THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

June 1, 2019

Baccalaureate Ceremony – Edith Memorial Chapel

Through a Whole New Lens

"He who looks out at the world from an open window never sees as many things as he who looks at a closed window. There is nothing deeper, more mysterious, more fruitful, more shadowy, or more dazzling than a window lit by a candle. What we can see in daylight is always less interesting than what happens behind a windowpane. Deep in that dark or luminous aperture, life lives, life dreams, life suffers."
--From Le Spleen de Paris by Charles Baudelaire (Emily Leithauser, Trans.)

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view … until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."
--From To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

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Reverend Morrow,
Rev. Jones,
Mr. Palmer,
Mr. Roeckle,
Mr. Goeman,
members of the faculty, staff, parents, friends,
and above all, members of the great class of 2019 –
Good evening and welcome to Baccalaureate!

Conventional wisdom suggests that, in a Darwinian "eat-or-be-eaten" landscape, a human being has the edge over, say, a stalk of wheat. Is there even a question there? From the French baguette to unleavened matzo, bread has long been a staple of the human diet. But, like many perceived truths, our assumptions can unravel when we subject them to scrutiny, when

we examine them … through a whole new lens. And I would contend that our willingness to scrutinize our most deep-seated beliefs and convictions, even if unsettling or threatening to us, is not only an essential trait of an educated mind, but in fact a fundamental responsibility that you graduates carry with you out into the world.

I'd like to make my point with a few examples – each rather different.

In his book, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari makes a number of unusual assertions.

Most narratives of human progress maintain that a crucial, life-easing triumph for humanity was the invention of agriculture. After all, what a relief to have a reliable source of food that did not have be painstakingly scrounged from the forest, or that did not require risking life and limb on a wooly mammoth hunt.

Harari invites us to unpack that assumption and to look at the situation in an entirely different way.

If you accept a competitive, survival-of-the-fittest view of nature, success would be measured by the proliferation and robust health of the species. Successful organisms dominate, and they often use other species to their advantage.

So, where do we humans fall? We invented the wheel, we split the atom, we put a man on the moon, and we produce monumental amounts of surplus food through technology – we are, without doubt, winning!

Harari asks us to pause there, and he proceeds to turn the usual scholarly premise about the agrarian revolution upside down.

He begins by examining the lives of humans before and after we learned to farm. Research shows that typical hunter-gatherers had a varied and rich diet – often consisting of fish, small game, wild grains, and seasonal fruits, and it is estimated that to sustain himself or herself, the work week of the typical hunter-gatherer, was anywhere from 20-40 hours.

Furthermore, a nomadic existence, based on the need to follow the food, meant that living quarters were relocated and rebuilt frequently, and were therefore relatively clean.

Following the transition to an agrarian society, the diets of the vast majority of humans narrowed dramatically – often limited to a basic gruel of the wheat, or rice, or corn that they grew, which then led to malnutrition; the work week of the average peasant expanded to 70-80 hours, and the sedentary villages that formed adjacent to permanent fields, were often quite wretched and dirty with poor waste and sewage systems.

Life became nasty, brutish, short, and I might add, dirty.

He then turns to wheat – or corn, or rice – choose your grain. Those plants began as small, scrawny wild grasses, sown at random by wind and other accidental forces.

With systematic agriculture, they have grown infinitely more robust over time (as a wild grain, the proto ear of corn was barely an inch long; a modern ear of corn scarcely bears any resemblance). Grains are cultivated worldwide in vast quantities, and exponentially outnumber humans.

In order to cultivate in such quantities, not only did humans work more, eat poorly, and live under squalid conditions, they also developed skeletal injuries from the back-breaking work of clearing fields and carrying water to irrigate, injuries that are noticeable to archaeologists doing studies of ancient human skeletal remains before and after the switch to agriculture.

Periods of surplus allowed populations to grow, but once they grew, humans became chained to the land for survival. This dependency meant that farmers were far more vulnerable to famine or drought.

The hunter-gatherer clan, when faced with shortages, simply migrated to a new region, carrying the few tools they needed. Large populations of farmers could not simply uproot with their heavy equipment and create new fields on short notice – these populations had no choice but to stay put and starve during lean times.

It would seem then that wheat has gained the upper hand. While we toil long hours in the service of these vital grains, while we break our backs to water them and pull out their weedy competitors, they grow fat and happy in the fertile fields that we provide for them. We might like to think that we humans are at the pinnacle of evolution, but if we take a strict Darwinian view of what it means to thrive as a species, **wheat, perhaps, has won**.

My second example of a change in perspective comes from a conversation I had with a parent of a student many years ago.

The parent, who happened to be a person of color, pulled me aside at an event, and explained with a note of concern in her voice that her son was reading To Kill a Mockingbird in class. She asked me if my faculty colleagues were really prepared or trained to teach the book.

I responded, blithely, "Absolutely! After all, we study the Jim Crow south in history class, we've had workshops on equity and inclusion, and we read books on bias and stereotype threat."

"In truth," I added, "To Kill a Mockingbird is simply one of the great books, the lessons are self-evident. Not to mention that it is one of my favorite books of all time."

"Don't get me wrong," she said, "I think the book is important and should be read, but it is a book that might be written to help certain people feel good, to feel secure – but perhaps not all people, perhaps not someone like my son."

This made me pause – I didn't quite follow her.

"With whom do you identify when you read the book?" she asked.

"Atticus Finch," I answered, and as I said it, it began to dawn on me: I come from a long line of attorneys – my uncle, my grandfather, my great grandfather. At the end of the day, I can peer into those tragic circumstances from a safe perch. I can feel well-intentioned sympathy for Tom Robinson… at some distance, but mostly I feel good about the world because I identify with the lawyer, who rises to the occasion as a hero. Life can be cruel and

tragic, but at least we have Atticus Finches in the world, and for me, that feels comforting.

She asked, "Do you know what it might be like for my 13 year-old son to read that book? As with countless other families like ours, what if he had a relative, say his great-grandfather, murdered by a lynch mob in Arkansas in the 1930s? He might not be peering into someone else's tragic world from a safe perch."

"To be honest," I said, "now that you ask it that way, I have no idea what it would be like for your son."

Her tone softened. "That's why I am asking the question."

Sometimes, the opportunity for new insight is created most effectively by distilling a complicated circumstance down to its essence.

In his Gettysburg Address, delivered on the Civil War battlefield with the bodies scarcely buried, Lincoln did far more than merely help our suffering nation look ahead to a time when the war would be over; he offered a path to reconciliation.

As historian Garry Wills has said, with a few deceptively simple turns of phrase:

"government <u>of the people</u>, <u>by the people</u>, <u>for the people</u>…",
…he transformed the persistent notion of a <u>plural</u> United States, into a <u>singular</u>.

The concept of a group of competing political entities, states, who had entered into a flawed, uneasy compromise in 1789, became, in the space of his <u>two-minute</u> speech "a <u>single</u> people dedicated to a proposition."[1] Through this new lens, Lincoln "called up a new nation out of the blood and trauma."[2]

[1] Wills, p. 147
[2] Wills, p. 175

Or consider the Canadian poet John Macrae, who dismantles the illusion of the glory of World War I with a single couplet of poetry: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow, Between the crosses, row on row…" An entire generation of young men, stubbornly squandered, and now buried, row, on row, on row.

Or the power of a single photograph to wake up an entire nation to the horror of the "conflict" in Vietnam: the image of a nine-year-old child, who has stripped off her burning clothing as she flees a napalm attack, pierced through the mind-numbing euphemism "collateral damage," and showed what was happening on the ground on an excruciatingly painful human level.

The significance of these examples lies not in whether the new view represents a more accurate perspective; it is rather the invitation to reassess what appears to be a given – and in doing so, we are frequently called upon to entertain competing truths, to wrestle with multiple correct answers.

Was Lincoln in fact "The Great Emancipator" as some have called him? Do his complicated views on race diminish what he accomplished?

As Harvard Law professor Randall Kennedy reminds us, moral ambiguity abounds when studying the lives of famous individuals:

- President Woodrow Wilson was a social progressive whose support for the suffrage movement helped ensure the passage of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote. And President Wilson re-segregated the U.S. Postal Service, and hosted a screening at the White House of the notorious film, Birth of a Nation, which portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as a force for good.

- Princeton native Paul Robeson, a world-class entertainer, Shakespearean actor, and social activist committed to helping the downtrodden world-wide, was unable to attend Princeton University because of his race. He also eulogized Josef Stalin upon his death in 1953, and remained a supporter even as news of genocidal atrocities and human rights abuses emerged from behind the Iron Curtain and were confirmed.

- Co-Founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth worked alongside Martin Luther King and was a pivotal, courageous leader in the Civil Rights Movement. And as a pastor, Rev. Shuttlesworth openly opposed efforts by gay rights activists to secure their own legal protections.

The point of a real education is to throw you into the ring to wrestle with ambiguity. And in fact this is what great schools must do if they are to prepare you to take on leadership roles and navigate a highly complex world. Our unconscious tendency is to categorize, to see superficial patterns of friend and foe, to mistrust the unfamiliar. And we must therefore learn to consciously resist the parochial, to seek to view situations from unfamiliar angles.

What have been your moments here at Lawrenceville? If we've done our job, you've had in fact many moments where we've pushed you to see through a whole new lens.

For some, it may have been the first time you sat at a Harkness table expecting **answers** from your teacher, only to find that it was **questions** that were expected, and it was up to you to pose those questions.

Perhaps you grew up believing that our fundamental civil liberties and the right to a fair trial by an impartial jury are essential protections that extend to everyone everywhere. Then you read Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson and heard Anthony Ray Hinton in School Meeting, and you realized that those powerful notions do not always apply equally, especially to the most vulnerable.

Or was it when a group of students spoke up with courage and conviction last spring, saying, "We are as much a part of this school as anyone; we hold Lawrenceville to a higher standard; and we can do better." As a school community, after 15 months of trying to understand the experiences of others on this campus, one of those courageous students has now been elected student body President for the coming year.

And we had a rather remarkable example of seeing something in a new light in an editorial that one of you wrote for The Lawrence this past fall:

"Growing up," she wrote, "I was never religious, and I knew very few people in my community … who practiced religion in any way.

Although Lawrenceville provided me with more exposure … by hosting religious services on campus … I [had] never witnessed true faith.

Then, this past Friday, I attended the Jewish Student Organization's (JSO) memorial Shabbat for the victims of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting. The JSO members lit candles, one by one, to honor each of the victims; they said prayers and sang Hebrew songs of mourning and healing.

Throughout the service, the bond between the members of the JSO, born through their shared faith, hovered in the air, tangible and hopeful. Sharing in both their heartfelt mourning for those lost and the support they showed one another, I was moved to tears."[3]

Or was it Lt. Col. Robert Darling, who gave a whole new, gripping, eyewitness account of leadership inside the President's bunker during the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center? His moment-by-moment narrative inside the Emergency Operations Center gave us a virtual seat at the table alongside Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice as Vice President Cheney made life-and-death decisions based on the best information he had at the time.

Perhaps it was seeing so many of you flock to hear the scholar Dr. Robert George, not because you agreed or disagreed with him, but because his views run counter to the orthodoxy that often permeates academia, and you were seeking a new perspective.

So as I say, if we've done our job, we've cultivated in you a propensity to question assumptions. You learned around the Harkness table that a differing opinion is not a provocation but an invitation to listen. And to learn.

There may be little at stake in the rather academic question of whether wheat has gained the upper hand in evolutionary terms. But there are in fact real and urgent issues you will confront, and currently as a society, we seem incapable of engaging in substantive, informed debate. We treat them as

[3] The Lawrence, Nov. 9, 2018

binary questions, you're for or against, and any attempt at civil discourse devolves immediately into invective:

- The right to bear arms … and gun control in the wake of school shootings;
- Sexual assault … and the rights of the accused;
- Immigration … and effective border control;
- Women's reproductive rights … and the Pro-Life Movement;
- The causes of climate change;

And that's just the beginning of the issues needing reasonable attention from reasonable individuals who are willing to explore both sides of complicated questions.

And of course, taking a narrow, one-dimensional view of any issue fundamentally limits our ability to see what may be a much richer, more complete reality. As Mohammed Ali said, "Looking at life from a different perspective makes you realize that it's not the deer that is crossing the road, … rather it's the road that is crossing the forest."

Tomorrow you will pass over a threshold and depart. As you make your way beyond Lawrenceville, remember that there can by multiple truths; hold tight to your embrace of ambiguity, and resist the simplistic, the one-sided.

Having been here, you've seen disagreement work, perhaps imperfectly at times, but you understand that respectful dialogue is actually possible, … and you leave here with a degree of faith that if, from time to time, we are willing to peer through a whole new lens, we indeed can continue to make the world a better place.

Thank you very much.

Stephen S. Murray H'54 '55 '65 '16 P'16 '21
The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head Master