



## Installation Remarks by Head Master Stephen S. Murray H'55 '65 P'16

Friday, October 9, 2015

Good afternoon. Mr. Carter and members of the Board of Trustees, esteemed colleagues, students, alumni, parents, my family, and many, many dear friends: it is my pleasure to welcome all of you.

Over the course of my career, I have attended and sometimes presided over a variety of auspicious events, some of which have even been slightly intimidating, but never in my life have I spoken before a gathering that included:

- A number of my former bosses;
- Numerous mentors from over 30 years in education;
- 3 distinguished predecessors who have held the position of Head Master of Lawrenceville;
- One of the finest faculties ... in the world;
- One of the finest students bodies ... in the world;
- Members of my current Board who are anxiously assessing their long-shot bet on some guy from Cleveland;
- A former student and former water polo captain;
- My father – Lawrenceville Honorary '47, my big brother, and my little sister;
- My uncle Tim Cutting -- Lawrenceville '47
- My college roommate;
- My lovely wife, to whom I owe everything, and four of my five children;
- **And, my 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher from 41 years ago at the George Washington School in Morristown, NJ.**

I mean, God bless the teacher who not only puts up with 6<sup>th</sup> graders, but who encourages them, inspires them, and shows them she has eternal faith in them – no matter how we act at age 11. **In all seriousness, it is an honor of a lifetime, and I am truly grateful to all of you for being here.**

If you will bear with me, I thought I would share a few reflections on the importance of optimism.

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“Bellwether” comes from Middle English – a “wether” was the word for a male sheep, a ram. In order to find where the flock was headed in a fog or at night, the shepherd would hang a bell around the neck of the dominant ram, who was therefore

the “bellwether.” The term when used today often refers to ‘something that leads or indicates trends’ especially under uncertain conditions.

Our poets, philosophers, and artists often serve as our bellwethers – perceiving trends or realities that are not yet evident to us – blinded as we are by the fog of the moment, blinded as we are at times by a singular faith in science and technology, such that we are unable to see the signs in front of us, such that we listen only with our heads and forget to listen with our hearts.

We sometimes look back at the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a time of naive confidence, a time when our burgeoning faith in technology caused us to ignore certain bellwethers easily now seen in hindsight: Mankind was harnessing steam power; tying the world together with engineering feats such as transcontinental railroads and massive ocean liners; creating great urban centers of manufacturing; racking up medical advances ranging from the typhoid vaccine to antiseptic surgery; and exploring the four corners of the world.

It seemed that nothing was beyond the reach of human ingenuity; there was no problem that could not be solved if humans put their mind to it. Forward, positive progress was inevitable.

The irony of course was that the very accomplishments of which we were so proud, exacerbated and greatly amplified the wars and tragedies that came with the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Urbanization created high concentrations of men for conscription into armies for World War I; highly mobilized transit allowed warring countries to rapidly move waves of men to the front so battles lasted not for days but weeks and months; and of course our vaunted manufacturing centers that were set up to produce items like cotton gins or steam locomotives, which improve our lives, were also able to produce vast quantities of armaments that rained down destruction.

### **So much for human ingenuity.**

And then there was the Spanish Flu that followed the First World War. Huge concentrations of troops after the war led to widespread contagion, and then rapid transport home on modern trains and ships allowed infected soldiers to spread the flu in unprecedented ways.

Before the flu pandemic from 1918-1920 had run its course, 28% of the world was infected; and the death toll easily surpassed those killed in World War I.

And then of course Europe had hardly caught its breath before World War II broke out, where significantly improved weaponry, industrial capacity, and advanced medical knowledge were used to devastating military and genocidal effect.

The list of 20<sup>th</sup> Century catastrophes is long, and their scale and duration frequently were exacerbated by tools and technology originally intended for good.

Looking back to that naïve period of 19<sup>th</sup> century optimism and progress, **most didn't see what was coming**. Still, as I mentioned, our poets and artists are often our bellwethers...and there were some who seemed to indicate that trouble was on the horizon.

In his poem, "Dover Beach," published in 1867, Matthew Arnold seems to predict the chaos and confusion that awaited Europe later that century and into the next; his verses run counter to the over-weaning confidence and positivist mind-set of the time:

*"And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night."*

19<sup>th</sup> century French novelist Gustave Flaubert mocked our faith in inevitable human progress in his later writings, and Georges Seurat, with his 1884 painting "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte," seemed to suggest that society was becoming atomized and depersonalized by mechanized modernity.

And then, writing in the aftermath of the First World War, amid the confusion presaged by Matthew Arnold, William Butler Yeats evokes a profound loss of innocence and a world coming apart at the seams in his poem, "The Second Coming." He too seems to foreshadow the string of man-made tragedies that would follow World War I as the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded:

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity."*

“The best lack all conviction” – **well perhaps, but perhaps not.**

In spite of the ignorance and naiveté that lead to grim patterns in human history, it is not clear at all to me that the “best lack all conviction.” There are always opportunities for hope and change – opportunities that sometimes come directly from the saddest chapters.

The human spirit is at its core, I believe, tremendously optimistic and hopeful, and even if the poets seek to remind us of what may go awry, there is ample evidence that we are not consigned or condemned to tragic outcomes, even if at times we are forced to endure them.

When I was a younger teacher at Deerfield, I used to lead student trips to France with my college roommate, Todd, who, as I mentioned, is here today.

We developed a rather interesting program, staying almost entirely in rural, remote parts of France. The first half of the trip we spent with families in a hardscrabble village in southern, Champagne – quite close to the battlefields of World War I.

The second part was just a bit further south in Burgundy, where we stayed in an old, partially restored 16<sup>th</sup> century chateau – a damp, old stone structure. It had been abandoned for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and left to the elements; parts of it had been dismantled by local farmers over the years as they scavenged for stone. American soldiers leaving battlefields of World War I bivouacked there briefly, and their graffiti was still discernible on window sills in the attic.

I recall a date next to the name of a young corporal from St. Louis, Missouri: December 18, 1918, just weeks after the guns on those terrible European battlefields finally went silent. The young writer scratching his name on the sill was far from home, it was Christmas, and as he sheltered in the old ruined, hulk of the chateau, I had to wonder what he had seen, what he had endured, what images haunted his sleep.

Our lodging, though once grand, was simple; even with the walls and roof restored and a rustic kitchen functional; our staying there was little better than camping, and great fun for the students. The old stone structure was so cold and damp that even on hot June evenings, we made regular, blazing fires in the six foot fireplace to take away the chill of the downstairs.

Because vestiges of World War I, in so many ways, surrounded us in these Eastern French provinces, we dug into the historical context on the trip. But I found that touring battlefields evoked little of that tragic war. The horrific trenched battle zones -- scarred, barren moonscapes -- were now pleasant, bucolic settings, park-like and serene.

So we tried a different approach with our students to help them gain a perspective on war. Each time we entered a village in our travels, I asked them to locate in the town square the inevitable memorial to those who had lost their lives in “La Grande Guerre” as the French say. Every village had one, usually a small, chipped, marble plaque – invariably a few sad geraniums growing beside it.

They were to count the number of villagers killed in the war, and then determine the ratio to the overall village population. The first time they tried this simple exercise, they were shocked. 36 men died in a village of 135. 55 lost in a small town of 250; 14 lost in small rural hamlet of 65 people. The ages ranged from teenagers to men well into their 50s. An entire swath of the population simply gone.

The old black-and-white photos of our history books allow us to distance ourselves, remove ourselves in space and time from the horror. Somehow, standing in a forlorn village common, not far from the actual battlefields, the cold simple numbers seemed to have an immediate, wrenching, and powerful effect.

And still, it can take a bellwether, a poet, to help us to see even more clearly. Or perhaps, **to see differently.**

On one particular evening on a trip many years ago, we had returned to the old chateau after a series of visits to neighboring villages. We had planned to give them some free time, but also wanted to spark some reflection on their part. My roommate had an especially good idea. “Your ticket to dinner this evening,” he said, “is a poem in French that is somehow inspired by something you did or saw today.” They were immediately intrigued, and they went off in twos and threes to work on their poems.

Dinner was brought in by a local farmer’s wife who cooked traditional, French country cuisine, and we ate in front of a roaring fire. At the conclusion of the meal, we went around the table, and the students read their poems – the quality and tone varied, some facetious, some sentimental, a few bordering on the serious.

Then it was Valerie’s turn. Valerie was a Nigerian girl from New York City.

Her poem was written in the first person, and as she read slowly and clearly, she situated her narrator alone in front of a hearth late at night, staring at the dying embers. The room was dark and bleak and empty, and she continued to stare into the fire. It slowly emerged that the narrator was an aging French peasant woman, alone in her small hovel. In the poem, she is recalling the loss of her son, decades earlier, in some battle whose name she cannot recall in a war she could not understand. She has lived many, many such sad lonely evenings, and even at this advanced age, she relives the pain and loss quite vividly each day.

We were all deeply struck by the sad beauty of her poem, but perhaps even more so, by her ability, through empathy and insight, to travel across generations and cultures – this deeply perceptive, Nigerian-American girl could not have been further in space and time

from a lonely French peasant woman living out her life of regret and loss – and yet Valerie was able to bridge the gap, to imagine the pain, and express it beautifully in words.

I find Valerie’s poem, Valerie’s empathy, a source of hope, a source of optimism. Not the overweening, blind confidence that all problems can be solved by human ingenuity. It is a more grounded, realistic optimism that with effort, we can bridge the issues that divide us, that we can understand the pain of others.

Optimism and hope, of course, are fragile and can contain the seeds of bitterness and disappointment if we naively believe that we can avoid all loss and tragedy. Life is unpredictable, life is messy. Optimism for me is a bit like the image conjured by Henri Bergson at the end of his essay “On Laughter.” When seized too hastily or greedily, laughter can be reduced to a bitter salty taste. The child skipping down the beach encounters wind-blown foam torn off the tops of waves. Like laughter, the foam sparkles in the sun and is enormously attractive. But grasp a handful to see it up close, to taste it, to own it, and one finds in one’s hand nothing but a few drops of water, bitter and salty to the taste, impossible to grasp.

When we resort to optimism naively, thoughtlessly, hastily, like a child grasping a handful of sea spray, it will slip through our fingers and disappoint us.

The optimism and hope that endures, that serves us well, must be groomed in thoughtful ways in a purposeful setting; it does not ward off tragedy, but helps us to understand it, to avoid, perhaps, repeating it.

**We are here in a school, one of the very great schools**, and I see this as our purpose. To equip our young people to go off into the world with a clear-eyed sense of hope, and the tools of empathy and compassion and understanding required in order to make it a better place.

Lawrenceville, in all its idyllic beauty, does not exist as a bulwark against disappointment, a source of false hope that the world can be a utopia, that every problem can be solved. Lawrenceville is preserved as a place of enduring beauty and strength because what we do here is important, it is important for the world. We practice a certain hope and optimism each and every day in our approach to educating and preparing our students to launch, to go out and make a difference.

We have here some of the very best teachers anywhere, teachers who work tirelessly to develop some of the very brightest, most promising hearts and minds that can be gathered in one place.

And this is practiced on a regular basis around a table, a simple, wooden oval. Some of you will recall the reference to the Harkness table in my convocation speech:

*“The physical presence of the table, the carefully crafted, venerable piece of furniture, burnished by countless hands and elbows, ... , is important. The smooth, unbroken plane of the wooden surface connects those around the perimeter and helps create that democracy of voices that is so critically important.”*

And what starts around that table extends beyond into the school. Students, your teachers begin with you students in the Second Form, instilling in you the discipline of listening; not simply taking note of a comment from a peer, but hearing another person and seeking to fully grasp their intent, acknowledging their thought before the discussion moves on.

The dynamic around the table further instills in you the discipline of thinking deeply, of examining your own assumptions in order to defend your position, or concede a point when a comment from a peer thoughtfully reveals a perspective you hadn't considered carefully enough. You learn to think, to listen, to engage, to be in the moment.

This develops over time into habits of mind, habits of empathy and understanding, habits of respect and openness to different viewpoints; merely disagreeing with someone does not make him or her your intellectual enemy – instead you see an opportunity to learn something new you hadn't considered before. This thinking extends more broadly across the school into the Houses, onto the playing fields. It informs how we treat each other, how we respect each other, how we seek to understand each other.

And as I listen to the deep-seated beliefs expressed by members of this faculty on the importance of the work that occurs around that wooden table, their words betray a certain humility, and at the same time, a deep love, bordering on awe.

**Kris Schulte** speaks beautifully about her colleagues: *“It is wonderful to work here with teaching colleagues so dedicated to growth and willing to try new methods, make mistakes and try once again. I am continually impressed with my colleagues' dedication to doing what will best help their students learn-- and working incredibly long hours in the process -- even while counseling, coaching and doing all the other duties of a boarding school teacher! Teaching is such an optimistic profession, and I see that attitude each day in my work with my colleagues. It is inspiring.”*

Without a trace of his characteristic irreverence, **Regan Kerney** says, *“I have no choice but to know all my charges – where they live, what they play, whom they admire, and when they are having a bad day. At a Harkness table, every seat in the room is up close and personal, including mine. It is a place where, to paraphrase Admiral Chester Nimitz, uncommon education is a common virtue, and one thing we learn is a lot about each other. This is essentially what*

*teaching boils down to. If this is work, then I want to be sentenced to hard labor.”*

**Katie O’Malley** sees teaching as feeding their souls, and she writes, *“There are few experiences more enjoyable than a good discussion around a dinner table, and the classroom Harkness table provides a similar kind of feast. Lawrenceville students are hungry for the stimulation and sense of significance they get from engaging in thoughtful conversation, and there is a delicious earnestness in the way they listen to their peers, present their ideas, and ask challenging questions of the texts. As their teacher, I get my fair share of refreshment just sitting at the table.*

Like one used to coaxing a sprout to grow on its own, **Jake Morrow** writes modestly: *“...students will learn more deeply, if they solve a problem for themselves [...]. That [...] principle can be a little humbling for a teacher. It makes me a resource for students to draw on, and not the font of all Latin knowledge. But it also allows me to observe more and talk less, and it gives the students an opportunity to learn the material more thoroughly and become a lot more confident in their own abilities. And that is – as I understand it – what Harkness teaching is all about.”*

And **Blake Eldridge** connects Harkness teaching more broadly and more deeply to the culture of the School: *“The dynamism, regularity, and intimacy of the Harkness table are also characteristic of House life, and they once again create the perfect environment for learning.*

*In the House, the virtues of respect, compassion, open mindedness, and generosity are reinforced and find practical expression. [...] In time, those [...] become the [...] habits that draw others together and animate a House – and the result is an enduring solidarity.”*

So Lawrenceville has a long legacy of preparing young people with a certain optimism – be bold and assertive, and along with that, have the confidence to examine assumptions, to listen with empathy, to take thoughtful initiative, to approach the world with a patient understanding that it is not a perfect place.

And where are these students, these graduates whose hearts and souls have been so painstakingly developed and nurtured in this environment, so well prepared to take on the challenges they encounter?

- Kim Dacres – Class of 2004 – is a principal at the Harlem Prep Middle School, one of the Democracy Prep Public Schools in New York.
- Bobby Codjoe – Class of 2006 – is a trial attorney for the Legal Aid Society in the Brooklyn, NY office.
- Christina Williams – Class of 1994 – works around the world with Doctors Without Borders, most recently in Papua, New Guinea and the South Sudan.



- Oliver Sissman – Class of 1996 – is a Sergeant with the New Jersey State Police.
- Shahid Aziz – Class of 1988 – is a surgeon who spends time in Bangladesh doing cleft lip and cleft palate repair.
- Juliette Rousselot – Class of 2004 – a self-described human rights consultant and freelance journalist – has worked at Amnesty International, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, and has written and published widely on human rights issues around the world.
- A.J. Ernst – Class of 2005– Dean of Students at a charter school in North Philadelphia
- Stacey Patton – Class of 1996 – previously of the NAACP is an acclaimed Author, Child Advocate
- Mike Schell – Class of 2001 – Executive Director of the Cannonball Fund, an organization dedicated to developing leadership and improving academic and athletic prospects of youth in under-served communities through baseball and softball.
- Tiffany Kuehner – Class of 2003 – CEO of Hope for Haiti – a group that was on the frontlines aiding the humanitarian response during the recent earthquake in Haiti.
- Wayne Meisel – Class of 1978 – One of the primary architects of the nation-wide service organization Americorps and Board member of Teach for America.
- Adam Spector – Class of 2000 – is a board member and tireless advocate for the Coral Restoration Foundation, a group dedicated to the protection of the Florida barrier reef.
- Tanmay Rao – Class of 2015 – has created a free math tutoring program in which high school students teach elementary and middle school students in Mercer County, New Jersey

The list of what our graduates are doing to make a difference goes on and on.

Yeats warns us that the “best lack all conviction;” studies suggest that millennials lack resolve. There may be some truth in that at times, and yet I prefer to consider the extraordinary faith and commitment that these Lawrentians exhibit in their life work. I prefer to consider Valerie’s insightful poem and her ability to exercise empathy.

We know that we must greet the world with a clear-eyed sense of realism; we can see that we must exercise caution in the face of unreflective, naïve, positivism. That has led to sadness and tragedy at times. The world, we know, is full of turns and deceptions, and there are no guarantees.

But for all the cruelties and disappointments we encounter, understanding and compassion are powerful forces, situations **can** be improved, problems **can** be thoughtfully solved.

If you have spent time in this beautiful setting, at this wonderful school, you know that what is truly impressive, what gives us a hope, is the work that our teachers, mentors, coaches, Housemasters do each day, with great care, love, and dedication. This careful work has been going on for a very long time here, **and the charge to us is to see that it endures for a long time to come.**

Even if certain poet bellwethers continue to worry and fret about the human condition, I am confident that you students leave here recognizing the privilege of being associated with a school untouched by cynicism, where good character matters deeply, where lessons learned around a Harkness table will guide you in life as you seek to make a difference.

As for me, with all due respect to Mathew Arnold and William Butler Yeats, I prefer an altogether different poet bellwether, the Irish poet Peter Fallon, who, like Valerie, focuses less on cataclysmic human failures, and more on our capacity to love as a source of hope. At the end of his epic poem, “Strength of Heart,” he enjoins us to **“Be worthy of this life. And, Love the world.”**

Thank you.