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Baccalaureate Ceremony – Edith Memorial Chapel

Ordinary Stories: The Tragic and the Heroic in Everyday Lives

Reverend Morrow, Mr. Chander, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Roeckle, Mr. Goeman, members of the faculty, staff, parents, friends, and above all, members of the great class of 2018 –

Good Evening and welcome to Baccalaureate!

The human spirit is not content merely to persist, merely to get by. Deep in our core, there is a hunger; we seek purpose; we seek fulfillment. We look to be uplifted, to have our souls stirred, to be inspired to live as better versions of ourselves.

To be inspired, we might imagine we need stories of grand heroics, but sometimes the stuff that best feeds our souls is surprisingly close to home. Right there in simple, everyday tales of ordinary lives. Sometimes tragic, sometimes heroic, but simple, and often right close by.

Of course, we are often more easily drawn to epic narratives because they offer escape; escape, because they do not challenge us to look in the mirror or to examine our own motivations, our own difficult choices. We don't identify closely with the heroes and heroines who occupy these spaces – they are too removed, super-human, and don't fit into our humble context. We prefer to peer into their larger-than-life worlds with fascination and watch from a distance as they win against impossible odds:

- Odysseus helps engineer the fall of Troy, blinds the Cyclops Polyphemus, navigates past Scylla and Charybdis, and returns home to slay the suitors plaguing his faithful wife Penelope.
- Robin Hood, with his ragtag band of thieves, feeds the poor, takes down corrupt government in the form of the Sheriff of Nottingham, and order is restored to the kingdom.
- Frodo, of course, destroys the ring, Harry Potter defeats Voldemort, and Katniss Everdeen refuses to kill Peeta, escapes from the arena in a hovercraft, and leads the rebellion against President Snow.

Equally compelling to us, and equally removed from our day-to-day existence, we are drawn to tragic figures who lose spectacularly in perfect storms of fate and bad luck:

- Oedipus kills his father, marries his mother, then blinds himself and wanders the world as a beggar.

- Spartacus the slave takes on the entire Roman Army and is betrayed by pirates;
- Joan of Arc beats back the English, but she too is sold out;
- Macbeth misreads his fate, cannot curb his insatiable ambition, and ends up with his head on McDuff's pike.
- Bellatrix Lestrange goes down in flames and her evil rampage is thwarted by Molly Weasley;
- And even the Evil Queen in Snow White, who ultimately is **not** the fairest of them all, slips and falls to her death when being chased by the dwarfs.

Now, these are great stories. They endure for a reason and seem to touch something deep within our imagination, but it is not clear to me that Robin Hood inspires me to be a better person or that Macbeth causes me to examine more deeply my character flaws or worry that I might harbor deep cravings for power. I love the film Spartacus, but I don't imagine myself a Roman gladiator leading a slave revolt any time soon, except perhaps in fleeting moments of fantasy.

I believe we have far more to learn from the ordinary, more to learn from the lives of people who live at our level and who do things within the realm of the possible, for better or for worse.

And stories that recognize and convey the private tragedy or quiet heroism of ordinary people in more mundane circumstances have much to teach us, especially in times like these when we need to avoid escapism, when we so desperately need to return to the noble simplicity of being good, and worthy, and strong. If our leaders don't seem inclined to live by basic notions such as 'word of honor' and 'the truth' and 'respect,' we need to look elsewhere for our models.

In his novel, The Water of the Hills, set in rural Provence, French writer Marcel Pagnol portrays a remote mountain village beset with small-minded parochialism and common human frailty, which ultimately leads to tragedy.

César Soubeyran, the miserly patriarch of a prominent, local family, has never married and apparently has no heirs. Obsessed with his legacy and family bloodline, he falls prey to a covetous desire for land, which leads him to effectively engineer the agonizing death of an individual he later discovers to be his son.

At the outset of the novel, which was also adapted to the screen in two visually spectacular films, Jean de Florette and Manon of the Spring, a small farm becomes available when the owner passes away. In this traditional community, a family's standing and prestige are maintained through land ownership, and in the windswept, hardscrabble, rocky terrain, land is only of value if it has a reliable source of water. Desiring the farm to add to his local holdings, and knowing every inch of ground in the area, César clandestinely plugs up the spring, which is hidden on the property, deep in a dense, wooded thicket of rosemary, brambles, and shrubs.

Unexpectedly, Jean Cadoret, a distant relative of the deceased, shows up to take over the farm, and he is immediately branded an outsider by the clannish locals, who cling to the almost tribal allegiances of village life. Worse yet, he is slightly crippled with a curved spine, a 'hunchback' as the villagers refer to him disparagingly.

The outsider persists in trying to grow crops and raise rabbits, but carrying water by hand from a distant source halfway down the mountain is back-breaking work, and he soon kills his mule in the process.

“Quand on a commencé d'étrangler le chat, il faut le finir” (When you start to strangle a cat, you've got to finish it off), César cruelly observes as the family is slowly ruined and as Jean ultimately works himself to death.

César forces the young widow to sell the property, makes it appear that he stumbled upon the hidden source of water, and promptly begins farming the land, which yields tremendous bounty.

Years pass. Nearing the end of his life, through a chance meeting, César learns the wrenching truth. As a young man, just before heading off to serve in the foreign legion, he had spent the night with the young woman he loves, Florette. Pregnant, her lover gone off to war, she is desperate. She writes to César, hoping he'll promise to marry her upon his return. In the chaos of war, the letter never reaches him.

César returns from the service to find that Florette has married, moved to another village, and is raising a son. He remains single, and, misunderstanding the circumstance, allows an empty bitterness to take hold of him. In the end, he is left to reflect on a cruel irony: that his overweening ambition to manufacture a family legacy of land and wealth was the very thing that destroyed his only son.

It can be much harder to separate ourselves from tragedies that occur on such a human level. Such stories of ordinary lives can inspire us to resist our lesser instincts, to rise above the pettiness of humanity, to seek to measure up to something more noble.

In much the same way, positive models lift us up. Nelson Mandela is a giant of the 20th century, someone of tremendous stature, and yet, in many ways, his heroism, his greatness, derives from one of the simplest, most humble of gestures.

Mandela was a known activist and then freedom fighter whose imprisonment evoked outrage and indignation around the world, but what made him great was not merely his resistance to the horror of Apartheid in South Africa. It was not even his patience while suffering decades of confinement. **It was his reaction upon being released.** He moved from a principled opponent of injustice to one of the great figures of the 20th Century when he essentially said to his people, “If I can forgive, so can you.” He wrote, “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.”

I was equally moved and inspired by Anthony Ray Hinton this past fall. He may be less well-known than Mandela, and this simple man will likely never achieve such international recognition, but after 30 years in the maw of a racist penal system, his refusal to let bitterness and hate consume his soul, his determination to make a positive impact with the time he has left, grant him in my mind a similar stature. I am left wondering, in both cases, could I forgive? Could I avoid being consumed by anger? I do not know, but they both help me see what a truly great heart and soul look like, and they give me something to aspire to.

Let me draw this to a close with one more story and bring it even closer to home – it is to a tale of moral courage in the most mundane circumstance, which for me makes it all the more relevant to all of us.

A couple of years ago, we were preparing to award to an alumnus the highest honor that Lawrenceville can confer, the Aldo Leopold Medal. Over the course of his career, Sherry Snyder had been a serial entrepreneur and had found particular success in finding cures for isolated diseases, what some refer to as “orphan diseases,” which are maladies that afflict relatively small numbers of people and therefore typically are not profitable for large pharmaceuticals to invest in a cure. **Sherry found a way** – he saw a need and turned it into an opportunity, and he was especially motivated by the idea of helping people in otherwise hopeless circumstances.

He also practiced social entrepreneurship with the same mindset: see an opportunity and find a solution. As a young man working in New York City, he was struck one day to notice that the many tennis courts in the city park system stood idle during the day. Kids in the poorer neighborhoods had no equipment. A former Division I tennis player in college, he believed these children could acquire the same confidence and discipline that he had gained through athletics. With the help of his friend and tennis star Arthur Ashe, he hatched the idea of bringing tennis to inner-city youth.

He began by simply driving around city’s toughest neighborhoods handing out equipment. And it worked remarkably well. The program has grown to include academic support and mentorship as young people learn the game of tennis, and he estimates that over the years, the program has touched over 200 thousand young lives.

As we were preparing the award, we were reminded that while Sherry was an alumnus of Lawrenceville, he hadn’t graduated. He would have been in the class of 1954, and although his file did not indicate a reason, we could see that he had withdrawn towards the end of his 4th Form year in 1953. Given his lifetime of achievement, it occurred to us that while conferring the Leopold Medal on him, we also ought to award him a diploma. We did a bit of due diligence on the issue: nothing in his file indicated a problem, and he appeared to have withdrawn voluntarily and in good standing.

So, after awarding the Medal, with the Board of Trustees in attendance, we surprised him with a diploma. He grew quite emotional as I was handing it to him; he told us in a quavering voice that we had no idea how much this meant to him, and then he said, “There is a reason I did not graduate, and it is not a great story – I probably should not tell it.” The room went

silent, and I stood there wondering if I should maybe take the diploma back. He then broke the awkward silence, saying, "I guess maybe I should tell it," and so he did.

Apparently, he had been very successful at Lawrenceville, and in his words, felt he owed everything to the lessons he had learned here. He grew under the mentorship of his housemaster in Dickinson, Ted Keller, and during his 4th Form year, he was elected House President. "We had a couple of Jewish boys in our house that year," he said, "and what made me so mad was that a couple of the other guys made their lives miserable." They would run by their room insulting them and shouting anti-Semitic comments, and as House President, Sherry felt it was his job to put a stop to their behavior, but they refused to listen to him. His housemaster was sympathetic, but the administration seemed unwilling to react. Apparently, he surmised, these families gave money to the school, and this was not a boat they wanted to rock. "I loved the School," he explained, "But I could not stay in the School if they weren't going to react to this and do the right thing."

With his parents protesting, and even the two Jewish students assuring him that he had made his point, he left Lawrenceville towards the end of his 4th form year. "My father was so mad he almost did not pay for college," he said. "I've always wondered if I had made the right decision, **so this diploma means a lot to me.**" You could have heard a pin drop when he finished his story, and then the Board gave him a standing ovation.

When we were discussing it later, I told him I admired his moral courage. He quietly shrugged his shoulders and said, "I loved Lawrenceville, but I just couldn't stay." I was so struck by his strength of conviction at that young age, and his unwillingness to compromise his integrity.

And I was equally struck by what he said next: "I suppose those boys did not truly feel malice, they probably didn't understand. Fear sometimes brings these things out of us, and I am willing to bet at this point in their lives, they may even regret those things they said when they were much younger." It is a rare individual indeed who embodies such rock-solid character coupled with the natural, forgiving, generosity of spirit that he revealed in that last comment.

...Now, I still am drawn to epic stories of impossible heroics. I have seen the film Braveheart more times than I can count and love the fact that the Murray clan fought with William Wallace. I have reread The Lord of the Rings over and over, and my all-time favorite moment in a film is the final scene of Spartacus, where his soldiers sacrifice themselves rather than betray him to the Romans, each declaring, "I am Spartacus." I am moved every time I see it.

But there is a different power in simpler stories, stories in a way more suited to feed our spirits because they are relevant to our ordinary lives. I pity César Soubeyran, who, but for a lost letter, might have lived out his life with Florette. But life unfolds in mysterious ways, and the story reminds us that the tragedy was not the lost letter, it was his greed that prevented him from recognizing the second chance that fate offered him.

Mandela taught the world the meaning of moral courage through the simple act of forgiveness, thereby sparing his country a bloodbath. Anthony Ray Hinton may not be Nelson Mandela, but my admiration for him is equally profound, and the strength of character and spirit I see in him leaves me deeply humbled.

And Sherry Snyder? We all should try to be a bit more like Sherry Snyder. Right here, in this serene, protected place, there is tremendous opportunity each and every day for all of us to try to conjure up even just a bit of his courage, both in his defense of the vulnerable and in his willingness to see good in all people.

If we can do that here, I have faith that you can do it out in the world, and that thought inspires me and stirs my soul.

--Thank you very much.

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