

Mai Mang

The Advice Below

(Phi Beta Kappa Poem, Connecticut College, 2006)

*On the twentieth day of the fifth month in the year two thousand and six
I, Mai Mang the poet, doctor of philosophy, professor of literature (yet none of these really
matters)*

*Sees a vision – a shooting star crossing the sky –
Thus offers you the advice below:*

As you step out of this door
You enter the world

Don't think you've acquired any wisdom – above the door is written
“Abandon all hope, ye who exit here”

Take off your academic robe, empty your dorm room
Return or sell everything back to the library and college bookstore
Because you're entering a new world
Paved with cement, overgrown with artificial grass and trees
This world is by no means braver
Freer from terror or war, or even more existential with values
But it's still your world
Not that of your parents or of your professors
You inhabit it alone
And from within or without find a naked meaning for it
Wisdom, some say, is a blessing
Some say, is a curse
Yes, it may come after four years of learning
Bringing you expectations of success, wealth and happiness
Not entirely so – it may also bring you

Downfalls, distraughts and despairs
You can check this with your parents or grandparents
They know it well, even if your professors may not
Wisdom, knowledge, all of these are like water
It carries the boat, also topples the boat
So be wary of it, just as you should watch out for ambition
Beautiful things may come with ambition
But afterwards they will still wither, turn ugly
Forcing you to cry out: "No, I don't want it"

"So what do you want?" You'll be asked
You look around for answers, only an echo resounding

"So what do you want?"
Well, life's question is hard to grasp

Just like a double-edged sword
But you must grasp it
Because the world, as you and I both know
Spins with both days and nights
Continents and oceans, springs and falls
Births and deaths
But you must learn and experience this all
Accepting both inspirations and boredom
Truth and lies (a lie is but a reversed truth)
You must learn to both "let it be" and "let it go"
Four years are not enough for you to be fully grown-up
But you should be grown-up enough not to be solely ego-dependent
Don't say "I'm so excited" or "I'm so scared"
What you really mean is "I have no idea" or "I think therefore I am not"

Both are correct – life doesn't really require the piling of forethoughts or overthoughts
It needs unknown paths and undone deeds

The world is wide, but that might mean
Your mind is narrow

Step out of your mind (I'm not suggesting get crazy), cast off your learning, and seek again
Remember, if art is short, then life is long
But not that long, seventy, eighty years, one hundred
As long as the distance of you walking from Cro's Nest to Fanning
The world, one or many, trapped by different definitions, will still be out of your reach
Like the azure Long Island Sound shining at the edge of an unobstructed open view
Learn to appreciate it, even if you cannot attain it
Life's essence lies in appreciation, not in possession
Just like this blooming Saturday morning
Having rid yourself of all the assignments, no longer concerned with next week's exams
This precious morning, one out of the numerous days in your life
Thus will flutter unfettered in your memory like a brightly colored butterfly
Hence I don't pray for you wisdom, success, or any abstract achievement
They will descend upon you
You will win or deserve it
Provided you are not striving too hard and racking your brains
I will pray for you instead more concrete and practical items, such as a good night sleep
After a broken heart rather than a broken rib or – if one must be stoic – bankrupt dreams

Don't plan anything grand, say, to conquer or save the world
Let the world treat you as an equal and take you in, so the world is yours

Don't harbor any desire to justify yourself with rhetorics
Learn to listen, whether it's your future spouse or unborn children

If you haven't listened (as you should have to your professors or silence)
From now on you are on your own to learn
Be thankful to anyone who was once good to you
Especially your parents, even if only they had paid for you (or would have paid for you) a
handsome tuition
After all, your parents were once you, and you'll be

Your parents too, whether you admit this fact or hate it
As for those who were once mean to you (your ex-roommates, ex-boy or girl friends)
Well, in the end, I wish you break even

Here I'm not saying anything extraordinary
"Extraordinary," that is a word for misfortune, not good omen

Here I'm trying to keep my words within the limit of fifteen minutes
May each second of these fifteen minutes, each letter of these words bind together and become
your lifelong and faithful protective talisman

Here I am, not as one of your own, but one who has condensed and manifested different fates
Not just of your past, but also of your future
Who has crossed the iron or bamboo curtain of the twentieth century and experienced its
two sides, a dubious Eastern sage, who assumes

Your native tongue, yet twists it with a foreign accent
"A monk coming from afar chants better sutras"
As the proverb goes in Chinese
Surely older than you, yet – perhaps indeed there is some weird reason –
Younger than your parents

But my ultimate and most heretical teaching and blessing, after all, may not be that alien from
theirs:

"BE SAFE, BE LOVING, BE LOVED"

– If again the odds are "either or," you have to choose one amongst three
Choose the middle and radical way: "BE LOVING"

-- translated by the author from the Chinese