

## Reflection on Sidwell Friends School's new meetinghouse

28 September 2011

Dear Family and Friends,

Sixteen years before I met Thich Nhat Hanh and began to practice mindfulness, I was introduced to Quaker practice at Sidwell Friends School. Every Thursday morning the 500 students and faculty members of the Upper School gathered at 9:30 in the gymnasium for a 45-minute Meeting for Worship. The spiritual dimension of the community was often palpable at these times. As the folding chairs and bleachers filled, I felt an energy I rarely experienced during the rest of the week. Once, Percy, our art teacher, captured that energy in a photograph of the empty gym set up for Meeting, rows of folding chairs arranged around a square, a vase of flowers on a small table at the center. But every week, as the chairs were put away and the divider that separated the gym in half opened, the energy dissipated, and our Meeting space became a gymnasium once again.

Because of the evanescent nature of its spirituality, it was some time before I discovered that Sidwell Friends had become a spiritual community for me. I had often wondered what it would be like to worship in a Quaker Meeting where the others present were there by choice and were Quakers. I finally attended a local Friends Meeting and was surprised to find that I missed the familiar Sidwell Friends faces and the youthful energy of more than four hundred teenagers.

This year, 38 years after I arrived at Sidwell Friends, a Meeting room for the entire Upper School was built. Elisabeth and I saw it last week when we visited the campus, and Steve, head of Buildings and Grounds, showed us the new space. Occupying the exact location of the old gym, it has simple white walls eighteen feet high with openings around the top that let in an abundance of natural light. White oak, reclaimed from local barns, panel the walls and provide the flooring, on which rest wooden benches with cushions that seat more than 600. The simplicity and grandeur of this space overwhelmed me. It was as though the soul of the School had been made visible.

Sidwell Friends is a premier academic institution. Many of its students have gone on to do amazing things. However, this year of earthquake, hurricanes, economic turmoil, and bitter partisan politics suggests that future graduates will need more than strong academic preparation in order to live lives of peace and contentment. As I looked back at the new Meeting room, I sensed it would draw more families and teachers to Sidwell Friends who value the spirit as well as the intellect and that in its sanctuary many others would discover their spiritual nature.

Many smiles,

Richard