunters on that planet?"

"No."

"Ah, that is interesting! Are there chickens?"

"No."

"Nothing is perfect," signed the fox.

But he came back to his idea.

"My life is very monotonous," the fox said. "I hunt chickens; men hunt me. All the chickens are just alike, and all the men are just alike. And, in consequence, I am a little bored. But, if you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different

from all the others. Other steps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music, out of my burrow. And then look: you see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But, you have hair that is the color of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you. And the fox gazed at the little prince, for a long time.

“Please—tame me! He said.

I finished that class by telling you that you had tamed me as I had tamed you. I said that you would probably think about me when you see Russia mentioned on TV. What I didn't say then was that each of you, my students, has left me “the color of wheat” I will always carry along. Yours comes from the movies you gave me to cheer me up in my Colorado solitude: Pleasantville, Napoleon Dynamite, Little Miss Sunshine. It is in the pink polka-dot plant you and I got me as a pet in Home Depot, the one named Minerva. Your color is in the theater, all of it: acting in it, living for it and through it, loving it. The CD you burned for me before I left is the sound of the “wind in the wheat.” Now I wish I had asked you why you had chosen some songs for it . . . What's amazing about that CD is that I run into your music constantly, in shops and cafes. I believe it was your intention, I believe you took the following passage from *The Little Prince* to your heart:

But he did not answer my plea. He said to me, instead:

“The thing that is important is the thing that is not seen . . .”

“Yes, I know . . .”

“It is just as it is with the flower. If you love a flower that lives on a star, it is sweet to look at the sky at night. All the stars are a-bloom with flowers . . .”

“Yes, I know . . .”

“It is just as it is with the water. Because of the pulley, and the rope, what you gave me to drink was like music. You remember—how good it was.”

“Yes, I know . . .”

“And at night you will look up at the stars. Where I live everything is so small that I cannot show you where my star is to be found. It is better, like that. My star will just be one of the stars, for you. And so you will love to watch all the stars in the heavens . . . they will all be your friends. And, besides, I am going to make you a present . . .”

He laughed again.

“Ah, little prince, dear little prince! I love to hear that laughter!”

“That is my present. Just that. It will be as it was when we drank the water . . .”

“What are you trying to say?”

“All men have the stars,” he answered, “but they are not the same things for different people. For some, who are travelers, the stars are guides. For others they are no more than the little lights in the sky. For others, who are scholars, they are problems. For my businessman they were wealth. But all these stars are silent. You—you alone—will have the stars as no one else has them—”

“What are you trying to say?”

“In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing. And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing, when you look at the sky at night. . . You—only you—will have stars that can laugh!”

And he laughed again.

“And when you sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be content that you have known me. You will always be my friend. You will want to laugh with me. And you will sometimes open your window, so, for that pleasure . . . And your friends will be properly astonished to see you laughing as you look up at the sky! Then you will say to them, ‘Yes, the stars always make me laugh!’ And they will think you are crazy. It will be a very shabby trick that I shall have played on you. . .”
And he laughed again.

“It will be as if, in place of the stars, I had given you a great number of little bells that knew how to laugh . . . “
And he laughed again . . .

I wish I could hear you laugh again, just one more time . . . You left without saying good bye, which was, by the way, very rude of you. But I forgive you, dear Trevor, I’m just being selfish . . . I’ve been working on this letter for a week now, and I’m still not even half-satisfied with it. So please excuse my selfishness—I’m frustrated with my own incapacity to express my words to you, to capture you on paper. I guess it may have been one of your tricks, too: you made such an impact on me that I simply can’t put it into comprehensive words. Let me change the subject.

Do you know I returned to CSS because of you? You always wanted to be special, to stand out, and I don’t think I managed to let you feel special enough. So now is the time: I returned because you missed me. I returned because you needed me. I returned because you and Erica religiously kept in touch with me, yet you never asked me to come back because you wanted me to be happy. I returned because I wanted to teach Erica one last time, which I did. And I wanted to see you graduate. Which I am doing now. It’s not the kind I envisioned: It’s graver, more demanding, more final, and less graduate. Yet, with the authority your Mrs. Chelukhova granted me for three years, with the authority you gave me with your Alla, with the authority Leslie is permitting me now with her Mom, I’m telling you, Trevor, that you are graduating from my life with an unsurpassed excellence and numerous distinctions.

I will miss you dearly, Trevor, more that I can convey with words. The five years I have know you for have affected me deeply. I’m more open and outgoing with students now because you told me I had held back. (I laugh at myself more easily now – you taught me not to take myself too seriously. I do talk about my past while I teach – you explained to me that this way, history becomes more relevant to students, and I should leave humility behind. I observe people as attentively as you did, and although I can’t draw their caricatures with you skill, my mental images of them are precious. I teach *The Little Prince*, and I think about you whenever I do. You told me one day, two years after I had brought it up in your philosophy class for the first time, that it had given you hope, had helped you out of sadness. When I teach it now, I hope it helps others, too. But the biggest lesson I learned from you, Trevor, is to do my utmost best to be there for my students. I want you to be proud of me; I want you to give me a nod of approval from your new home, because you, out of so many people, truly know the tremendous value of the helping hand. My hand will not cease helping, Trevor, thanks to the lessons you taught me.

This is the longest letter I have written to you, Trevor. Thank you for putting me through the awkwardness of having to read it out-loud, sweet boy! Had I been the kind of teacher to you as you are to me, I would have given a whole new meaning to “experiential.” Because did I mention the hundreds of people I now have to face with my phobia of public speaking? When you gave your junior speech,

your audience was smaller! Granted, it was only the faculty members, but still – some of us had friendly faces! And guess what? Nobody cried!

I suppose it all proves my point, though. You were, are, and will always be exceptional, Trevor, as a student, friend, sibling, child, actor, or teacher. For all the above, I thank you. Let me quote Exupery again, for the last time. These are the last words of the book, by the drawing of a simple landscape – two lines of a desert and a star above them. “Look at this landscape carefully to be sure of recognizing it, if you should travel to Africa someday, in the desert. And if you happen to pass by here, I beg you not to hurry past. Wait a little, just under the star! Then if a child comes to you, if he laughs, if he has golden hair, if he doesn’t answer your questions, you’ll know who he is. If this should happen, be kind! Don’t let me go on being so sad: Send word immediately that he’s come back. . .”

And one day, when my own time comes, I won’t be afraid. For not only will I have conversations with Homer and Exupery, I know that you will be waiting.

Love always,

Alla

All quotes taken from *The Little Prince* by Antoine De Saint-Exupery