

May 6, 2002

Dear _____,

When you asked me to write a few words of reflection on your passage from sixth to seventh grade, not for you alone but for all your class, I felt disoriented. We should, whenever possible, speak to what matters and speak from the heart. But how to do so, on an occasion that is neither private nor public, and that invites the discussion of personal truth while repelling the revelation of personal experience? In the end, it seemed best to treat you as the strong and independent spirit you are.

As we pass through childhood each of us, a storehouse of alternative ways of becoming a person, imagines many different courses of action and of life he may later take. However, we cannot be everything in the world. We must choose a path, and reject other paths. This rejection, indispensable to our self-development, is also a mutilation. In choosing, as we must, we cast aside many aspects of our humanity. If, however, we cast them aside completely, we become less than fully human. We must continue somehow to feel the movements of the limbs we cut off. To learn how to feel them is the first major work of the imagination.

Later on, as adults, we struggle in the world and against it. We settle into a way of living and doing. A mummy begins to form around each of us, diminishing our reach and our vision by accommodating them to our circumstance. We begin to die many small deaths. Our aim should be to die but once. We can continue to live only by breaking out of the mummy. We can break out of it only by denying ourselves some of the safeguards with which we protect ourselves against the frustration of our longings and the defeat of our ambitions.

Life comes before goodness, because vitality is the condition of sustained and magnanimous compassion. We are plunged into a great and mysterious darkness, which our minds are able to penetrate only at the edges. Luck and misfortune, beginning with the accident of our birth in a particular class, nation, and community, shape much of what happens to us. We would be almost nothing if we did not fight against the consequences of this fate and recognize in ourselves the unresigned and uncontainable spirits we all really are. By rebelling against our belittlement by the alliance between chance and society, we cease to be little. We become great: unshaken, unsubdued, unterrified.

Our struggle, which is the condition of greatness, would also be the cause of our perversion, were it not transformed by love. To love another person and to be driven by a vision defining a task are the two decisive events a person can experience. They make us godlike. But not just like the God who creates; also like

the God who suffers and dies, because through them we also become hostages to other people, who may rebuff our love or destroy our work. This dependence on the others is not our doom. It is our salvation.

All of this is cause for joy. Right now we are both alive. Better you and I not think too much about this fact, or we might be overwhelmed and paralyzed by joy.

Love,
Roberto