



AT COMMONWEALTH



Aaron Littman '06

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The Heart of the School

WILLIAM D. WHARTON

IN MY ADDRESS to the seniors at June's graduation I spoke about the heart of Commonwealth's mission: its tradition of teaching. I told them about Charles Chatfield, former English teacher and Headmaster who died last March. He was, I said, the person who, more than any other, shaped the way English has been taught at the School, and whose influence, reaching well beyond that department, still informs the work of all teachers and students.

Commonwealth English students are perpetually exhorted to look closely at the text, reflect on it, listen to it, and to speak concretely about what they find there. They are not searching for answers to big questions; they are not discussing themes or passing judgment. They are asked to observe, to leave themselves open to seeing more, and to regard skeptically any claims to have "gotten it." Proceeding in this manner, they face what one scholar of close reading called "their own bafflement," while, at the same time, they remain "honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind a screen of received ideas." This way of looking becomes the end in itself—rather than simply a means of arriving at the answer—and it leads young readers to surprise, discovery, and a deeper kind of understanding.

Such attentive inquiry bears fruit in all fields. For example, in his book *Imagining Numbers*, Harvard mathematics professor Barry Mazur suggests that getting the answer is not the main point of a good encounter with a math problem:

All the best mathematical problems are *come-ons*....If the problem is really good, a solution of it is nothing more than a letter of introduction to a level of interaction with the material that

you hadn't achieved before. Solving the problem gets you to a deeper level of question-asking. The problem itself is an invitation, a goad, to extend your imagination.

Treating texts and problems as invitations to extend the imagination cultivates in our students habits of wide-awake, open-ended engagement with the material and of keen attention to whatever truths await discovery at or under the surface. And we teach them that the looking, the quality of attention they bring to bear, is as important as the discovery.

Moreover, this approach—seeing a text or problem as a come-on, and cultivating attentiveness—transforms the relationship of teacher and student into a partnership. We learn to look together, to talk about what we see, and to discuss what we understand and what we don't grasp. Kevis Goodman, former Commonwealth teacher and Chatfield protégée, now Associate Professor of English at Berkeley, puts it aptly: "If I can be successful...a student will leave the room feeling not that she or he has been lectured at but somehow talked and thought with."



Max Ehrman '08



Roswell Thomas '05

It takes extraordinary teachers and students to work in this way. Teachers must be deeply informed and excited about what their fields have to offer. But, just as important, they must also have the respect and patience necessary to let their students

find things out for themselves. Charlie Chatfield's willingness to endure long classroom silences epitomized these qualities. Students, for their part, must not only be hard-working, but they must also possess (or strive to develop) deep interests and a willingness share them—always a risky prospect for fifteen-year-olds worried about how they sound to others.

And finally, the work we do also requires a scale that allows for talk: small classes; schedules and student loads that leave room for those often-transformative one-on-one conferences; and a setting (151 Commonwealth) that encourages, even forces, face-to-face discussion. Education involves much more than the transmission of information; conversation fosters character.

Over the past few years, our whole community—alumni/ae, trustees, parents, teachers, and students—has taken part in the broad conversation about Commonwealth's long-term direction. We agree unanimously that the people—teachers and students—and our intimate scale are crucial to our ability to cultivate the distinctive capacity for penetrating inquiry. Our plan (which you can read on our web site) focuses on keeping Commonwealth a place where a Charlie Chatfield can wait quietly, letting each individual in a diverse class of students work through his or her own bafflement before a text. ▣

The Mary P. Chatfield Cultural Scholarship

ESTABLISHED BY DAVID ALLEN '87 AND JUDY JOO

WHETHER YOU'RE AN ART HISTORIAN OR A BANKER, David Allen will tell you, a mechanic or a lawyer, a musician, a parent, or a teacher, you can never excel at what you do if you have not developed the skill of critical thinking. David learned this life skill in large part from Polly Chatfield, his senior advisor and teacher for Renaissance history, art history, and Latin. She taught him, he says, not only how to understand paintings but also how to ask questions, how to pursue and broaden ideas, how to analyze. This year, to honor the woman who so crucially influenced his way of looking at the world, David and his wife, Judy Joo, have created the Mary P. Chatfield Cultural Scholarship. In part because he remembers the Commonwealth trip to Italy led by Larry Geffin and the profound effect it had on what he was learning at school, David has earmarked this scholarship for cultural exchange. By matching scholarships to need, he hopes to encourage students, regardless of their families' financial situations, to travel and learn about other lands and peoples. The first eleven grants were made for travel during project week/senior project and summer 2005 (see p. 20 for details). From lumberjacking in Maine to working with nomadic families in Mongolia, Commonwealth students crisscrossed continents, taking good will and energy with them and returning changed in ways they could not have foreseen. We are enormously grateful for the creative and inspired generosity with which David and Judy enrich our students and our school. ▣



Alexander Lee '06