

Two months ago I completed the Washington State University sheep shearing school, so my first plan for this speech was to bring out a sheep and shear it for you.

Partly I chose not to do this because the sheep would find you very scary and this place even scarier. The other reason I chose not to shear a sheep is that Mr. Olson said I couldn't. My wife, Ms. Weston, asked twice; but he meant it, and he was right.

Most sheep don't really enjoy being shorn, but it's usually not distressing and can be quite funny, however I really intended a shearing demonstration as something of a semicolon, as a pause between what came before: the first 18 years... high school... the first segment of an alphabetical list of names... and what comes next: the rest of the alphabet... higher education... the rest of your life. If this were a sheep shearing, then this pause in the program wouldn't offer any editorial comment but would act rather... as a conjunction... a breath between related subjects, without getting in the way or adding clutter.

Instead, my speech has an incomprehensible title; you can see it printed in the program. This title is an Italian word I would like to teach you. I am a certified Italian teacher in Washington State and have been for 15 years, though I've never actually taught Italian to anyone. You can no longer get this certification; mine is grandfathered through an old system. Since this is one of the only times I've had a forum to teach anything that wasn't physics, I would like to take this opportunity to teach you my favorite Italian word: 'Cioè'. C. I. O. E.

It's something of an ice-cream cone on a hot day, not the translation or the shape, but the feel of the letters; the vowels of 'cioè' melt all over your mouth while you say it.

Italian is pronounced as it's written, one letter at a time. For example espresso isn't "es-press-o" it's "es-press-so"; you pronounce both parts of the double 's', one at a time: 'espresso'. With 'cioè' the idea is the same: 'c-i' has a "chi" sound, the 'o' is "oh" and the 'e' is "eh" with an accent, so "EH". All together: "chi-oh-EH", but said without hesitation "chiohEH". Sometimes it is said so quickly as to have only one syllable: "chwEH".

The meaning of 'cioè' isn't any harder than the pronunciation, but it's not easier either. It has no direct translation. It's a word that acts as a semicolon; it can mean "that is to say" but only in the sense that a semicolon can mean this too. Italians have their own semicolons, they don't need a word for it, but they have a beautiful language and don't like stopping for pauses; they want to fill them in with music – with Italian. Italian also has momentum...and inertia; once you get going it's hard to slow down, and 'cioè' allows you to insert a pause without stopping.

A friend of mine once explained that she loved Italy precisely because Italians always sound like they say such important things to each other; their language is so earnest in its rhythms and accents. This is a little joke Italians play on the world. When you understand those words, you learn that they don't say anything more important than anyone else and often don't say anything at all; cioè, Italians are just better at filling the void... with music.

'Cioè' can also be question; *cioè?* This is a request for clarification: what?... and?... so?... asking someone to add a semicolon and say more. *Cioè?* I like to imagine an English translation of this question as a semicolon followed by a question mark, a sort of emoticon.

Like *cioè*, my second-favorite Italian word also lacks direct translation and fills a silence: "boh." 'Boh' is the word for shrugging your shoulders, it means something like, "I don't know," but more casually, as in, "I dunno," but less rude. 'Boh' is pronounced with a pop on the B; the sound starts sharply but cuts off: 'boh.'" And it's often used along with a shrug of the shoulders, as if 'boh' were onomatopoeia - as if you were in a comic and the word bubble above your head just popped in confusion, "boh."

You can imagine a conversation using just these two words. Say you're listening to an incomprehensible speech, and you look to your neighbor and say, "What? Huh? *Cioè?*" Then your neighbor responds, "I dunno. Boh." I want us to try this conversation together. On my right, on my signal, I want you to ask: "*Cioè?*" And then on my left, respond to them with "Boh." Let's practice first: on the right, on 3, try *Cioè*, and be sure to accent the 'e'. 1,2,3: *Cioè*. Now the left side, on 3, practice Boh. Be sure to pop the B. 1,2,3: Boh. OK all together: 1,2,3...

"*Cioè?*... Boh."

You just had an entirely appropriate conversation - in Italian - about my speech so far.

My particular passion for 'cioè' is related to an affinity for semicolons in English; I use them in about half of my sentences and relish the sound of the pause between clauses.

For this reason, I am drawn to writers of short sentences, writers who use a period to insist on a pause in readers' minds. In high school I was slightly obsessed with Kurt Vonnegut, a master of the short sentence. Among other things, at that age I read a series of commencement speeches Vonnegut gave. More than once he asked his audience to think of the name of a teacher who was fundamental to their lives; he then asked the audience to speak that teacher's name out loud, simultaneously.

As a teacher I'm proud to know at least one or two students who would probably say my name given that request. And I'm proud of my profession because all of us are that teacher to someone, while none of us is that teacher to all. Our diverse idiosyncrasies are precisely what make us influential and important to a varied student body.

Perhaps the greatest joy of teaching is that the opposite can also be true; you - our students - can have just as big an impact... on us.

Nick Calcott, a 2001 Mercer Island graduate, said to me near the end of his senior year, "Will you miss us?" I told him "no," that, like Doritos, "they'll make more," that teaching is something like wading in a river of youth. We stand still while kids the same age flow through our hallways and classrooms, new students always replacing the ones who flow away... But I was completely wrong. I do miss Nick Calcott; he was a super-cool guy, completely unique, like all of you. He was dedicated to the mastery of hippie-sports, instrumental in the birth of our school ultimate team, and dyed his hair blonde with leopard spots. Nick was transformed by Ron Adams' photography class – many of you know Mr. Adams as a frequent substitute teacher. I have one of Nick Calcott's photographs from that time at home; it reminds me how much I missed as a teacher

back then, how much teaching has changed for me and how much teaching has changed me.

So, yes,... I'll miss you. Especially my TA's; I have great students, but I have been honored to work with amazing Teacher Assistants: Samy, who grades your papers better than I do, and Joey, who actually filmed some of you last year for my National Boards application – by the way, I failed those sections, Joey.

In January of 2000, during my second year at MIHS, I was interviewed by Ashley Sinclair, reporter for the school paper. Ashley asked me where I expected to be in 20 years. I said, "right here, only a little balder." There are still eight years to go, but I suspect the first part of my prediction will come true; the second already has. If I were asked that question today, I'm not sure how I would respond. I expect to be teaching physics in 20 years; sheep shearing is a very hard way to make a living, but public education is undergoing such monumental changes that I don't know what my place in it might be in the future, and I wonder whether MIHS as we know it will be around. So let's put it this way: if you'll be here in 20 years, then so will I.

I would like to thank you for inviting me to give this address. I will admit to coveting this honor for many years, and every spring for the last decade I've considered what I might actually say if I were asked. None of it was what I've said so far. Five years ago my brother died unexpectedly. This event devastated me and the remains of my family, and I wanted more than ever to give this speech and tell you to notice each other, to pay attention to the time you have now with the people around you. I was grieving. But

I know you are not so blind to each other, and I have enough experience as a teacher to know that, even if you *were*, just telling you wouldn't help.

Still, I would like to dedicate this speech to my brother Peter: an architect, an artist and a passionate guy, who spoke Italian like a native and was even fonder than I of "cioè."

Graduates of 2012, thank you for your time. Thank you for inviting me to pause with you... between *Goolsby** and *Grady**... between youth and age.

This semicolon is over, this cioè; it didn't offer you anything, but it also didn't get in the way.

*(I scribbled these names into blanks on the page when I gave the speech, based on the stopping point in the ceremony.)