For the last few weeks, I’ve been trying to figure out what to say to you, the graduates of the 3rd session of Halifax Humanities. I have circled around and around in my mind, gone down a hundred different alley ways, in the hope that in exploring all the things that I might say, I would come to the think I most want to say.

Finally it occurred to me that maybe I was having trouble knowing what to say, because I wasn’t sure just who would be doing the talking. I have a number of roles in my work with Halifax Humanities: manager, fund raiser, promoter, recruiter, secretary, bus ticket lady, bookkeeper, even teacher. But for me the most enjoyable role is that of being your fellow student.

And it is out of that role that I address you today. I would like to say something clever, witty and memorable. But the only things I really feel are worth saying have been said many times before, by me in an inadequate fashion and by others far wiser than I.

But allow me to tell you a bit about my life with books, in the hopes that I’ve learned a little bit about being a life-long student.

I was an early reader, perhaps even a bit precocious, and by grade 1 was assessed as reading at a grade 6 level. This was a fact about my life with both good and bad consequences.

When I think about what books were to me as a child, I’d have to say they were my friends, and sometimes they were more important to me than flesh and blood friends. I was a shy, insecure child, never really at ease with others. So I preferred the company of Heidi and Anne (with an E) and the adventurous kids in the Arthur Ransome and Enid Blyton stories. But early on, I began to develop a somewhat unhealthy side to my reading life.

I loved reading but I began to treat books as conquests. Early on, I became very competitive about my reading and took way too much pride in the fact that I read more and faster than my classmates. Books often became items on a list and what mattered most was how many items I could check off in record time. I think that I must have been an insufferable little snob about my reading abilities. When I was in grade 5, our teacher, wanting to encourage reading, gave the class a challenge of reading at least one book a week. Well, stupid me, after the first week, when we were to report about our reading, I stood up and told the class that I had read over 20 books (which I actually had done.) Needless to say, I was not popular with my classmates, a couple of whom pummeled me in a corner of the schoolyard during recess.

My early love of reading books was turning into a love of being someone who could claim to have read many books. These are two very different things.

By the time I was about 8 years old, my life as a bookworm was running on 2 parallel tracks. On the one hand, I had favourites that I read and reread, like the Heidi books and anything by Lucy Maud Montgomery, and an old copy of The Lives of the Saints, but on the other hand I was a competitive little list maker and blazed my way through Nancy Drew books, Trixi Belden mysteries, and others like that, keen to always be the one who had read more and faster than anyone else.

But what wasn’t part of my life, was conversation about books. Well except for those dreadful ones where I boasted of how much I had read!!

That situation changed for me in a when I was in grade 8. Sister St. Hugh, my teacher, became aware that my family was undergoing some difficult times. She never spoke to me directly about our family troubles, but what she did do was set aside time each week, talk with me about whatever I happened to be reading. Gone with the Wind...
and books by Pearl S. Buck were big favourites that year. And in those conversations about books, I began to see that books could be so much more than a private pleasure, or items to be ticked off on a list of accomplishments. Books were like places to visit, explore, discuss with a companion. And those conversations about books somehow gave me a capacity for reflection that would stay with me when I had to return to a home that was not always a place of warmth and love. And what was most amazing to me was that Sister St. Hugh regarded me, not as just a kid, but as an intelligent reader and thinker. I began to see myself as she saw me. What an incredible gift.

I’m middle-aged now, (well not in my mind) and the quick and clever girl I once was is long gone. I too often succumb to the easy option of slumping down in front of the TV. I have to read much more slowly now and often have to read and reread things before they sink in. My memory fails me in ways that are a bit worrisome. I know that some of you share this discouraging reality with me.

I’m still sometimes tempted by that “items on a list” mentality that I had as a child. When I was hired for this position, I reckoned that I had read about 2/3 of the curriculum. But in my education and reading, I’ve missed some biggies. So I can’t deny that I’m rather relieved that I can finally say that I’ve read Dante, and Homer, given that in the eyes of society I’m considered a reasonably well-educated person. But what has become far more precious to me than the list offered by Halifax Humanities, is the conversation that we all, teachers and students alike have shared. I love looking at books from all the different perspectives that are brought into our classes, and I delight in hearing from the many of you who are remarkably, attentive, caring and thoughtful readers.

But if like me, you are dealing with a memory that is no longer sharp, and an attention span that has lost its power, can you still be a careful and attentive reader? I hope so. And I think, that for me at least, what it may take is letting go of the “items on a list” mentality.

One could look at our curriculum that way. We study the good stuff, the classics that theoretically every educated person in the West ought to have read. We could all be ticking off items on the intellectual “to do list”. But suppose we think of our relationship with these texts in terms of friendship rather than accomplishment.

A few months ago I saw an old documentary on the artist Alex Colville. He made an interesting point in the interview. He said, and it sounded snobby and elitist at first, that he prefers that his paintings be bought and hung in private homes rather than in public galleries. His reasoning was that in a private home, the viewer learns to live with the art, seeing it day after day, in different kinds of light and from different angles. In this way a relationship develops between the viewer and the art and ultimately, over time the art is seen in an in-depth way not possible in brief gallery visits.

This idea of having a relationship with great art is very encouraging to me, now that I am no longer that quick and clever young girl. I befriend some books now, as I did with Heidi and Anne of Green Gables, visiting them again and again and over time, the great ones take root in my soul and shape my thinking and attitudes. Do you recall those words of Flannery O’Connor that David Heckerl shared with us recently: “A story isn’t any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase, unless it hangs on and expands in the mind.” Sometimes, only a fragment of a work takes root. I recall telling you of my 30 year relationship with T.S. Eliot’s 4 Quartets, which I once studied academically as a bright young thing and now have lived with as an experienced woman of “a certain age”. And it is the latter relationship that is the deepest. Lines of Eliot’s work have illuminated my soul, and given me strength at times when I most needed it. But could I deliver a brilliant lecture on the meaning of that work in its totality – not a chance!!
We’ve just bought a new car, after 10 good years with the last one. One feature the car has that we’ve never had before is a built in CD player. So I set off on Monday to fetch my daughter from the Valley with my good friend, Judy Collins. One of the features of this car is that you can repeat tracks on the CD with a button on the steering wheel... So I kept replaying my favourite Judy Collins song, “The Fallow Way” which became my personal anthem during the 7 years when I was a small-town, stay at home Mom and minister’s wife, with no connection to the university world that had been such a big part of my adult life. During those years, while there was much good in small town living, I often felt that I was losing touch with the intellectual part of myself, even becoming less intelligent, with no one to talk to about what I read, except for my rather busy, overworked husband.

The song is all about the fallow, seemingly unproductive, inactive times that we can experience and how we can learn to see value in such periods. I want to quote one verse

I’ll learn to love the fallow way
And gather in the patient fruits
And after autumns’ blaze and burn
I’ll know the feel of still, deep roots.

Some beautiful seeds of learning have been planted this year. But don’t despair if they seem not to be producing fruits, or if you have even forgotten what’s been planted. Be patient, attentive, and open to whatever has taken root. Live with the works you’ve studied. Visit with them every now and then and you may find that you don’t need to work on these great writings. They may start to work on you. The end of this intense 8 months may feel like the start of a “fallow time”, a quiet and seemingly unproductive time, but remember that is what is needed for deep roots to take hold.

Last year, one of our valedictorians David Clarke, left us with the most wonderful statement and I can’t do anything better than end with his words. In Halifax Humanities, he said, he had learned both confidence and humility and that they go hand in hand. I hope that you have all come to have confidence in yourselves as more careful readers and thinkers than before. But I also hope that you have gained this other quality: the humility to live with great works and see them not as objects to be conquered, mastered, figured out, analyzed, not as items on a “to do list” but as friends that you get to know with patience, openness, and even loving attention in conversation with others.