



CONVOCATION at The Lawrenceville School
The opening of the 208th year

Sunday, September 3, 2017 at 5:30 p.m. in The Circle

MUSICAL PRELUDE
Chapel Bells
Thomas J. Goeman, School Organist

*ACADEMIC PROCESSION BY THE FACULTY

*INVOCATION
KAMEELAH RASHAD P'21, MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LIFE LEADER

"Mending Wall"
Address by Stephen S. Murray H'55 '65 '16 P'16 '21
Thirteenth Head Master of The Lawrenceville School

“Mending Wall”

Faculty colleagues, students, parents, alums, friends – welcome to the opening of the 208th year of the Lawrenceville School.

The world can be a dangerous place. Not everyone you meet is your friend. When my son Sam was 17, he was on a service project in Guatemala building homes in a remote, impoverished village. Walking back to his hotel late one evening alone, he was jumped from behind and badly beaten by a couple of guys who wanted his cell phone. They got it.

This of course could happen almost anywhere – at home or abroad – but not long after, I was corresponding with a security expert on international travel, and given the context of the incident, his comment was that Sam was lucky to be alive. Needless to say, a profoundly sobering thought. My son learned an important lesson that night about not being naïve, about not being overly trusting in certain circumstances.

Luckily, he learned an equally important lesson a few years later to help balance this. He was 20 and studying for the summer in Dakar, Senegal. He was living in a local neighborhood where a group of young men played soccer every evening on a deserted, dusty lot. It was a ragtag group of street kids – many of them did not own a pair of shoes, so when substituting from the sidelines, players entering had to borrow footwear from those leaving the field.

In spite of their lack of equipment, they played rather extraordinary soccer – the equivalent of the unbridled, improvisational artistry that one sees on inner-city, asphalt basketball courts in the US, or with pick-up hockey on frozen ponds in rural Canada – just pure love of the game, raw talent, and a bit of bravado thrown in.

Coming home from class, Sam would stop by and watch from the sidelines, hoping to join in. He was a white kid and a foreigner, and the local Senegalese couldn't imagine he could keep up. Finally one evening, they were short a player, and grudgingly, since Sam patiently showed up every

day, they finally invited him to play. He scored two goals in the first five minutes, and from then on, he was in. He played every evening with them.

Because Sam was living there, my wife and I took a sudden interest that summer when Senegal was in the news. We saw images on CNN of tires burning in the streets as protesters clashed with police. We skyped with my son and asked if he thought he needed to get out of there. He responded, “Oh, there’s nothing to worry about, those are not anti-western protests, those are anti-government, pro-democracy riots – the president just tried to pass a decree making his son automatically his heir apparent and the people aren’t having it. Besides, since I have been playing soccer, all the families in my neighborhood know me, so I’ll be fine.”

We swallowed hard as parents, but it turns out, his instincts were right, and he returned home safely at the end of the summer.

I have been reflecting on my son’s experience as I watch the resurgence in this country of a more nativist attitude, as I see us giving in to the urge to put up barriers, to keep the world at bay, to mistrust and to fear outsiders.

This nativist fear and mistrust recently came to a head, tragically, in Charlottesville, VA. While the flashpoint ostensibly was over whether or not to honor Confederate leaders in public spaces – **that wasn’t really the issue** – that kind of a question can and should be handled by municipal leaders and historians in thoughtful debate. And in fact, that had already occurred in Charlottesville, and the democratically elected officials had made a reasoned decision – it was no doubt contentious -- but they worked within the system to arrive at their decision.

What was on display in Charlottesville this past August was an angry mob that included white supremacist militias, the Ku Klux Klan, and neo-Nazis, many of them armed. **What was on display** was a deeply misguided and downright repugnant nostalgia:

- on the part of the KKK, for a racially segregated society,
- and for the Nazis -- a nostalgia for an ideology of anti-Semitism and racial superiority that was decisively defeated by allied forces, led by the United States in WWII.

Racial segregation, hierarchies that exclude, or worse, promote violence against religious groups, ethnic cleansing, are all forms of building walls to keep out the “other”, of excluding a group to create the illusion of superiority, of erecting mental barriers based on hate and mistrust.

Before we decide that the outside world is such a hostile place, that foreigners are to be feared and walls are to be built, I’d suggest spending some time in the receiving area of terminal 4 at Kennedy Airport. Terminal 4 is for international departures and arrivals, and I was there not long ago picking up my middle son James who was just returning from a semester in Vietnam. The terminal teems with nervous energy as people from all over the world cross paths. I couldn’t begin to identify the myriad languages, and I felt reminded of the extraordinary power and richness woven into the fabric of humanity in this country, the fabric of humanity that has long made this country great.

I frankly cannot fathom the talk about curtailing this energy, of allowing fear to drive a decision to limit the influx of drive and initiative; I cannot fathom this any more than I can fathom the hate, the intolerance, and the mental barriers on display in Charlottesville.

Now, let’s be honest. It is easier to be open and generous when in a place of privilege. There is a legitimate and understandable sense of mistrust and betrayal felt among certain sectors of this country whose economic futures have experienced a long, slow erosion, whose livelihoods were ravaged during the recent recession, and who have never benefited from the inexorable evolution of the global economy. Their plight is real. If these circumstances have fueled some of the mistrust of globalism and wariness of the outside world, I am not entirely surprised – we are not always at our best when we feel vulnerable, and opportunistic voices can easily exploit and exacerbate our sense of vulnerability. But this is not primarily about economic uncertainty.

I am struck that this is far more than just a question of building a wall or not, or imposing new restrictions on well-established immigration guidelines. This is more than the short-term political gain of creating a scapegoat in the form of the outsider; more than just pandering to

Americans' baser instincts and fears (Americans, who have virtually all descended from one-time immigrants themselves).

While historians can debate the legacy of Civil War statuary, and while economists determine whether or not closing off our borders, canceling visas, and tearing up trade agreements confers any benefit **at all** on the American workforce, I see a much bigger question about national identity.

Do the words etched at the base of the Statue of Liberty – ***“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”*** – still ring true? Even if we all accept necessary and practical restraints on immigration and responsible legal channels for entry into this country – do these words still describe an ideal to which we aspire, do these words describe our country at its best – as a beacon of hope, fairness, and compassion? Or, have we changed as a country? Do we now want to hunker down behind protective barricades, limiting our profile in the world, muting our moral leadership, dimming the torch that once invited strangers to our door?

There is a school of thought that says that our most valuable import is human capital and that our most valuable export is our legal system: the constitutional balance of government power, an independent judiciary, and the basic notion of the rule of law. And all of that – both the import of people and the export of a fundamental value that we as a nation hold -- is predicated on a basic trust in humanity and a basic belief that this country has enormous potential to be a force for good in the world, if we choose to act on that potential.

It may seem like an unlikely place to look for clarity and perhaps a bit of wisdom, but as I look for answers, my mind goes to a remote corner of New England and to a quintessentially American poet.

In his poem “Mending Wall,” first published in 1914, Robert Frost lightly, almost playfully, poses a question about the significance of a mundane pile of rocks. The poem unfolds with a New England farmer who gets together with a neighbor to rebuild the stone wall that runs along their property line. The winter frost heaves and the occasional careless hunter tend to knock

down bits of the wall, so a spring ritual is to repair the boundary. If you know about New England stone walls, they are laid without mortar, stone upon stone, and with a bit of care, they can last a very long time. They both create a divide between fields, and they also were a way to dispose of stones pulled from the meager soil – more stone than dirt in some areas. Repairing a wall is heavy work – ***“We wear our fingers rough,”*** complains the narrator.

“Good fences make good neighbors,” says the other farmer. With a bit of spring “mischief” running through him, the narrator then gently jibes his taciturn partner as they work:

***“Why do they make good Neighbors?
(...)
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.”***

His reticent neighbor replies simply, ***“Good fences make good neighbors.”***

Without resolving the question, Frost leaves us wondering if we should rely on the cautious wisdom of a flinty New Hampshire farmer who wants things walled in, and walled out, or if we should reject such a mindset and embrace a more open attitude.

He opens his poem with the line, ***“Something there is that does not love a wall...”*** – On the surface, Frost is talking about natural forces that gradually erode a wall that is not tended. But as we are drawn into the poem, he is suggesting that there may be more important implications here:

Do good fences indeed make good neighbors? Our natural, fearful impulses certainly may cause us to put up boundaries, and why shouldn’t we take steps to keep your cows out of my corn, so to speak. And in truth, there are times to be cautious and careful and prudent. As I say, the world can be a dangerous place.

But perhaps there are times to resist these impulses, to adopt a bit of faith, that just as natural forces tend to gently and inexorably pull down walls, we

need to have a bit of courage and trust as we face the world, and allow our physical and mental barriers to come down.

With this in mind, I reflect on our own growth and evolution as a school. We sometimes tell stories about Lawrenceville's long history of taking in and being enriched by students from beyond our borders. Now, while it is true that back in the early days of the 19th century, we had students from Cuba and from the Cherokee nation; and I am aware that one of our Heely Scholars wrote about two Japanese students who were here in the 1930's and 1940's; still, these and other examples were notable exceptions. For much of our history, we have not been a school that opened its doors widely or that embraced difference consistently. We lived safely behind a wall of sorts, neither inviting "outsiders" in nor venturing out into the world beyond our comfort zone.

We have changed and evolved. While continuing to embrace enduring beliefs about character, sportsmanship, and personal honor, we have broadened our scope, adapted to a more current context, and done a better job of living up to long-established national aspirations, aspirations that are explicit in the Declaration of Independence, that are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, and that are etched in the base of the Statue of Liberty. Even if imperfectly pursued over time, these national ideals remind us...

- that we are all created equal before the law;
- that all individuals deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and deserve the freedom to worship as they see fit;
- and that ultimately we are a nation of immigrants and our strengths derive from our willingness to open our doors to others.

Lawrenceville's greatest strides in opening up doors and living up to these aspirations have been in more recent times:

- notably with the admission of African-American students in 1964;
- and with the advent of coeducation in 1986;
- and in very recent years achieving a student body that now hovers around 50% of color, matching the national demographic of school-age children, and with students holding passports from 39 countries around the world.

In my thirty years as an educator, I have not been in a more richly diverse, welcoming environment. We have changed as a school, and we are better and stronger for it.

With this perspective, with our own ideals in mind, is it wise then, is it the right course of action, for our country to evolve in a different direction:

- To sink back behind walls?
- To mistrust by default?
- to give in to our vulnerabilities?

I turn to examples of people, who, even in times of stress and adversity, did not give in to their fears and anxieties.

Tom Brokaw—longtime journalist and author of The Greatest Generation, a book about the men and women who fought in WWII, wrote a recent essay on a friendship – a friendship that reached across racial lines, that literally reached across a barbed wire barrier – a wall, if you will. It is the story of the lifelong bond between Alan K. Simpson, former republican senator from Wyoming, and Japanese-American Norman Mineta, former secretary of transportation under George Bush, a member of Congress, and a liberal democrat.

The two met as boys when Simpson’s Boy Scout troop accepted an invitation to a scout jamboree behind the barbed wire of a Japanese internment camp in Wyoming. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt, giving in to a panic sweeping the nation, signed an executive order consigning 110,000 Japanese Americans, including Norman Mineta and his family, to hastily constructed concentration camps. The boys met behind the barbed wire enclosure, under the watchful eyes of armed guards in towers, and their friendship lasted a lifetime.

Brokaw goes on to describe that as Transportation Secretary, Norman Mineta was a key figure in ramping up airport security in the wake of the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center. In a meeting with the president, a congressman reminded Mr. Bush that “he had many Muslim constituents and that they were very worried about having their travel restricted or being rounded up and detained.” Much to Mineta’s relief,

President Bush responded, “We don’t want to have happen today what Norm went through in 1942.” In the midst of a national tragedy and the worst terrorist attack on American soil by an outside threat, we did not give in to our baser instincts.

At our opening faculty meeting I alluded to a recent article published in the Times by Thomas Friedman, who was writing from an airbase in the Persian Gulf the morning after Heather Heyer was killed by a white supremacist in Charlottesville.

He described watching our air force operating from the largest US base in the Middle East, fighting a group bent on imposing an exclusionary ideology on other people.

He notes that the Secretary of the Air Force is a woman. Her chief aide is a female African American lieutenant colonel. He observes that the soldiers conducting the operations are male and female, they are white, black, Asian, Indian, Latino, – and he talked about the **strength of pluralism, the strength of our pluralist** society. E Pluribus Unum – “out of many, one.” **Our differences are our strength, as he says, “both at home and abroad.”**

And then there are so many moments in Bryan Stephenson’s Just Mercy where we see people with the courage to give in to love, where they rise above their fear.

He describes the older woman who has taken it upon herself, in her words, to try to catch or deflect stones that others throw thoughtlessly at the vulnerable. She’s the one, you’ll recall, who suffered the wrenching tragedy of the murder of her grandson; only to find herself in turn pitying and mourning the murderers who were being sentenced. I do not know if I would be capable of such an act of empathy and forgiveness, but I am moved and inspired by her depth of soul, as was Bryan Stevenson. She did not give in to her fear. She did not seek to hunker down behind her grief – and no one would have blamed her if she had. She found inner strength and chose to pull down walls, to channel her energy in a positive manner.

And there is the courage of the character Mrs. Williams, who, in order to show her support, overcame her anxiety, walked through the metal detector, past the line of police deputies, and past the intimidating guard dog, and said loudly to the courtroom, “Attorney Stevenson, I’m here.” Indeed she was. In that brief phrase, as Stevenson writes, she was saying, “I may be old, I may be poor, I may be black, but I’m here. I’m here because I’ve got this vision of justice that compels me to be a witness. I’m here because I am supposed to be here. I’m here because you can’t keep me away.”

These stories remind us of the importance of respect, tolerance, and an open heart. These are American values, and, these are Lawrenceville values. Let me conclude with a final story that brings this a bit closer to home.

The Times of Trenton ran a story on Major Erhan Bedestani, Army Green Beret with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, a Turkish immigrant of Muslim faith, and Lawrenceville class of 1998. The story centers on the friendship between Major Bedestani and Gen. Zarawar Zahid, known as Colonel “Z”, an Afghan police commander who fought the Taliban side by side with Bedestani’s Special Forces group.

Zahid was killed a year ago by a bomb planted by the Taliban, and his death brought back memories of their friendship, including a rather remarkable journey to the US that Col. Z made to visit Major Bedestani a number of years ago. As I read the story, I reflected that perhaps Bedestani’s military career was a legacy of the discipline, work ethic, and loyalty that he experienced at Lawrenceville, but just as much, his unlikely friendship and deep sense of trust and kinship with Col. Z also may have had some roots in his Lawrenceville experience. After all, if we aim to live a life of high purpose, if we aim to use our gifts to “seek the best for all,” as our Mission says, then trust and kinship should be able to thrive in the most unlikely places, across what feel like natural divides, across boundaries, across walls, real or imagined.

Isn’t that what we aspire to as an institution dedicated to learning and understanding? Isn’t that the community we want to live in -- isn’t that our school at its best? And as we think about the country we want to live in,

indeed, the world we want to live in, don't we need to seek to tear down what divides us by understanding and respecting differences, not fearing them?

There is a place for fences in this world, because life is not risk free, and in some cases, clear boundaries may even help people to live side by side as good neighbors. But as the thoughtful farmer in the poem reminds us,

***“Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.”***

Thank you very much.

School Song

Triumphant Lawrence

Sung by the School community

Led by the Lawrentians and Robert E. Palmer, Director of Music

Triumphant Lawrence, raise a song

Unfurl thy banners wide.

A mighty host, at duty's call,

Glad thy commands abide.

Let warriors strong

The strife prolong

Let foes thy bastions try!

They're garrisoned with loyal hearts,

Forever and for aye!

*Benediction

Philip H. Jordan III '85, Religion and Philosophy Master,

Josiah Bunting III Distinguished Teaching Chair,

Religious Life Leader for Buddhism

*Recessional

Chapel Bells