

HEAD LINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School



March 2019

Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.
Folk saying, Origin Unknown

Dear Trinity Community,

Sherry Harrell, who sat behind me in fifth grade, had the annoying habit of sticking me in the back with a pencil. One day she was particularly vigorous with her poking and the effect was more than annoying; I turned on her with a vehemence that caught the attention of our teacher, who sent me home with the punishment of writing 100 times, “I will not flirt with Sherry Harrell in class.” There is so much wrong with this that I don’t know where to start, and I think I won’t. Instead, I’ll move on to the part of the story that I want to focus on, which I expect to be truly unbelievable to my audience of parents in 2019: My father, upon hearing my tale of a sore back and a spirit twice offended, simply charged me to sit down and write the sentences.

I expect that this story will be so strange to Trinity parents today that it will bring forth either laughter or outrage. I am hoping for the former—I laugh about it now when I tell it. My purpose in recalling it here is certainly not to critique my father, who was a good man to his dying day. I tell this story to mark a chasm of value that has opened wide over the course of my life. And that change, I think, is illustrated profoundly in my father’s response.

My father was not afraid of conflict, and he certainly wasn’t afraid of my fifth grade teacher, but he was afraid of something, and that is why he had me write the sentences. He was afraid that I might grow up to disrespect authority and fail to learn that actions have consequences. He believed, in the words of the old proverb, that his job was to prepare the child (me, not Sherry Harrell) for the road and not the road for the child. He thought that if he intervened in this disciplinary act, he would rob me of that preparation.

I am not recommending my father’s tack to our parents. This is not a story with a moral at the end. It’s a story to mark the distance between then and now. I have often imagined what would happen at Trinity School—really at any school—if one of our teachers meted out a similar punishment: I have visions of nuclear parent conferences, with attorneys present, and demands for the teacher’s head on a platter. There are many reasons for this shift, and some of them are to be welcomed. We have learned more effective ways of discipline. We may even have learned that it is usually the second offender who is caught. We have, most importantly, learned that shaming children is not a humane means of discipline. But the most important reason this story shocks us is that my father acted with a set of values that seem foreign to us today. It is not the prudence of my father’s decision that I am interested in (any longer); it is the fact that he made such a decision without deliberation or doubt, a decision that almost none of us would make today.

Please turn over...

I submit that today we live in culture which believes (in spite of what it might say from time to time) that our job as educators and parents is to prepare the road for the child and not primarily the child for the road. Like all cultural changes, there is a mixture of good and bad in such a shift. Preparing the road of learning for students who have learning differences, so that they can journey with others along the way, is surely an improvement on the past—I think back to a friend who always stumbled along the road of school and never finished, who now in his sixties would say that he was probably dyslexic. So I am not making a plea for the good ol' days. But I am trying to trace clearly what the apostle Paul calls “the pattern of this world” that we live in and to ask what it means for us Christians to be transformed when we cannot avoid that pattern of values. Certainly we ought to be aware of the dangers of any cultural value in excess: the recent college admission scandal could be justly narrated as extreme attempts by powerful parents to prepare the road for their unprepared children. And Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s *The Coddling of the American Mind* documents what kind of illiberal nonsense can come from an uncritical belief that children and students are so fragile that we need to protect them from all manner of challenging ideas.

At Trinity School, we believe that if children are fragile, it is as young birds are fragile. There are real dangers out there, and we want to be wise. But we cannot change the laws of gravity, and there are also real dangers in not nudging them out of the nest at the right time. We believe in truth, goodness, and beauty. These are things that are real and permanent, and the job of a school and parents is to form students in accord with these things. And these realities, like all reality, do not bend to the emotions and whims of human persons, any more than the face of El Capitan bends to the fear of someone free soloing it. The job of educators (parents and teachers together) is to teach, inspire, and train students in the proper and ordinate responses to those realities. We hold, with C. S. Lewis and a venerable tradition that he outlines in *The Abolition of Man*, “the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are” (31).

A corollary of all this is that learning is hard sometimes. If we are never uncomfortable, we are probably not being challenged sufficiently and measured against reality. And if we learn only what we like or agree with immediately, we will be stunted in our growth. A classical education in truth, goodness, and beauty tests the student against these permanent things and aspires to teach them to love what they ought to love.

I have another memory of fifth grade. The same teacher who assigned me the shameful punishment assigned me something else. I was required to memorize the Gettysburg Address in its entirety and stand before the class to recite it. By this simple educational act she gave me the chance to etch upon my soul noble sentiments that still guide me and that inspire me as a citizen and a head of school. She did what Plato said a good educator should do: “give delighted praise to beauty, receiving it into his soul and being nourished by it, so that he becomes of gentle heart. All this before he is of an age to reason; so that when Reason at length comes to him, then, bred as he has been, he will hold out his hands in welcome and recognize her because of the affinity he bears her” (*Republic*, 402a). For this gift, I owe my teacher an eternal debt of gratitude, and for this I can forgive much.

Non Nobis.



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