

**Seeing What You Don't Know
(and Knowing What You Don't See?)**

September 4, 2019

Faculty, staff, students, Whitney - Welcome to the new school year. I hope that you all had a wonderful summer.

We start the year with a convocation ceremony to symbolize the ushering in of a new year, a new beginning. The academic calendar allows us to start fresh every September. Every year, we bring new energy, new ideas and, for many of you, new growth, both physically and emotionally.

When our children were young, we lived in a house in Delaware that had been built before the Revolutionary War. Our home was perched near the Appoquinimink Creek, and we were very aware of the history of the land. Once we found an old shoe buckle and another time we found a metal button from the clothes of a British soldier. During these years, we looked and looked for arrowheads in the fields and meadows and farmland that surrounded our home because before the British soldiers, the Lenni Lenape and Nanticoke tribes

had lived there – but to no avail. We hoped that by searching for arrowheads, our children would become as curious, as interested in the history of the land as we were.

Years passed, and when our children were in middle school, one day we were crossing a freshly plowed field, and there, resting on the very top of the tilled soil, sparkling in the fresh dew, was undeniably an arrowhead looking as it might have when its creator had finished making it. After finding our first arrowhead, we began to find more. Within a month or so every member of the family had found at least one except for my oldest daughter and to this day that remains a sore spot for her. So why for 5 years did we not find any arrowheads and suddenly we found 7 within a few months?

What happened? Why did we suddenly see them?

A great German writer and statesman named Goethe argues that we only see what we know.

What are the implications of this claim? One thing it might suggest is that we human beings have a hard time seeing new things or unexpected events or elements within physical sight that are beyond the training we

receive from culture and society. That is, we only see what we know.

In retrospect, perhaps as a family, we had preconceived notions of what an arrow head might look like and what type of sedimentary material it might be made of. The arrow heads we eventually found were not shaped the way we thought they would be, and they were made of chert, a type of sedimentary rock that our eyes had quickly and easily passed over. We were passively viewing but not actively seeing. For years our brains had been blind to the very objects we were looking for.

Of all our senses, visual perception is the one we rely on the most, but it is also arguably our most unreliable sense. As much as one third of our cerebral cortex, our brain, is devoted to visual processing, which is much more than our other senses. Sight mediates and validates the other senses. When we hear, feel, or smell something, we usually turn to see it also because those of us who are lucky enough to have vision, usually want confirmation with our eyes.

Culture and society has such a strong influence on our understanding of the world that at times we can be cognitively blind to what is in front of our eyes. Herman Melville captures this blindness in his story *Benito Cereno*, where two ships pass each other in the

middle of the ocean and one ship appears to be in trouble. The white sea captain from the well-functioning ship boards the troubled ship that has torn sails and is on an erratic course. In fact, the troubled ship turns out to be a slave ship, and the white captain has such strong pre-conceived notions about black people that he misses all the details which should tell him that there has been a slave uprising. Melville's sea tale is brutal and violent and extremely thought-provoking. The cognitive blindness of the white sea captain whose eyes are fully functioning becomes almost comical. What has happened on the ship—that the Spanish are no longer in control of the ship but the Senagalese are-- is obvious to the reader but not to the main character of the story. Societal conventions often affect and dictate our visual interpretation of the external world.

When my son, who teaches at Exeter, read this talk, it triggered two memories for him. One involved a class where he was teaching teachers. They were reading an article called "Has None of Us Wept?" A number of white women in the class kept saying that terrible stories of migrants attempting to cross the Mexican border are tragic but they don't know how they can help. It's an issue which for them is "out of sight, out of mind." Another woman in the class, of Mexican

descent, said: It is not ‘out of sight, out of mind’ for me.”

So the article and ensuing discussion made him think about our blind spots, either blind spots we have actively created or that are culturally created for us. How do we recognize our blind spots? How do we dismantle those blind spots and expand our field of vision and our imaginations so that we can force ourselves to see what seems distant from our experience? We often use the verb “to see” interchangeably with knowledge or with physical sight. When we say “I see” we might mean “I know,” and we might mean I physically see what you are pointing to. In the case with the white women reading tragic stories of migrants, they see but they agree that they do not know.

I hope that this talk prompts you to reflect on experiences where you yourselves were suddenly able to see something that you could not see before as well as moments when you have been completely blind to something.

So here is my charge for you this year: I want to inspire you to approach this idea of “seeing” more actively. Look for the unexpected. Work to embrace what you do not know. Transcend cultural boundaries. Actively

engage your brain by asking questions. Recognize your blind spots and work to overcome them – this is what an excellent education is about.

The great American writer Annie Dillard says that the world is studded and strewn with gifts. She says that nature both reveals and conceals. It's all a matter of keeping your eyes open, and if you can find the joy of the unexpected sighting, your life will be that much richer.