



School Meeting
Comments: 50th Anniversary of King Assassination and Recent Events
April 5, 2018

Good Morning.

Yesterday was the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. In reflecting upon that, Reverend Morrow reminds me of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates' question to all of us, and I paraphrase: How is it that we have come so far and have so far yet to go?

At the invitation of Bri Thompson, I am here to say a few words about our community, or rather, about what we should be striving all the time to be as a community, regardless of the imperfections that become apparent from time to time. And even if we know that we won't get it right every time, there is learning in those moments when we see those imperfections.

My comments, and Bri's invitation, come in response to recent events, events that began with student activism, **which we applaud**, and which then led to differences of opinion, **which we should welcome, and which is part of our fabric as an academic community**.

The activism began with a group of students choosing to express their opposition to gun violence at the March for our Lives in Washington, D.C., which featured, among other things, survivors from the shootings in Parkland, Florida.

Following this, there were postings on social media about the experience of being at the rally, and this in turn drew in a series of postings expressing a range of opinion. And this is where things began to go awry.

Now let me be clear, there are various platforms of social media, and they can be powerful, not simply for social connection but for raising awareness on issues as they are emerging. From the role of Facebook in aiding the short-lived Arab Spring some years ago to more recent documentation of police violence in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, social media is absolutely a powerful tool.

At the same time, these platforms, which sometimes invite a kind of anonymity and a license to abandon civility, **can be a poor place for an exchange of views on complicated topics**.

I am not going to stand here and tell you to avoid all such exchanges – these forums are here to stay and are part of our landscape. But I will remind you of the obvious.

If you are going to engage in an online debate, understand that you cannot control how you will be perceived or the level of offense you may cause. Know that you can't take it back once you

post, and you will likely have little opportunity to clarify tone or intent. And do not seek to trivialize or provoke merely for the sake of provoking – **it will end badly**.

If we were speaking around a Harkness table, we would not make light of a person's heartfelt stance on an issue – we might disagree, perhaps even strongly, but if we express an opposing view, it is done with care and respect. If we do not follow such a simple guideline – that is to say the same civility we practice around the table together, then we should not be surprised when emotions run high and when our words offend in ways we may or may not have intended.

And let me be even more clear. Sweeping, generalized assertions about black urban populations, family structure, and gang violence, and cavalier allusions to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, are deeply problematic and certainly are going to offend people. I am offended when I read them.

And when we get into these escalating moments of slinging sound bites at each other, it does not matter if you are not intending to hurt, you may still cause deep offense; the anonymity alone, and what may be perceived as a vituperative tone, can even cause people to feel unsafe.

When we sit face to face and have reasoned, civil debate, we can make statements, and those statements can be challenged. If we pause to listen to that challenge, we can hear and understand why a statement that on face value may seem defensible, and may even have some basis in fact, is actually quite loaded and ignores a tremendous amount of background and context.

We seem to be at a moment in current society when some are particularly willing to dismiss facts as “fake news” merely because those facts conflict with our preferred view, but you cannot talk about gun violence within certain communities without discussing what study after study has clearly documented: that blacks are victims of police violence and over-aggressive police tactics at much higher rates; that incarceration rates and length of sentences for African Americans are far higher than whites **for the same crime**.

A recent, highly respected study by a friend of mine, Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt of Stanford University and a MacArthur Fellow, demonstrates that the length of jury sentences correlates with racial features – in other words, the “blacker” your features, the longer you'll serve, **for the same crime**.

When we throw assertions around without taking the time to consider critically important context such as this, we should not be surprised, and in fact we should anticipate, that people will feel hurt.

Now, prior to this exchange on social media, not because of it, a student forum on gun control and gun violence had been organized in the Heely Room. This was the right impulse – it's a **complicated topic, let's talk about it**.

Unfortunately, the emotions riled up by this back-and-forth posting became very much part of the undercurrent of the debate. The issues raised on social media do need to be addressed and discussed as a school, but in the moment, as emotions in the room rose to a certain level, a judgement call was made to **pause** the dialogue, not to **stop** it. The judgement call was made not

to stifle important questions, but to find a better setting, and to create better conditions under which we could actually hear each other.

School President Bri Thompson, Student Council, Dean Kosoff, and Dean Eldridge have been working to set up those opportunities for dialogue – some will be more open-forum type sessions, some will be perhaps at the House level.

We also continue to work on keeping us all fully informed on the topic. Next week, Yale Professor Akhil Reed Amar will speak on the second amendment, and we are working on getting Professor Meg Jacobs, senior research scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Institute at Princeton, to speak on the change in the conversation about guns from the 1970s forward. Dr. Chaput has been particularly helpful in making these arrangements.

Let me close by saying that I believe deeply in this community and what it represents. I believe in our ability to work on listening to each other, to learn from each other, and to respect each other. For me, this is vitally important work as we prepare you to head out and make a difference. **The world sorely needs a better commitment to Harkness principles of civil and respectful discourse.**

I recently heard an interview with the new president of Williams College, Dr. Maud Mandel. She was asked about the value of diversity and inclusion on a campus. In her response, she described what she felt was the truly unique form of inclusion that occurs on a college campus, and I would extend that to a boarding school campus such as ours.

The diversity we find here is wholly unlike diversity we see in other settings. Cities tend to be diverse spaces broadly defined, but in fact, even in cities, people tend to live, work, eat, and move about in a relatively segregated manner. Neighborhoods, work places, and restaurants tend to be separated by socioeconomic class, by religious groupings, and frequently by race and ethnicity.

Here, at Lawrenceville, you have roommates, classmates, tablemates, and teammates **who are distinctly unlike you.** Who are from different socioeconomic classes, different races, different regions of the country, and in fact from all over the world. **This may well be one of the most diverse spaces in which you will ever live at such close proximity.**

There will be misunderstandings; it will be messy at times. We will not always get it right. Last week on social media and the other night in the Heely Room, **we did not get it right.** In my view, this is not a sign that we are deeply flawed or that we have bad individuals among us. It merely tells us that we are imperfect. And in those abrasive, sometimes hurtful moments, there are also efforts to communicate, and if we do it right and take advantage of our extraordinary differences, there are powerful moments to listen and learn and understand. **And we can do that.**

That is what I believe, and that is why I have such great faith in this institution.

Thank you very much.