



THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

Convocation at The Lawrenceville School

The Opening of the 210th Year
Sunday, September 8, 2019 at 5:30 p.m. in The Circle

“Stuck on a Rock, Midstream: Moments to Test Your Mettle”

Address by Stephen S. Murray H’54 ’55 ’65 ’16 P’16 ’21
Thirteenth Head Master of The Lawrenceville School

On a hot July day in 1979, in the wilds of northern Quebec, I found myself stuck on a rock, in the **middle of a set** of rather swift running rapids.

I was staring dumbly at my canoe, a beautiful wood-framed, canvas-covered canoe, which was crushed, wrapped tightly around the rock, the same rock upon which I stood. The once elegant craft was hopelessly twisted and contorted in an inverted U-shape, stuck fast to the rock by the force of the current. And at that moment, all of my belongings: clothing, food supplies, and tent – were floating downstream, rapidly disappearing around a bend in the river.

We were several hundred miles from the nearest dirt road, and the only passable way through this wilderness to reach our pick-up point was over water, by canoe.

As the extent of my predicament was dawning upon me, I felt a sudden, simultaneous realization well up inside – I felt strangely calm and clearheaded: this was definitely solvable, and in fact, it would make a good story someday. And standing there on that rock, with the water rushing by, I almost looked forward to telling it.

Now, to understand a little more clearly the nature of my situation, a bit of geology would be helpful. The shape and character of the topography of northeastern Canada was largely formed during the Last Glacial Period by an ice sheet nearly two miles thick. This sprawling glacier gouged out the Great Lakes, the Finger Lakes, and Lake Champlain. In the northern regions of Quebec, the massive weight of ice scoured the terrain, leaving it relatively flat, aside from the myriad eskers, moraines, drumlins, and mounds of glacial till left in its wake.

Twelve thousand years ago, the final retreat of ice fed an almost infinite network of crystal clear lakes and rivers, and exposed vast stretches of granite rubble. Over time,

upon the chaotic jumble of boulders, ranging in size from basketballs to Volkswagens, grew a thick forest of hardy spruce trees whose roots drew life from the hardscrabble land, almost entirely devoid of topsoil. Beneath the trees grew an impossibly thick, vibrant green carpet of sphagnum moss, almost magical in appearance.

I found myself in this extraordinary setting at age 15 on a canoe trip with ten other adolescents, two leaders, and a Cree guide named Matthew Loon, a member of one of the largest of the First Nations of Canada. Our itinerary covered a good 300 miles of lake and river travel, punctuated by frequent “portages” – where we carried our canoes and gear around waterfalls and over low ridges to connect to new waterways. Our food was packed in wooden boxes called wannigans, and on the portages, we strapped the wannigans to our backs with a leather tumpline that ran across the forehead, a practice borrowed from Native Americans. We cooked over open fires and baked bread each night in reflector ovens. We drank water straight out of the rivers, fished for pike and walleye, and even in July, awoke in the morning to frost on the ground.

About 150 miles into the trip, we had left the Témiskamie River, and we were poling our way up a tortuous stretch of a narrow tributary. Picture the guy in the stern standing with a long pole, like a Venetian gondolier, pushing the canoe upstream against the current with the bowman keeping the canoe straight.

We were trying to reach Cold Water Lake, or Lac à Eau Froide in the local parlance. This was our halfway point, where we would be resupplied by float plane. Mile after mile, it was tough work and we made painstaking progress. And this is precisely where our mishap occurred. As we toiled up the river, our canoe hit a tricky patch of current that turned it sideways against a boulder. It instantly tilted upstream and began to take on water – in a matter of seconds, the once graceful vessel was a hopelessly splintered wreck. We clambered up onto the rock, thankfully having been dumped upstream – had we been pinned between the canoe and the rock, we’d have been crushed.

As I stood there assessing my situation, contemplating the story I could tell, our companions suddenly sprang to life. Two canoes sped off down the river after our all-important food and equipment, which they were able to recover, and two others came up alongside the rock to make sure we were okay and to survey the damage. All 13 of us tried for an hour to dislodge the canoe, but even straining on a heavy rope, we could not budge it – the river owned it and wasn’t letting go.

We shrugged at our misfortune and managed a laugh, then doubled up in our canoes, redistributed the gear, and went on our way.

In the intervening years, I have thought back frequently to that brief, momentarily dire setback, and more important, to that feeling of calm certainty that washed over me on the rock. It was in that moment that I found the first glimmer of adult confidence, that steady, centered feeling that if I remain focused and think clearly, if I work with the folks around

me, I can probably solve this. And that glimmer of confidence has served me through much of my adult life.

I believe that this kind of confidence is acquired, or rather earned, when our mettle is tested, when we are pushed out of a certain comfort zone and we are forced to find our footing. In the weeks leading up to the accident, as the members of our expedition worked together on a daily basis to paddle, portage, pole up rivers, pitch tents, split wood, cook, strike camp the following morning, and navigate over 150 miles of rugged terrain, I had learned a kind of self-sufficiency and independence that I had never experienced before. All of that culminated in that moment on the rock. The situation was not ideal, but I immediately knew that it could have been far worse, and that it was eminently solvable.

In retrospect, I don't recall looking for this moment in any kind of purposeful way – the opportunity found me. As we come together as a community to launch the school year, my message to you students is not to wait for serendipity, but to seek out challenges, challenges that will stretch you and help you find the beginnings of real confidence – not brash, cocksure bravado – but the kind of settled self-reliance that only comes with experience. And the opportunities to acquire experience will come in many forms if you are open to them.

We all read Walking to Listen this summer, by Andrew Forsthoefel. On the surface, he seems to focus on his effort to test himself through travel, the physical challenge of moving from place to place. But in the end, we see that he is spurred on by a feverish yearning to find kinship, to find trust and intimacy in our vast, soul-less, de-personalized society. He writes at the beginning,

“...we desperately longed to connect, to share in the beauty and the sorrow of this fleeting life together, offline, face to face, but we just didn't know how, and so we stayed strangers and pretended that wasn't strange.”

After some months on the road, he reflects on a chance meeting and how his ability to connect with others has changed entirely:

“We'd spent just a few hours together in the same warehouse and just a couple of moments in conversation, and yet there was this strange kind of love between us (...) I'd never experienced that kind of instantaneous connection with strangers before this walk. It made me wonder why not, and if it was even possible without doing something outlandish like walking across a continent.”

No doubt, his journey was necessary for him, and for some, we may indeed need to do something “outlandish” or unusual; we may need to depart from the beaten track.

It could be travel – we send students all over the world on extraordinary trips and academic semesters. Want to try deep-water shark tagging at the Island School? How about identifying new plant species in the Ecuadoran highlands with our Harkness Travel

Program? Or telemark skiing at 14,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains with High Mountain Institute? How about living with a family in Zaragoza, Spain, for a year with School Year Abroad? A recent graduate described to me her experience of spending the better part of a year in remote western China, and it changed her life. It was her time at Lawrenceville that made her receptive to that kind of experience.

And yet your opportunity might be far closer to home; it could be in the realm of athletics. I sat at dinner not long ago and listened to an alumnus tell of his experience on the football team – a good 60 years ago. He told it as if it had happened yesterday. Small in stature, he had pushed himself to make the team, and he was just proud to wear the jersey even if it meant riding the bench. In their final game, against Hill, they were down by 13 points at the half, and from the sidelines he was watching their undefeated season slip away.

As they went into the 3rd quarter, the coach turned to him and said, “Ray, you’re in.” “I sunk down on the bench,” he said. “I hadn’t seen the field a whole lot that season, and I couldn’t believe he’d risk the game by putting me in. But he calmly looked at me and said, ‘You got this, Ray, we need you in the game.’”

“On the next play,” he went on, “I caught an interception and ran for 15 yards. That was my one contribution, but it changed the momentum of the entire game. Hill never scored in the second half, and we went on to win.”

As he quietly told the story, he said, “That moment,” and then his throat tightened and he could hardly finish his sentence. His eyes glistened, and he said, “That moment, when that coach looked at me and believed in me, changed my life and changed my ability to believe in myself. I’ve never forgotten it.” Had he quit the team, he would never have had his moment.

Perhaps it will happen in the realm of academics. An alumnus from the early ’80’s once shared with me that as a young man at Lawrenceville, he often felt alone and out of place, but found refuge in literature and pushed himself with a quiet passion. That feeling of isolation was exacerbated in English class, which, as he recalled, was largely comprised of athletes who did not seem to share his literary interest. They had been reading Faulkner, and on what appeared to be a whim, the teacher suddenly asked a very obscure, nuanced question, and said that if anyone could offer a credible answer, he’d waive the final paper. “The teacher surveyed the boys around the table,” the alumnus recounted, “and then his eyes came to rest upon me. It was as if he knew that I knew, and he was giving me this moment to shine. I could have faltered, and I was nervous, but I took a chance and nailed the answer. I found my place at Lawrenceville at that moment.”

The opportunity to get out of your comfort zone and to test your mettle might be even more inward looking, it might involve confronting your assumptions or your blind spots. We all operate with various advantages and disadvantages, and our advantages, or privilege, can create blind spots.

My older brother is a psychologist, and he once shared with me an interesting example of how our view of a situation can change in an instant depending on how you draw the circle of privilege. He used to run group therapy sessions for men who batter women, court-ordered group therapy. You want to see your wife and children, you need to show up. He says there is no typical profile to describe men willing to abuse their wives, and he had executives in Brooks Brothers suits alongside construction workers in Dickies and steel-toed boots. One day, he was working to help a particular group understand the notion of “male privilege.”

“That’s complete bull,” one of the men retorted. “**I**’m here, I don’t see **her** here.”

Another agreed: “Yeah, judge believed **her**, not me. The whole goddam system is rigged in her favor.”

“She totally asked for it,” said still another, “and **no one** gets that.”

My brother pointed out that men were frequently physically stronger, got paid more, were advanced professionally, spoke over women with greater frequency – none of it made any sense to them; they just couldn’t see it.

Suddenly, my brother said, he made a slip of the tongue. He said, “white male privilege.” As soon as he had drawn the circle differently, it all changed. There were two African-American men in the group, and they both said simultaneously, “Oh yeah, I get that.” When a white member of the group tried to dismiss it, one of the black men replied, “**I grew up in West Virginia, let me tell you about white male privilege.**” And suddenly, after nearly 45 minutes, the group quieted down, and were able to hear something they couldn’t before.

We resist recognizing our privilege because it is not easy to take a truly candid look at our actions and attitudes. Some of this comes from the deeply human impulse to view ourselves as basically good. We want to believe that our own actions are justified, and people will go to great lengths to see themselves in a positive light, even if it means rationalizing assault and battery.

We hear echoes of this notion in the book, The Person You Mean to Be, by Dolly Chugh, read by the faculty and staff this summer. She writes about the blind spots that all well-meaning people naturally harbor. “Even people,” she says, “who are engaging in crimes or bullying that others view as immoral may still see themselves as moral.”

Her point is to encourage us to see ourselves more honestly and more complexly – to redraw the circles, just as my brother did with that group of men, so we can grow. This takes a bit of personal courage – we don’t like to dwell on the less-appealing aspects of ourselves, and we have to work to overcome our normal resistance.

Do we stand by and tolerate comments we sometimes hear because we think people deserve it, that they have it coming?

- “He’s such a punk, he’s always saying something, no wonder no one in his House hangs out with him.”
- Or, “She hooks up with everyone, people have trashed her on social media, and it is so funny.”

What if we gave people the benefit of the doubt? What if we assumed that everyone has their challenges, and what if we took the time to try to understand their difficulties?

That young man who is so isolated in his House, imagine you reach out and discover that he has a brother suffering from an opioid addiction and living on the street. And that girl you’re gossiping about? Let’s say she finally takes a risk and opens up to you to reveal that she suffers from paralyzing anxiety.

What if this were your challenge, your opportunity to grow here at Lawrenceville? Working to be aware of your own advantages and practicing compassion with others takes effort, but it is precisely what we need if we are to be the kind of community we aspire to be.

The real test of our mettle might lie in breaking down our personal defenses and taking an honest look deep inside ourselves. With this in mind, I’ll end with a final story about confronting my own hypocrisy.

In high school, I was a nice guy. I had plenty of friends. I did community service. I was a dorm prefect. In most respects, at least in my own mind, I tried to do the right thing. As I got to the spring of my senior year, I was into college, graduation was close at hand, and I was pretty damn satisfied with myself. One night in late May, I’m sitting in my room, and I hear a loud group of juniors and seniors on a rampage, running by my door. One of them shouts, “Murray, c’mon, we’re doing a drive-by on Reilly – it’ll be hilarious!” They had water balloons, some so swollen they were difficult to carry. Someone thrust two big ones into my hands, and I joined the group at the tail end as they went running up the stairwell.

The unsuspecting Reilly was a junior who lived on the third floor. To this day, I don’t know why he was targeted. Maybe because he seemed to have it all going on and someone wanted to bring him down a peg. Maybe he had said something and someone was settling a score. I never found out.

We sprinted down the third floor hall, the lead runner kicked open Reilly’s door as he passed, and then we unloaded the balloons, indiscriminately, into his room. I was the last to go, and as I lobbed my balloons, for a fraction of a second, I saw this wide-eyed look of disbelief on his face. I bolted past the door and started down the stairwell after the

group, their side-splitting howls of laughter echoing loudly. I got halfway down the first flight, and stopped dead in my tracks. **What had we just done? And why?**

I turned and walked back up, stopping in his doorway. He was still at his desk, head in his hands, staring down at half a dozen, carefully handwritten pages of an English paper – due the next day, now a sodden, illegible mess. His entire room in fact – desk, stereo, bed – was a sodden mess. His neighbor, a senior, was already in the room, consoling him. I am not sure what hurt him more, the obliteration of his English paper, or the sudden, ugly experience of being a random target, and the laughter that had accompanied it.

“Look what they did!” his friend said. “I know,” I stammered, “I actually was part of it. And I am really sorry.” They both remained quiet for a moment. Then his neighbor said, “Well at least you had the guts to come back to apologize.” I felt terrible, and not sure I deserved to be let off the hook. Then Reilly finally looked up, and through slightly clenched teeth said, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll get over it.” I could tell he didn’t want to discuss it. Over the course of the next week, I apologized a few more times, and he seemed to accept it, even to shrug it off, but I knew the incident hurt him, and I also knew how hard it was for any guy to admit sensitivity or inability to accept a prank.

I suspect he has long since gotten over it. To this day, however, I am still ashamed that I participated.

Looking back, I think I allowed myself to get carried away in the moment because, after all, I was a nice guy, I wasn’t a jerk – until I showed myself that I was quite capable of being one. Aside from wallowing in guilt, which does not accomplish a lot, the small shred of consolation I’ve salvaged from this was to try to be more self-aware, to try to see my blind spots more clearly, and to try to never again be a mindless participant in something. It was a good lesson, but it was at Reilly’s expense, and that still gnaws at me.

So I’ll end where I began: How will you test yourself during your time at Lawrenceville? How will you seek the kind of challenge that will stretch you, teach you about yourself, help you find your confidence? I recommend that you be more intentional than I was, **and**, keep in mind: this learning can come at a price. It isn’t free. The price of one of my lessons was a twinge of guilt that has never quite left me. Another was a canoe, and a fine canoe at that. Last I saw it, it was wrapped tight around that rock and we had to leave it behind. Our Cree guide Matthew Loon said it would be stuck fast until the spring melt came to carry it away. I’ll never know about that canoe, but my lessons have stayed with me, and for that, I am grateful.