



THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

*November 1, 2018*

*Comments in School Meeting*

Thank you Hunter, Jack, and Caroline.

I have been struggling in recent days on a number of fronts. I've been struggling, in part, to hang on to my optimism and belief in humanity, which fundamentally is my nature.

I have also been struggling to avoid the numbness that comes with too much violence and absolutely senseless loss. I worry at moments that I am getting used to it.

Protecting ourselves with this numbness, protecting ourselves from feeling the pain of others too acutely, may be a natural reaction, but we lose something essential in our humanity if we ever allow this to become normal, if the empathy we feel for others ever gets scabbed over or calloused.

I spoke to the faculty yesterday, and I observed that in our work here, in our guiding and mentoring all of you young men and women, we are at our best when we are sensitive to the pain and difficulty that adolescents feel. We may be firm and even tough at times to help prepare you, but it is always done in a careful, measured way based on a thoughtfully cultivated relationship, and an understanding of how to test and stretch you in a humane and caring way. And it only works when all of you are aware that we, your teachers, care deeply about you, even as we test you and stretch you.

When we do this, I believe we help you grow, and I believe we are also modeling for you the importance of empathy and compassion in any relationship. Empathy

and compassion are not signs of weakness; there is great strength and resolve when we take the time to understand and connect to others. It takes far less effort to harden ourselves, to ignore what someone else is experiencing, to look away.

So even if I struggle, I refuse to give in and to feel numb.

And in fending off the numbness, I have to distinguish between different types of loss and tragedy: some instances that feel unavoidable, others that do not. When I read about a plane that goes down off of Indonesia, I am struck by that loss. I know that there is great pain. With that comes some understanding that there is human imperfection, perhaps human error, perhaps the weather -- and it is unlikely that we will ever fully eliminate such factors from our lives.

And then there are events like the senseless tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue, which stems from virulent anti-Semitism; from ignorance that spawns hatred; and from a current mindset or attitude that has reared up in our country that seems to encourage us to give in to our worst impulses, to give in to our most base and irrational fear of the perceived "other."

And as Caroline so beautifully and movingly described, I think you all know how close to home this hits. The long-serving Rabbi and spiritual leader of this synagogue is Teddy, Caroline, and Drew Friedman's grandfather – Mrs. Friedman's father. Had it not been for their grandmother's health that morning, he would have been in his office at the synagogue, and he would have sat in his usual place in the back row during the service, the same row where every one of his fellow congregants, who also typically shared that row, is now dead.

And in response to all of this, I am not hearing a reassuring, national message that unifies us against the hatred that led to this act.

In the few days leading up to the attack in Pittsburgh, we have had pipe bombs that target people with opposing ideas; Anti-Semitic and paranoid rants against Holocaust survivor George Soros; And bizarre, unfounded references to "unknown Middle Easterners mixed into the caravan" of refugees making their way through Central America, a caravan that is somehow, preposterously, a Jewish plot, and connected somehow to Jewish relief agencies.

In response, we hear deflection, we hear that the media is to blame, we hear more conspiracy theories.

So, I look for other voices. Mrs. Friedman's brother, Jonathan Berkun, is also a rabbi, and he wrote a piece describing his return to Pittsburgh the day after the massacre. His arrival was especially poignant:

"After landing, I bought a bottle of water at the Pittsburgh airport. The saleswoman was so friendly that I quipped how I had forgotten how nice people are in this city ... "It's been a tough day for us, sir," she responded with a tear in her eye. I told her why I was there and where I was from. We both shed tears. I was crying and I hadn't even rented my car yet."

After meeting up with his father, they went together to a memorial vigil, where clergy of all faiths had come to pray and pay respects. He goes on to say,

"We maneuvered between throngs of people from all backgrounds, ages and attires, stopping every three steps to hug someone he knew or someone I hadn't seen in 25 years. Those reunions were tearful and were the main reason I came in the first place. When people experience trauma, the sudden realization that they are not alone triggers deep emotions ... Tears flow, and that flow is the first movement towards healing."

As Rabbi Berkun grapples with the enormity of this hate crime, he reflects on his childhood neighborhood where this all occurred, a place that "was always diverse religiously, socio-economically, racially, and ethnically. It is a place where people felt a profound sense of homeyness and true concern for one another. It is a place where people don't talk about caring for each other; they simply do it."

He goes on,

"This is the place that was turned upside down on Shabbat morning at Tree of Life. But one speaker after another [at the memorial] echoed the same

recurring theme: hate will not defeat love. We will recover. We will rebuild. We will overcome.”

I find great power in his hope, power in his faith, power in his firm belief that this community will rebuild.

And through his words, I too come back to my own optimism and ultimately my refusal to submit to my misgivings.

It is at these moments that I understand all the more clearly the importance of what we do here at this school, at Lawrenceville.

We build our community

- on a commitment to inclusion and equity,
- on a commitment to basic respect,
- a commitment to truth,
- a commitment to real information, the free flow of rational ideas, and civil, informed debate -- civil debate around the Harkness table, and civil debate more broadly in our community.

These are all powerful notions that are fundamental to who we are and what we believe in.

And when we work to reinforce these beliefs in this community:

- when we greet each other on the pathway, whether or not we've met before;
- when we work to engage in civil, respectful discourse even as we disagree;
- when we assume positive intentions in all of our daily encounters, and when we allow compassion and trust to guide our actions,

... it is a clear rejection of the fear and base impulses that seem to be welling up all around us, and in fact it is an act of faith, faith that we can do better, faith that we can build a better world.

The world needs this faith right now, and it starts with how we live together and work together, right here, in this community.

- *Stephen S. Murray, Head Master*