



## THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

June 5, 2020

### Comments at Final School Meeting

Thank you, Soleil, Esha, Josh, Chelsea, Jack, and Ije, for your powerful, honest words.

I am grateful for this opportunity to offer some closing remarks at this final school meeting, as we prepare to conclude what has been an extraordinarily eventful spring term.

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In 2006 I was in Johannesburg, South Africa, and I spent one morning visiting the Apartheid Museum, which was a deeply wrenching experience.

Even before entering the museum, the enormity of the tragedy is conveyed – and partly because we don't really have a language to convey the reality of millions and millions of lives lost, the tragedy is conveyed metaphorically. The visitor walks past steel cages filled with stones, some of the cages stand more than twenty feet high, and each stone represent a life lost, a soul crushed in the diamond and gold mines, lives extinguished in the townships due to the oppression and brutality, first of hundreds of years of colonialism followed by decades of Apartheid.

As an aside, I have read that the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery Alabama, which was erected to memorialize in our own country the history of racial terror lynching, drew some inspiration from the Apartheid Museum, as they tried, when language fails, to represent with hanging steel columns the countless souls lost to prejudice and hatred.

Later, during my time in South Africa, with the memory of the museum still raw in my mind, I had a striking experience that caused me to reflect. I was sitting in the locker room of our hotel after exercising. Two burly, blond-haired men speaking Afrikaans were changing. Then a black man walked in, went to his locker, and began to change for his workout. **And nothing happened.** No one batted an eye, no one glanced around, there was no apparent tension in the room. It was the most banal scene you could imagine. But having immersed myself in the history of that country, that moment in the locker room captivated me.

The system of Apartheid, of forced racial segregation, had effectively ended 15 years earlier with the legislative repeal of Apartheid as an official policy in June of 1991. Without doubt, South Africa had then, and still has now, countless unresolved problems, and it has by no means healed all the deep wounds that likely persist.

But as I sat there in that locker room, these three men had grown up in a system in which a racially mixed public space would have been illegal, and that black man would have been arrested, possibly killed for the simple act of crossing a line. Now, scarcely 15 years later, here they were, seeming to completely accept a fundamental new reality.

**How were they able to come so far on their journey in so short a period of time?**

And why, I wondered, was there so much evidence in my own country that we had made so little progress in dismantling the structural racism in our courts of law, in our financial institutions, and in our national mindset.

This question stayed with me for years, until I heard an interview with Bryan Stevenson on National Public Radio two years ago in which he spoke about the founding of the Legacy Museum, and the importance of bearing witness to history, in this case the history of being black in America, from enslavement to mass incarceration.

His point was not that this is the only narrative, and of course there are important narratives of overcoming and triumphing that are also part of the truth, but his point was that we will never solve our race problem in this country until we fully confront and own our past as a nation.

He compared our cultural and historical amnesia to the experience of Germany following World War II. In the aftermath of the war, Germans were forced to deal with Auschwitz. They were forced to watch documentaries, some created by directors such as Billy Wilder and Alfred Hitchcock, on the atrocities of the Holocaust. Coming of age as a young German in the 1950's and 1960's and 1970's, meant that the death camps of just a handful of years earlier were part of the story that had to be owned. It was part of the German identity. Stevenson described visiting Berlin:

*"You can't really go 100 meters without seeing markers and stones that have been placed next to the homes of Jewish families that were abducted. Germans seemed to want you to go to the Holocaust Memorial. They were intent on changing the narrative. They didn't want to be thought of as Nazis and fascists forever. And I just don't think we've created cultural spaces in this country that motivate people to say 'never again' to this history of enslavement and lynching and segregation. And the absence of that commitment I think has left us vulnerable.*

*And not only do we not do that, we actually romanticize this era and we tell stories about how glorious and wonderful the architects and defenders of slavery are.*

*In Alabama, Confederate Memorial Day is a state holiday. Jefferson Davis's birthday is a state holiday. We do not have Martin Luther King Day in Alabama. We have Martin Luther King/Robert E. Lee Day."*

As I have reflected on Stevenson's comments, and as I consider that scene many years ago in a locker room Johannesburg, I have to believe that somehow the image of Mandela emerging from prison, ascending to the presidency, and exercising just leadership, on some level, forced South Africans to contend with their past – to recognize the profound injustice of state-sanctioned racism and oppression and cruelty.

**A recognition that has been often absent or painfully slow in coming in our own country.**

My hope, as we seek to learn from current events, from the current crisis in our country, is that we are finally being forced

- to reckon with our past,
- to acknowledge the many truths of our history,
- and to face the legitimate reasons for the current level of anger being expressed in this country right now.

We are being given an opportunity that we must not squander if are to have

- even a chance of moving forward together,
- of emerging whole,
- of emerging better.

I want to conclude by bringing our focus closer to home, to talk about my **hope and optimism** for Lawrenceville, and end with some of the things I have gained this week from so many in this community.

And when I say **hope and optimism**, it is hope and optimism tempered by the understanding that this reckoning will not be easy.

Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, once interviewed Admiral Jim Stockdale, who, like Senator John McCain, had been a prisoner during the Vietnam War. When asked about who survived and who didn't under those harsh prison conditions, he replied, "I can tell you who didn't make it out. It was the optimists." He went on to say that the guys who just hoped against hope, against all evidence to the contrary, that they'd be out by Christmas, eventually gave up when Christmas came and went. He said, "*You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose —with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.*"

### **Confronting the brutal facts.**

My optimism and my faith for our community is based on my belief,

- first, that we all care deeply about this school, all of us, and therefore that we are all determined to prevail, that we have no choice but to prevail, to in fact be better by keeping our standards and expectations for this School high;
- and second, that as hard as that may be, we understand that to do this, we need to recognize and face the reality of our history, "the brutal facts," as Admiral Stockdale says.

And what are some of the things I have learned from this community this week? What have I gained?

I think about trustee and current parent Lisa Skeete Tatum calling me and urging the School, as a starting point, to validate and acknowledge the pain and anguish of what is going on, to allow individuals within the community to give voice to those feelings.

In this regard, I think about the powerful, honest words we have heard this week from so many, from Soleil, from Esha, Jasmine, Devin, Barbara, Gabby, and William. From Mr. Welborne, Mr. Scott, Ms. Easterling, Rev. Morrow, Rev. Jones.

I think of the work of Student Council led by Soleil and supported by Mrs. Kosoff and Mr. Eldridge, who, together, have been tireless in their efforts to unite us so that we are facing the challenges ahead together, and not divided.

I think of all of our housemasters who fostered dialogue and listening in our Houses.

I think of the leadership from members of the Alliance of Black Cultures, the Diversity Council, Religious Life Council, and the Pan-Asia Alliance.

I am inspired by the incredible effort to create a meaningful experience during these final days, an experience that will allow all of our voices to be heard, that will draw us together, that will serve as a starting point for moving forward: “The Lawrenceville Community Project - Bearing Witness to Spring 2020” – this collaborative effort was shouldered by Ms. Hunter, Ms. McMillan, Mr. Campbell, Dr. Chaput, Dr. Von Wachenfeldt, Dr. Friedlander, Dr. Jacobs, Ms. Aikens, Ms. Clancy, Ms. Niu, Ms. Clore, Ms. Kooistra, Ms.

Corcoran, Ms. Hedges, and Ms. Easterling, who had the support and help of all of the Department Chairs.

And finally, I have heard and been inspired by powerful voices from our alums, especially our alumni of color. One alumna wrote to remind me to that even as we face our past and name the names of men who been killed recently, we must not forget all black lives, including women and members of the LGBTQ community, names such as Nina Pop, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Regis Korchinski Paquet, and she went on to say, “...yes, Lawrenceville has taken some steps towards fostering this environment of safety and actively practicing an ethos of Diversity and Inclusion—[but we must] continue to fervently do so.”

And finally, as we prepare to welcome to Lawrenceville our new Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement, Rick Holifield, to build on the excellent work over the past two years of our Task Force on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, I want to close with a particularly strong call to action from one of our alums of color:

*“As a Black woman, I want to remind and support you all as you play whatever part you feel is necessary in this time because they are ALL important. Protest, donate, write letters, push for legislation, call people out, don’t call people out, turn off your phone, go off on social media, do anything you please but remember to **prioritize your mental and physical wellbeing as you need to.**”*

*All the discomfort of being in our own skin is a feeling most non-Black people are currently experiencing by being called out for their privilege / silence / ignorance, but we have been uncomfortable for centuries. Our families and ancestors have experienced this through slavery and every day since, and they have persevered. This time is no different. It is a blessing to be Black... even in America.*

*Non-Black people are embarking on their “journey” to try and understand institutionalized racism in education, within the criminal justice system, and even at home. To be honest, I am hopeful (and a bit skeptical) that they’ll get to where we need them to be, but I understand it is a process that will take time and A LOT of work.”*

Indeed, it will take “a lot of work,” those are the brutal facts. And I look forward to this work together, in the weeks and months ahead.

God bless you all -- we have lived through quite a spring together, and in spite of it all, I believe we have revealed ourselves a strong community, **intent on getting even stronger.**

Thank you very much.

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