



THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

Baccalaureate Address

May 2020

Reverend Morrow,
Rev. Jones,
Mr. Palmer,
Mr. Goeman,
members of the faculty, staff, parents, friends,
and above all, members of the great class of 2020 –
Welcome to Baccalaureate!

On Love

John Prine, who died of Coronavirus a couple of months ago, was a raspy-voiced singer/songwriter whose cynical, barbed lyrics conjured late-night loneliness, unsatisfied yearning, and the private tragedies of ordinary people.

*"If dreams were lightning, thunder was desire,
This old house would have burnt down a long time ago."*

He sang of characters like Sam Stone, an opioid-addicted combat veteran who is described through the eyes of his child:

"There's a hole in daddy's arm, where all the money goes, Jesus Christ died for nothin' I suppose."

And yet, in the most unlikely context, with a sympathetic turn of phrase, he betrays a profound affection for humanity, especially in our most broken down, imperfect state. In the middle of an aching sad ballad of life's gritty disappointments, comes a hopeful line, like a yellow dandelion growing through a crack in a dirty sidewalk, that reminds us that even then, there is simple beauty in our lives, and there can be love:

*"But dreaming just comes natural
Like the first breath from a baby,
Like sunshine feeding daisies,
Like the love hidden deep in your heart."*

John Prine joins the ranks of countless theologians, philosophers, atheist existentialists, playwrights, even romantic poets, who have wrestled with the many gnawing uncertainties of the human condition:

- What is the purpose of our time on earth, and is there a higher power guiding us as we seek to make something of our lives?
- If finding our way is so full of challenge and adversity, why do we persist, what's the point of it all?

Prine, and others, are asking us, could the point of it all be love?

My father was a gentle, kind soul, and he believed that love was very much the point of it all, and in fact, as he considered some of these great, unanswerable questions that confound us, it was his belief that God is love. And as I have reflected on his simple truth, I have found great comfort there.

Now some believe, as they ponder the Divine, in a kind of human exceptionalism, that human beings follow a chosen, divine path and have special favor in the order of things. Perhaps that is so.

For me, however, the natural world is too wondrous, there are too many extraordinary examples of brilliant ingenuity and cunning survival in nature to put humanity in a wholly different category.

- Think of an orb spider's ability to weave a web,
- or an arctic tern's epic migration from breeding grounds in Greenland to the edges of the Antarctic continent;
- or the ability of timber wolves to communicate and cooperate while hunting an 800 pound elk.

And yet I do believe, as my father did, that humans possess a special capacity to love. To love deeply, to love passionately, to love platonically, to love desperately, to love in so many different ways. This, I believe, **is** distinctly human.

And our ability to love carries with it great complexity. The world at times seems composed of forces and counterforces – **good and evil, heaven and hell, life and death**, – we experience and conceive of one in relation to its opposite, like yin and yang. Precisely because we have the capacity to love something or someone profoundly, we also experience grief and loss in powerful ways because we can lose what we treasure.

17th century French poet, François de Malherbe, wrote a poem to console a grieving friend upon the untimely death of his young daughter – and this particular couplet is considered among the most beautiful lines in all of French literature:

*Mais elle était du monde, où les plus belles choses
Ont le pire destin;
Et rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
L'espace d'un matin.*

(my rough translation)

*But she was of a world where the most beautiful things
Meet the saddest end;
And as a rose she lived as roses do,
The mere span of a morning.*

We find throughout philosophy, literature, and art endless depictions of love, tributes to love, quandaries inspired by love. Plato's dialogues on the nature of love in "The Symposium" explore physical attraction and procreation, platonic affection, and various other idealized forms of human connection: "It is love who empties us of the spirit of estrangement and fills us with the spirit of kinship."

The 18th century French novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Dangerous Liaisons, is constructed entirely of written correspondence – a paradox for a love story, of course, because for there to be a reason to write letters, there must be physical separation, there must be distance. The love letter itself becomes the proxy for physical contact between two yearning characters: the young ingenue Cécile brings the missive from her dashing music teacher into bed with her: "It is perhaps wrong to treat a letter in this way, but I couldn't help myself," she writes to her confidant.

As the novel develops, so does the emotional complexity depicted. We find profound contradictions within numerous characters, characters who experiences hopeless, aching passion on the one hand, and then display a callous willingness to violate utter innocence on the other – **all in the name of love.**

While some write of the perils of love, others caution against not loving. Eleanor Roosevelt, as a very public figure, worked to maintain some privacy in her own loves and passions. The intense scrutiny of and speculation about her private life is less important to me than the personal wisdom she shared with the world through her experience of the need for intimacy:

"It takes courage to love, but pain through love is the purifying fire which those who love generously know. We all know people who are so much afraid of pain that they shut themselves up like clams in a shell and, giving out nothing, receive nothing and therefore shrink until life is a mere living death."

We hear echoes of this fearful hesitation, this reluctance to live our lives fully, in Maya Angelou's "Love's Exquisite Freedom":

*We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.*

We love at great risk, she tells us, but without taking that risk, have we truly lived?

Love is about taking a chance, about being truly exposed, and about risking loss. One of the great modern soliloquies on love is delivered by Robin Williams' character, Sean Maguire, in Good Will Hunting. Street-tough, book-smart, and abused, young Will Hunting has learned to protect himself from risk because he has experienced so much pain and loss. Sean asks him to trust, and to risk being hurt again:

*And if I asked
you about love, I'd get a sonnet, but
you've never looked at a woman and been
truly vulnerable. Known that someone
could kill you with a look. That someone
could rescue you from grief. That God
had put an angel on Earth just for you.
And you wouldn't know how it felt to be
her angel. To have the love be there for
her forever. Through anything, through
cancer. You wouldn't know about sleeping
sitting up in a hospital room for two
months holding her hand and not leaving
because the doctors could see in your
eyes that the term "visiting hours"
didn't apply to you. And you wouldn't
know about real loss, because that only
occurs when you lose something you love
more than yourself, and you've never
dared to love anything that much.*

Will, of course, ends up trusting, ends up taking a chance, and goes "to see about a girl."

In his sobering epic poem, "Strength of Heart," Irish poet Peter Fallon conjures images of history's forgotten wars, of disease and pestilence. Regarding the Native American experience, he writes of endless trust and betrayal, of shedding blood, "and in return," he writes, they "received the gift of government, of plagues and poxes;" " Could there be an end to weeping?" he asks.

He writes of the toll of hate and terrorism and a passenger plane bearing a former student, brought down over Lockerbie, Scotland: and still, he comes back to our capacity to love as a source of hope. At the conclusion, he enjoins us to **"Be worthy of this life. And, Love the world."**

Love the world.

Let me bring this back to all of you, the graduating class of 2020. There has never been a harder time to "love the world" – not in my lifetime. Chris Eisgruber, President of Princeton, says of the current pandemic, "this will number among American history's greatest upheavals"

Indeed, it is an imperfect world, full of turns and deceptions, disappointment and loss. You have lost your senior spring and your graduation – at least for now. You may have lost loved ones in recent months. We will certainly experience more of this before we come out the other side, but hear me on this -- love makes this messy life worth living, worth persisting.

The great essayist, E.B. White, whom you may know as the author of Charlotte's Web, once received a letter from an individual expressing profound disappointment with the state of the world. E.B. White's simple, spare response is one of the great expressions of faith and hope, of deep affection for humanity, of love for the one world that we have. And I have to thank Ms. O'Malley for this beautiful passage:

Dear Mr. Nadeau:

As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness.

Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society — things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. It is quite obvious that the human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet. But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Man's curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.

Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.

*Sincerely,
E. B. White*

As I say, our current troubles are far from over, but there are positive glimmers on the horizon, and you have love. The love of friends, the love of family, the love of your School, the love that awaits you out in the world. So there is always reason to hope, and therefore, like E.B. White, we must all remember to get up and wind the clock, and we will find a way out of this.

Now, I haven't spoken here about my own love – I met her when I was 16, we've been married for almost 32 years, and we've had 5 children together. I've been lucky every moment I've been able to spend with her. Our children laugh at us because we sometimes have these half spoken conversations where we don't finish our sentences, and we just nod in tacit agreement, words unspoken. I could say more, but I'm not inclined to. As Tom Hanks, in the role of Capt. Miller in [Saving Private Ryan](#), says to his men when they want to know more about his private life, the love that waits for him back home, he responds, **"No, that one I save just for me."**

Allow me to finish where I began, with John Prine:

*"Oh the glory of true love
Is a wild and precious thing
It don't grow on old magnolias
Or only blossom in the spring
No the glory of true love
Is it will last your whole life through
Never will go out of fashion
Always will look good on you"*

To the class of 2020, **Seek love in this world - you will find it - and once found, you will have it always.**

Thank you very much.