



**UNIVERSITÀ  
DI PARMA**

Awarding of the title of Honorary Doctor in

**“Classical and Modern Philology  
and Literature”**

to

**Patti Smith**

***Lectio Doctoralis***

**“Higher Learning” by Patti Smith**

Parma, Auditorium Paganini

3 May 2017

Hail our great institutions. Hail our libraries. Hail the book.

I have always loved books. As a small child I was fascinated by these objects that my mother and father held in their hands and looked upon so intently. I wondered what was inside of them and what all of these mysterious words equaled. I wanted to know this with all my heart and long before I entered school, I begged my mother to teach me to read them. My mother never finished high school. She worked as a waitress. Yet she was my first great teacher who unlocked for me the great secrets of what were found in the pages of the book.

I loved books and the small library about 3 kilometers from our house was my first university. I would walk there in all kinds of weather, and if it was raining or snowing I would protect the books that I had checked out of the library by holding them inside of my coat like precious cargo. The books opened the universe of the imagination. *Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan*, *Little Women*, *The Songs of Innocence*, and the path to knowledge, which is lined with books, is the path I have always taken.

Books have been my constant companions through adolescence, illness, loneliness, on trains, on a river bank, or by the sea. Within them lie the nobility of ideas, the wonders and horrors of the imagination, the sciences, and all manners of instruction.

When I was young, I dreamed of attending a great university and being privy to the great libraries of the world. But coming from a poor family, there was no money for such pursuits and I did not possess the academic skills necessary to win a scholarship. But this dream has always lived within me. Receiving this honor today gives me a profound association with one of our great institutions of higher learning, and I am very grateful. More than ever, it inspires me to magnify the qualities that allow us to evolve, grow, and continue gathering wisdom. These qualities include discipline, enthusiasm, gratitude for our life force, and respect for the time we have on earth.

The writer Thomas Mann speaks of his respect for time. He tells us that it must be sanctified, for it offers us the opportunity to develop our most essential talents, and it is within these talents that the artist attempt to extract the immortal from what is transient. Time is the space in which to strive for self fulfillment and to grow into the individual we ought to be.

We all hope our time will be well spent, whether as a parent, a guide, a gardener, a nurse, we all hope that in some small way, we can serve humanity, be empathetically aware of the human condition, of human need, and extend our hand. Learning to help one another is the greater part of our education. In the wonderful Italian classic, *Pinocchio*, the naughty puppet causes all manners of mischief.

It is not until he places his own needs and his own desires aside and experiences the beauty of sacrifice that he finds his humanity and becomes a real boy. Our education, which magnifies ourselves must also blossom into empathy, mercy, and the love for one another.

**“People Have The Power” – Patti Smith**

I was dreaming in my dreaming  
Of an aspect bright and fair  
And my sleeping it was broken  
But my dream it lingered near  
In the form of shining valleys  
Where the pure air recognized  
And my senses newly opened  
But I awakened to the cry  
That the people have the power  
To redeem the work of fools  
From the meek the graces shower  
It's decreed the people rule  
The people have the power  
The people have the power  
Vengeful aspects became suspect  
And bending low as if to hear  
And the armies ceased advancing  
Because the people had their ear  
And the shepherds and the soldiers  
Lay beneath the stars

Exchanging visions  
Laying arms  
To waste in the dust  
In the form of shining valleys  
Where the pure air recognized  
And my senses newly opened  
I awakened to the cry  
The people have the power  
The people have the power  
Where there were deserts  
I saw fountains  
Like cream the waters rise  
And we strolled there together  
With none to laugh or criticize  
And the leopard  
And the lamb  
Lay together truly bound  
I was hoping in my hoping  
To recall what I had found  
I was dreaming in my dreaming  
God knows a purer view  
As I surrender to my sleeping  
I commit my dream to you  
The people have the power  
The power to dream to rule  
To wrestle the Earth from fools  
It's decreed the people rule

It's decreed the people rule  
Listen. I believe everything we dream  
Can come to pass through our union  
We can turn the world around  
We can turn the earth's revolution  
We have the power  
People have the power

St. Augustine calls upon us within his *Confessions* to examine every day who we are, what we know, and what we want. Hopefully, in contemplating these things, we answer with a continuing desire to evolve and understand, and explore new things. And hopefully, the answer to what we want will be found in the realm of the immaterial. Wisdom, compassion, and the ability to love.

As we study the work and methodology of others we also are reminded that more than an imagination is required. Self discipline, a strong work ethic and a certain amount of sacrifice is also necessary, if we desire to produce enduring and meaningful work. It is also important to possess a willingness to embrace these ideals with a positive spirit.

I am reminded of a passage in the charming story of an Andalusia shepherd boy Santiago in the novel *The Alchemist*. The young man relentlessly pursues an impossible dream. We are told that eventually the universe conspired to assist the shepherd boy because he maintained the language of enthusiasm.

This little phrase: maintain the language of enthusiasm is a simple yet splendid mantra for us all. It implies curiosity and innocence and the breath of life.

**“The Hour of Noon” (from “M Train” by Patti Smith)**

“My father was born in the shadows of the Bethlehem Steel Mill as the noon whistle blew. Thus he was born, in accordance with Nietzsche, at the appointed hour when certain individuals are granted the ability to grasp the mystery of the eternal recurrence of all things. My father’s mind was beautiful. He seemed to see all philosophies with equal weight and wonder. If one could perceive an entire universe, the possibility of its existence seemed quite tangible. As real as the Riemann hypothesis, as belief itself, unfaltering and divine.

We seek to stay present, even as the ghosts attempt to draw us away. Our father manning the loom of eternal return. Our mother wandering toward paradise, releasing the thread. In my way of thinking, anything is possible. Life is at the bottom of things and belief at the top, while the creative impulse, dwelling in the center, informs all. We imagine a house, rectangle of hope. A room with a single bed with a pale coverlet, a few precious books, a stamp album. Walls papered in faded floral fall away and burst as a newborn meadow speckled with sun and emptying into a greater stream where a small boat awaits two glowing oars and one blue sail.

When my children were young I contrived such vessels. I set them to sail, though I didn't board them. I rarely left the perimeter of our home. I said my prayers in the night by the canal draped by ancient longhaired willows. The things I touched were living. My husband's fingers, a dandelion, a skinned knee. I didn't seek to frame these moments. They passed without souvenir. But now I cross the sea with the sole aim to possess within a single image the straw hat of Robert Graves, typewriter of Hesse, spectacles of Beckett, sickbed of Keats. What I have lost and cannot find I remember. What I cannot see I attempt to call. Working on a string of impulses, bordering illumination.

I photographed the grave of Rimbaud when I was twenty-six. The pictures were not exceptional but contained the mission itself, which I had long forgotten. Rimbaud died in a Marseille hospital in 1891 at the age of thirty-seven. His last wish was to return to Abyssinia where he had been a coffee trader. He was dying and it was not possible for him to be carried aboard ship for the long journey. In his delirium he imagined himself on horseback in the high Abyssinian plains. I had a string of nineteenth-century blue glass trade beads from Harar and I got it in mind to take them to him. In 1973 I went to his gravesite in Charleville, near the bank of the Meuse River and pressed the beads deep into the soil of a large urn that stood before his tombstone. Something of his beloved country near to him. I hadn't connected the beads with the stone I'd gathered for Genet, but I supposed they originated from the same romantic impulse. Presumptuous, perhaps, though not erring. I have since returned and the urn is no longer there, but I believe I am still the same person; no amount of change in the world can change that.



I believe in movement. I believe in that lighthearted balloon, the world. I believe in midnight and the hour of noon. But what else do I believe in? Sometimes everything. Sometimes nothing. It fluctuates like light flitting over a pond. I believe in life, which one day each of us shall lose. When we are young we think we won't, that we different. As a child I thought I would never grow up, that I could will it so. And then I realized, quite recently, that I had crossed some line, unconsciously cloaked in the truth of my chronology. How did we get so damn old? I say to my joints, my iron-colored hair. Now I am older than my love, my departed friend. Perhaps I will live so long that the New York Public Library will be obliged to hand over the walking stick of Virginia Woolf. I would cherish it for her, and the stone in her pocket. But I would also keep on living, refusing to surrender my pen".

Being honored today gives me a renewed strength to do my work, but is also quite humbling, and reminds me that we are all here in service to one another. I would like to end with a poem by Allen Ginsberg. Like William Blake before him, he was an artist, a poet, but also an activist and humanist. William Blake wrote 'all is holy', and in his poem, Ginsberg expresses the holiness of all things, from the infinitesimal to the mundane, to the magnified spirit of all things. I would like to read it in the spirit it was written, adding silently as I stand among you, that the University is holy, learning is holy, the teachers are holy, and the young whom we shepherd are holy.

Again I thank you for this honor as I enter the shelter of your university with much gratitude.

**“Footnote To Howl” – Allen Ginsberg**

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!  
Holy!

The word is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and  
cock and hand and asshole holy!

Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! Everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!  
Everyman’s an angel!

The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! The madman is holy as you my soul are holy!  
The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the  
ecstasy is holy!

Holy Peter holy Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy Kerouac holy Huncke holy  
Borroughs holy Cassady holy the unknown buggered and suffering beggars holy the  
hideous human angels!

Holy my mother in the insane asylum! Holy the cocks of the grandfathers of Kansas!  
Holy the groaning saxophone! Holy the bop apocalypse! Holy the jazzbands marijuana  
hipsters peace peyote pipes & drums!

Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy The cafeterias filled with the  
millions!

Holy the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!  
Holy the lone juggernaut! Holy the vast lamb of the middle class! Holy the crazy  
shepherds of rebellion! Who digs Los Angeles IS Los Angeles!

Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria &Seattle Holy Paris Holy Tangiers Holy

Moscow Holy Istanbul!

Holy time in eternity holy eternity in time holy the clocks in space holy the fourth dimension Holy the fifth International holy the Angel in Moloch!

Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad Holy the locomotive holy the visions holy the hallucinations holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the abyss!

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!

Patti Smith

Parma, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2017