

October 2019 Letter on Belonging

Dear Town Parents and Guardians,

My favorite poet, Mary Oliver, writes:

What We Want

**In a poem
people want
something fancy,**

**but even more
they want something
inexplicable
made plain,**

**easy to swallow -
not unlike a suddenly
harmonic passage**

**in an otherwise
difficult and sometimes dissonant
symphony -**

**even if it is only
for the moment
of hearing it**

When I sit down to write these emails, I often find myself thinking of this poem. It is a challenge to strike just the right note (pun intended) as each time I attempt to untangle the multiple strands of my thinking to convey something with just the right balance between simplicity and complexity.

We've begun this school year enthusiastically and intentionally weaving in our newly articulated [values](#): curiosity, respect, joy, integrity and belonging. Across the grades, teachers are creating authentic ways to integrate them into the boys' learning and everyday experiences. You may have read previous reports of Lower School students performing at Assemblies, Upper School students organizing a Climate March, and classrooms across the campus connecting curricular content to the values. Teachers are helping the boys understand the definitions for each of the values and what those values look like in action.

I love all five of the community values we crafted together, and was especially pleased last week when our esteemed Pulitzer Prize-winning scholar, Jon Meacham, highlighted curiosity as one of the key values we should be teaching children today. Along with empathy and humility, Mr. Meacham said that curiosity helps us "remain eager to learn the other argument" and this in turn allows us to "reflectively, not reflexively, disagree." As a journalist and historian, Mr. Meacham has dined with every living president and written extensively about presidents throughout U.S. History. With his unique lens on both the past and present, and a firm belief that America has always been better when it has widened its arms to welcome others, Mr. Meacham concluded his evening by saying that what is most important at this time is our active engagement with the statement, "All Men are Created Equal." He called for us to learn from our history and to establish a wider understanding and meaning of this concept, emphasizing that "our disposition of mind and heart matter enormously."

Our potential to manifest fully our school values may well be conditional on our success with belonging. In our values statement, we say:

Belonging

We all belong.

- We embrace and celebrate each of our unique stories and experiences.
- We seek to ensure that every member of our community feels an equal sense of inclusion.

There is a great deal of educational research to support that students experience higher academic achievement in school when they feel emotionally and physically safe. Daniel Coyle, author of **The Culture Code**, writes that there are three norms and expectations that community members must embrace to create a sense of emotional safety and belonging:

1. You are part of this group.
2. This group is special; we have high standards here.
3. I believe you can reach those standards.

He goes on to say, "Alone, each of these signals would have a limited effect. But together they create a steady stream of magical feedback." In a school, there are a multitude of opportunities to communicate these messages through daily interactions and classroom practices. As boys develop their emotional intelligence and intentionally act to support belonging, they also understand that our Town values serve as our community 'standards.'

Every day, Town faculty and staff nurture curiosity, respect, belonging, integrity and joy in your sons and I know you will take an active role in doing the same. Your boys have the inherent goodness and energy to fulfill our highest aspirations. Our everyday behaviors transmit, amplify, and celebrate* our values and together we can create the beautiful harmony Mary Oliver references.

I look forward to a wonderful evening with you soon at our Fall Fundraiser - my costume is nearly ready!

Warmly,

Lorri Hamilton Durbin



P.S. If you're interested in learning about what you can do at home to forward belonging at Town, I recommend two reads:

1. A short but powerful article from the research-based Harvard Making Caring Common Project: [The 7 Tips for Raising Caring Kids](#).
2. An easy-to-read book focused on helping adults teach children emotional intelligence from the founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and a Professor at the Yale Child Study Center: **Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive** by Mark Brackett.

*this phrase is from The Culture Code, p 235.