



CONVOCATION at The Lawrenceville School
The opening of the 207th year

Sunday, September 4, 2016 at 5:30 p.m. in The Circle

MUSICAL PRELUDE
Chapel Bells
Thomas J. Goeman, School Organist

*ACADEMIC PROCESSION BY THE FACULTY

*INVOCATION
Reverend Sue Anne Steffey Morrow H'12, School Chaplain

"1925 SEAGRAVE"
Address by Stephen S. Murray H'55 '65 '16 P'16
Thirteenth Head Master of The Lawrenceville School

Colleagues, Students, Alums, and Friends of Lawrenceville, welcome to Convocation – the opening of this fine School's 207th year!

I got my first real job when I was thirteen. I worked for a neighbor who was restoring a 1925 Seagrave fire engine, a pumper truck. My boss, Mr. Pierson, paid me a buck twenty-five an hour. And I learned one of many important lessons from him **before** my first day of work.

He had described the job to me a few weeks earlier, and the idea of crawling under an old truck and getting grimy sounded interesting, and so I accepted. He told me we would work on Saturdays, we set a start date and time, and I promptly forgot about it.

Some weeks later, I had spent Friday night at a friend's house, and over breakfast the following morning, we hatched a plan to go to the movies. We were going to see *Papillon* with Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen, an epic story about two swindlers who are imprisoned on the notorious Devil's Island in French Guiana and who spend their lives trying to escape. I could not wait to see it.

As we were finishing breakfast that morning, the phone rings, and it's my mother. She explains that Mr. Pierson is trying to reach me. I think, "Uh oh ... this could be a problem." But I am still thinking I can negotiate my way out of this. I call him, and using my smoothest powers of persuasion, I tell him that the whole thing had slipped my mind and that I certainly could start the following Saturday. He's quiet for a moment, and then says, "I see."

I hang up, relieved that my plans are so easily back on track. A minute later, the phone rings. It's Mr. Pierson. He says firmly, "Stephen, we had an agreement and I have planned for a full

day of work. I'd like you here in 30 minutes." This time, I said, "I see." I gulped hard, and responded, "Ok, I'll be there."

He acted like nothing had happened when I arrived, looked me in the eye and shook my hand, probably still sizing me up, and he put me to work immediately.

First lesson: **Hold to your commitments and keep your word.**

And so I spent nearly every Saturday for the next three years as a bit of a grease monkey, extra set of hands, Johnny-on-the-spot assistant for any and all operations.

The truck had sat outside for a number of decades in a field in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, neglected and decaying, before Mr. Pierson rescued it and brought it to his garage to resurrect it.

It was an extraordinary piece of engineering for its time, the first rescue vehicle equipped with a mobile water pump powered directly from the engine. It had been built for hard work, for dirty work, for serious work, but it also had beauty and form, it was designed with a certain care and attention that elevated it far above its mere function. The running boards were solid oak, the fuel tank was hand-crafted copper, the fittings and handles were brass, with a nickel plated radiator shroud, and here and there, adorning the faded red paint, grand flourishes of real gold leafing were still visible.

It was if the designers wanted to remind us that many things, even ostensibly mundane objects, like a working truck, had a serious purpose, perhaps a higher purpose – in this case, saving lives. If you are going to build something important, make it look important, even beautiful.

Mr. Pierson certainly felt that our work on the truck had purpose, perhaps even a higher purpose. He was a successful banker during the week; he was a dedicated volunteer fireman at any hour that his Plectron radio receiver issued a call; and he was a meticulous craftsman on Saturday mornings. As I learned just how meticulous he was during those early weeks with him, I am sure I muttered under my breath more than a few times that he was **also** a bit of 'goddam' perfectionist.

But as we worked together, I came to see it differently. He approached each and every task with the greatest care, and I began to see that the painstaking restoration of the vehicle was in part his way of paying tribute to those generations of individuals who put themselves in harm's way to protect others.

I confess that at the start, I had grand visions of boldly learning to replace a piston, or heroically solving a complex problem in the exhaust manifold, but of course I did not know the first thing about engines, and my apprenticeship was destined to begin on a much humbler level.

Lesson Two: **Park your ego at the door, start simple, and work your way up.**

Indeed, one of my very first jobs was to slide under the truck on a mechanic's creeper with a socket wrench to disengage the oak running boards so that they could be replaced. The nuts were frozen tight under rust and a dozen layers of industrial grade paint. Trying to avoid

getting it in my eyes as I worked directly above my face, I had to scrape away decades-old layers of grit and caked-on grease just to find the nut, apply paint stripper, and finally, once metal was exposed, apply liberal amounts of WD-40 – just to have a shot at loosening the nut. Between the side and rear running boards, I probably had 60-70 nuts to remove in this fashion. If I grew impatient and tried to use the torque of the wrench to muscle the nut free, I more often than not simply twisted and broke off the old, fatigued metal bolt. Mr. Pierson would give me a sideways look with just a hint of exasperation, and quietly say, “Slow down, don’t force them, they’ll come off.”

And there was the third lesson: **Slow down, don’t force it. Be patient.**

I broke fewer and fewer as I went along, and in the end I successfully removed a good percentage of the nuts. My next job was to work them down to bare metal with the help of a wire wheel brush mounted on a bench grinder. With fingers already raw from the paint stripper, I now was applying the nuts and bolts to a wire brush spinning at high speed. It removed the rust and paint, but I had to work every surface and facet. It was slow work, and the pile of dirty hardware dwarfed the tiny pile of bright, shiny, finished pieces. I started to speed up, cut a few corners. Who would know? No one would see the damn things -- they go under the running board. Mr. Pierson seemed a bit surprised when I emerged from the basement an hour later with my pile of nuts and bolts – still somewhat mottled with paint and rust.

He said drily, **“Appears you’ve got more work to do.”**

“Well, you see, Mr. Pierson, I figure no one will notice these, hidden under the running boards. No one will know.”

“I’ll know,” he said with a tone that clearly was not inviting further debate. Back to the bench grinder. But he came down with me, and patiently showed me how to work the small pieces of steel against the wire brush until they were spotless, and also how to avoid losing the tips of my fingers in the process. And as we worked together over time, I found that he had a technique for everything – there was a certain way to hold sandpaper to get the best effect, and a way to match the grade of steel wool to the job in order to achieve silky smooth finishes, feathered down just perfectly. He applied paint to surfaces like an artist working with a canvas: “Don’t load the brush,” he coached. “Lay it on thin; never leave brush strokes; apply multiple coats; sand gently between each coat.”

And of course, there was a lesson in this too: **Do it carefully, do it thoroughly, always -- regardless of who sees and who knows. You’ll know, and that’s all that matters.**

Not all of the work was refined, not all of the lessons subtle. One cold, rainy fall day I showed up for work, and he said, “Today we’re doing something a little different. You look big enough to roll hoses – it’s bone-crushing work, but we could use an extra set of hands.” “If you say so,” I thought, puffing out my chest just a bit and surreptitiously checking the state of my 13-year-old biceps as I followed him to the car. We headed down to the local firehouse to roll out, drain, and tightly re-coil their heavy-grade, 100-foot, canvas-coated fire hoses. Each length weighed a good 100 pounds, more when wet.

Turns out, naturally, there were certain techniques to master here as well. Hoses need to be periodically drained and re-rolled so they are easy to handle when lives and buildings depend on it, and when even a few seconds of fumbling with a loose hose could be costly. Once you laid it out and the excess water drained, you formed a very tight coil, and slowly and evenly rolled the hose, bending over as you walked, and then carried it to be stacked in the back of a truck. My first few attempts were pathetic -- my back ached after the third one and my hands were raw with the cold, but I watched how seriously these guys took the exercise, and so I stayed with it. Done well, the weight of the hose helped it stay tight, and in an emergency, almost like unleashing a heavy bowling ball, the coil could be rolled out on a city street. In a pinch these guys could lay out several hundred feet of hose in seconds. After three hours, the job was done, and I was utterly spent -- "bone-crushing" was Mr. Pierson's word, and he was right. But there was an important reason behind the exercise, and it felt great to play a small part.

Again, here was a lesson: **Don't be afraid to put your back into it; hard work feels good, and even the simplest jobs deserve to be done right and have a purpose.**

Over time, working with Mr. Pierson, my hands hardened from all the paint stripper, wire brushes, grinding, and endless sanding, and I liked the feeling of having tough, wiry fingers and thick callouses.

Under his guidance, I slowly began to understand that it wasn't about what people would see, or who would know. It was about honoring the work by doing it carefully and never cutting corners. The vehicle had been hand crafted with care and respect, constructed of steel, oak, brass, nickel, and copper -- materials you use when something matters and should endure. The truck had been abandoned for a time and left to decay, and now we were slowly bringing it back from the edge, restoring it, element by element, back to its original luster.

As months went by, my first year turned into my second, and my second turned into my third -- the running boards were beautifully replaced, the copper fuel tank shone brilliantly, and the zinc plated water reservoir looked new again. Panel by panel along the sides, each curving fender in turn, the body had been stripped of old paint down to bare metal, and paint was reapplied, one thin layer after another, until the brilliant fire-engine red shone deeply and richly.

As for me, I began to feel increasing competent at the various tasks, even proud. And bit by bit, Mr. Pierson checked on my work less frequently. In those early weeks, he would come over, run his palm across a surface I'd been sanding, and invariably would feel some slight irregularity. He'd cock his head and raise an eyebrow and wouldn't even have to speak -- I would know -- 'not good enough'. The first time he didn't even check my work but went straight to get the paint gun, I have to confess, I danced a small mental victory dance.

In the end, I can't say that I actually emerged a craftsman. I know my way around a shop and can handle tools reasonably well, and through most of college and my early teaching years I was a fanatically precise housepainter, but I found other callings and never became a restorer of vehicles in my own right. Still my time with Mr. Pierson taught me some enduring lessons that continue to serve me:

- Keep to your commitments
- Park your ego at the door
- Be patient -- don't force it

- Do any job well for its own sake
- And don't be afraid to put your back into it – a little hard work never killed anyone.

And it was more than that. Working with my hands gave me a sturdy confidence and a kind of mental tool kit to take on all manner of problems that needed patience, persistence, hard work, and a touch of humility to solve.

I was reading a book this summer recommended by Dean Eldridge called *Shop Class as Soul Craft* by Matthew Crawford. He decries the wholesale removal of applied learning and manual arts from high schools in the 1980's and '90's, preparing students for a "High-Tech," "post-industrial" future. But, it turns out, this loss of project-based curriculum created a new set of problems. He quotes MIT professor Frank Levy, who makes the point about the importance of developing a creative, hands-on, problem solving mentality: "...creativity is knowing what to do when the rules run out or there are no rules in the first place. It is what a good auto mechanic does after his computerized test equipment says the car's transmission is fine, but the transmission continues to shift at the wrong engine speed."¹

This roll-up-your-sleeves, creative mindset is something akin to what used to be called "Yankee ingenuity." I am reminded of an experience I had in college, which I wrote about in the upcoming issue of the *Lawrentian*. My roommate and I spent an afternoon with a certain spry Vermont farmer in his 80's who was showing us his "projects."

First stop was "the smithy". He had found an old crank bellows in the woods, all seized up with rust. He took it apart, cleaned it, and made it work. He had likewise found an iron sink, again, in the woods, filled it with concrete and created a shallow depression for the forge. He then showed us how he fashioned all of the fittings, hinges, and door fixtures that he needed around the farm, using scrap metal.

A little further on, he showed us his sawmill, set up with a huge circular blade – that too, "found in the woods". He had taken an engine from a junked car, got it working, and this powered the saw with a belt drive he had rigged up.

Finally, he showed us a cabin he had built entirely by hand without a single nail. All his own lumber carefully pegged or fitted with dove-tail joints. And the door handles and hinges – all hand made.

I am struck, even a bit inspired, by those who show their skill and mental acuity through their work with their hands. When we admire ancient cathedrals in Europe, we can marvel at the soaring architecture and the inspired lines, and we sometimes pass over the fact that each stone was individually cut and then etched with a personalized marker by anonymous, highly accomplished stonecutters, without whom, the idea of the cathedral would simply remain an idea. They did this to each stone because they were paid by the stone, and they kept track in this way in order to be compensated. I have run my hands over those stones, run my fingers along the stonecutters' individual marks and wondered about them.

¹ Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) 35.

And the truth is, we place great value on hands-on learning right here at Lawrenceville. There are so many opportunities to roll up your sleeves, get your hands a bit dirty, and to learn, whether you are working with local farmers testing for fecal coliform throughout the surrounding water systems, or perusing primary source documents in our own archives; you might be working in our makers space on a robotics project, serving folks right in our back yard in a Trenton soup kitchen, or volunteering in a school in Tanzania. And we are planning to develop new opportunities for this type of learning.

We've been crafting a new strategic plan over the course of the past ten months, as I mentioned Friday evening, and expanding the experiential learning side of our vaunted curriculum has emerged as a key initiative. The Vision statement for Lawrenceville 20/20 makes the case for hands-on learning and the innovative spirit:

We will develop head and hands and lead the way with experiential learning. Our rigorous intellectual culture in the Harkness classroom will connect to outstanding real-world, entrepreneurial problem-solving programs that deepen understanding, spawn creativity, and teach initiative. State-of-the-art facilities for creative design will generate collaboration across the disciplines and encourage roll-up-your-sleeves, project-based learning.

Once we formally adopt the plan, we'll be taking a look at the success of current programs, such as the Hutchins Scholars, along with our archival research interns, The Heely Scholars. We'll look at what is working with our global travel programs that connect students to the wider world and our service learning opportunities that bring students to the neighborhoods of nearby Trenton. We'll enhance our creative spaces in the Kirby Math and Science Center and in the Gruss Art Center to ensure that we give students the tools and opportunities to tinker, to innovate, to make things.

Learning can be a messy, untidy, grimy experience. I learned this forty years ago when I began work on a 1925 Seagrave pumper truck, and the lessons I learned while inhaling the acrid smell of paint stripper and rubbing my fingers raw with steel wool have stayed with me a lifetime.

As we move forward this year to begin to implement our plan and to design new programs and hands-on initiatives, I invite all of you to join in, to get involved, to roll up your sleeves, to get your hands dirty, and above all, to learn.

Thank you very much.

And now the awarding of the prizes:

The Chivers Cup is awarded to the House with the highest GPA. The 2016 winner of The Chivers Cup is Carter House. Would this year's House president please come forward to receive the Cup on behalf of your House?

The Adams Cup recognizes the House with the greatest commitment to community service. The 2016 winner of the Adams Cup is Stephens House. Would this year's House president please come forward to receive the Cup on behalf of your House?

The House Cup is awarded to the House with the greatest House spirit. The 2016 winner of the House Cup is Woodhull House. Would this year's House president please come forward to receive the Cup on behalf of your House?