



**The Lawrenceville School 212th Convocation
“On Hope”
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Coming up out of the Paris Métro one day in the fall of 1985, I found myself in a somewhat unusual, vaguely surreal setting. I was on the way to my first day of work teaching in a public school in Saint Denis, a rather poor, down-and-out suburb of the city of Paris.

Exiting the subway station, I paused, staring up at the 12th century gothic Basilica of “Saint Dennis,” or Saint Denis, named for the third century Christian martyr of the same name, the patron saint of France.

As I took in my surroundings, I had the curious tale of Saint Denis in the back of my mind. Of all the gruesome chapters of Christian martyrdom - including Saint Eulalia who reportedly was put in a barrel with sharp knives protruding inside and rolled down a street; and Saint Blaise who was flayed with iron combs used for carding wool - I’ve always felt that Saint Denis had the best story.

According to legend, Denis was the bishop of Paris, having been sent to the region, around the year 250 of the Common Era, to convert to Christianity some of the Celtic tribes, or Gauls, who lived there. His skill at converting pagans so vexed the local authorities that they had him beheaded at a druid holy site, Monmartre, one of the seven hills of Paris. After his beheading, Denis picked up his head, which continued to preach a sermon on repentance, and walked several miles outside the city. The historic, ornate basilica that bears his name was later erected on the spot where he supposedly finally fell, presumably after his head had concluded the sermon.

So I was thinking about Denis as I proceeded on my to school, but the thought of his long, strange walk with his talking head in his arms was only part of what made the setting feel so unusual.

Over the course of many decades, modern urban planning forced the poorer city dwellers to the outskirts of the city, and as a result, a sprawling working-class suburb had grown up around this once-isolated, magnificent gothic structure.

The landscape was rendered all the more incongruous and garish due to the post World War II housing projects that had sprouted up to house these displaced families, who had been pushed



out of the medieval alleys of old Paris as the city center was gentrified and the grand boulevards were created.

These large-scale housing developments, influenced by modernist urban architects, were designed with brightly-colored plastic siding and other recently invented, synthetic materials.

Though they were intended to be uplifting and to combat the dank, sordid living conditions of earlier tenements and ghettos, they did not age well. 30 years after construction, in the mid 1980s, the sad, run-down, faded exteriors of these futurist structures looked all the more other-worldly and out of place in the shadow of the beautiful, enduring, stone basilica.

And although unanticipated by the idealistic designers, these high-volume housing projects served to perpetuate and exacerbate social problems that then led to generational poverty. The misery within matched the neglect without.

By the time I arrived, the population of this area, and therefore my students, was almost exclusively North and West African: Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, Senegalese. These neighborhoods of immigrants from former French colonies, brought in to work in factories in the 1950s, were now devastated by the high unemployment of the 1980s. The mere presence of these populations served as an uncomfortable and embarrassing reminder of French colonial cruelties and excesses. It seemed as if the ideals of the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” like the ideals in the American Declaration of Independence, did not uniformly apply to all.

Out of sight, out of mind, impoverished suburbs like Saint Denis, with the unemployed crowded into bizarrely colorful, stifling apartments, seemed conveniently forgotten by the French government. And as I walked by, Denis’ severed head, sculpted in stone on the north portal of the cathedral, stared silently over the strange, lurid setting, his 2,000-year-old sermon of repentance long since forgotten.

My school, in keeping with the local architecture, appeared to be constructed entirely of plexiglass, aluminum, and plastic. Built for ten years of temporary occupancy, it was now in its third decade and showing its age. They could not take delivery of the 20 government-allocated personal computers because there was not a single door in the building with a working lock.

My middle school students, in sharp contrast to the sad setting, were extraordinary. Intrigued to have a foreign teacher, they were particularly excited by anything American. Hired to teach English, and without any discernible curriculum, I improvised. We read Langston Hughes, and we listened to B.B. King and Delta blues legend Robert Johnson. My Kodak Ektachrome slides of the New York City skyline lit up at night, projected with an ancient slide projector, fascinated them. And in turn, as I gained their trust, they told me their stories.



They explained that their generation was known as “Les Beurs” – a reversal of the word “Arab” using a kind of French pig Latin, and indeed they lived a rather upside down or contradictory existence. Their parents’ African heritage was in many ways foreign to them – they were French citizens whose first language was French, and yet traditional French society rejected them, scorned them, as immigrants, “des immigrés.” The plight of the girls, 13- to 14-years old, was particularly complicated as they explained it. If they acted too French, or seemed to forget their traditional roots, their fathers threatened routinely to send them back to North Africa to an arranged marriage with a much older man. In spite of all of this, they came to class every day with curiosity, humor, and passion.

What was missing was hope. The kind of hope that comes from the knowledge that you have a chance, that there is a way forward for you, that society is invested in you. But every aspect of their world reinforced their feeling of alienation: the claustrophobic housing conditions in a marginalized suburb; the dilapidated and outdated school building; the disconnect with both their family’s heritage and their French heritage; and the utter lack of job prospects.

Some years after I left, violent riots erupted in the region. Over the course of six evenings, 69 cars were burned in the neighborhoods around Saint Denis alone. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets, and the crowds responded with rocks and Molotov cocktails.

The French president at the time referred to the instigators as “scum” – but contemporary news reports also alluded to underlying causes, such as failed initiatives to improve the lives of members of these marginalized communities.¹

I had seen the roots of this unrest years before – it was only a matter of time. Speaking this summer with Dr. Ali, our new Executive Director of the Hutchins Center for Race and Social Justice, he quoted Dr. King, who said, “A riot is the language of the unheard.”

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The societal elements that conspire to remove hope – that undermine a community’s faith in the future – are all too common, both internationally and across our own country. The circumstances of neglect vary, but the outcome is the same: Watts, Los Angeles; Newark, New Jersey; the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans; Flint, Michigan.

And hope can’t be a quiet yearning that things might change; a patient wish that someone, someday will listen. Hope needs to be grounded in reality – it needs to have a shot, the possibility of coming through. Simply wishing for things to change is simply that, wishing.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/02/france>



Admiral Jim Stockdale was a prisoner of war in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. Over many years he endured repeated torture and agonizing uncertainty about his fate. When interviewed about how one survived such conditions, he was quite clear on who *didn't* make it out:

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists. (...) [T]hey were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ (...) And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

He went on to say, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end...with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”²

My students in Saint Denis were daily faced with the brutal facts of their situation. It was the faith that they could prevail, that the system was set up for them to succeed, that was so utterly absent.

So how do we engage in the hard work of instilling the right kind of hope, of creating upwardly mobile possibilities in communities? I know it can be done, because I’ve seen it happen up close, and under the right circumstances, it works.

Cleveland is one of those rust-belt cities hit hard by the loss of manufacturing jobs in the decades following World War II. In the mid-1960s, riots, caused by smoldering racial tensions and striking economic disparities, tore the city apart. When I arrived decades later in 2005 to take a job, there were still visible scars from the damage in certain neighborhoods, and 40 years later, old wounds and resentments were still quite raw.

Businesses, shops, grocery stores, had all moved out of the city center, leaving it stagnant and lifeless. The once thriving neighborhoods were still occupied, but there were no jobs, the schools I visited were in deplorable shape, and the closest source of food was a street-corner 7-11.

In my first year as head of a local independent school, my board chair said I needed to apply to join a local group of civic leaders called Leadership Cleveland. I told him I was here to run a school, and he agreed, but he went on to say, “You also have to get involved in the city. People have been turning their backs for too many years. If the city thrives, so will the schools.” It was by far and away the best thing I did during my ten years there.

The program involved a diverse group of corporate and non-profit leaders who were given a crash course in municipal politics and the precarious economic realities of a small, dwindling city. We had bank executives, the head of a battered women’s shelter, local entrepreneurs, the managing partner of a law firm, school heads and principals, the chief diversity officer of the Cleveland Clinic, the regional director of the United Way, a judge, a major league baseball

² <https://www.jimcollins.com/concepts/Stockdale-Concept.html>



executive, and various local politicians. It was an incredible network of extraordinary people, and it was quite a time commitment.

My first lesson was about dignity. One of our early field trips was to understand the dynamics of public housing. We toured a failed housing project where families had been renting from the city at subsidized rates, but it came with no long-term financial incentives. More important, it was a daily reminder of their dependence on the state – and the degraded condition of the units, after just a few years, reflected this.

We then toured a neighborhood where the city was experimenting with a new model. In a public/private partnership, families purchased their unit from a developer at a favorable mortgage rate, and over time, they received tax breaks, an opportunity to build equity in a property, and some degree of financial independence. A few years into the experiment, the properties were pristine, and reflected the pride people felt in owning their own place.

The more I learned, the more interested I became, and I began to see various initiatives begin to take shape, not highly orchestrated at first, but over time, there was a remarkable confluence of what seemed at first to be disparate efforts.

Through my new network, I was invited to join the board of a local start-up charter school in one of the hardest hit neighborhoods in the city. It was a tiny oasis of excellence in a pretty grim setting. It was gratifying to see the good work going on in our handful of classrooms, but hard to gauge the broader impact.

A few months later, I was invited with a number of other school leaders to a breakfast with the superintendent of Cleveland public schools, Eugene Sanders, who was new in town. He was an ambitious and forceful presence. He was prepared to take on the teachers unions who he felt were not prioritizing the students, and his message was, in his words, “I don’t give a damn if you are a Catholic school, independent school, or charter school. Something is happening in your schools that is not happening in my schools, and I am going to change that.”

Jump ahead a couple of years, and our fledgling charter school had teamed up with two other successful charter schools. We shared back-office support and recruitment services, and suddenly our model was a whole lot more stable. And in spite of opposition from teachers’ unions, the superintendent stepped in and sponsored us as Cleveland schools, saying to the unions, “You need to compete.”

That year our small charter network was named as one of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s Blue Ribbon Schools, an Obama administration program aimed at highlighting success stories across the country. This in turn allowed us to get a grant from the Gates Foundation to replicate our schools, which were driven by an ethos where *every* child in the building mattered.



Working with private donors, we would buy abandoned public school buildings in underserved neighborhoods at a favorable rate. We renovated the spaces and opened up high-performance schools, and as our reputation increased, we were able to hire talented young principals who wanted the autonomy to run their own schools.

We noticed boarded-up properties nearby being purchased as families moved to be near one of our Breakthrough Schools, as our growing network came to be known.

The Cleveland Clinic, the largest employer in the city, was headquartered near some of the very same neighborhoods we were targeting. As they expanded and built new medical facilities, they teamed up with Cleveland State University to create job training programs for hospital technicians at good wages and excellent benefits. Families who were buying these homes to be near high-quality schools, now had access to jobs.

Some of this was serendipity, some was according to plan, and sometimes civic pride was the driver. The owner of a local chain of grocery stores that had long since moved to the suburbs purchased an historic building in the center of the city and opened a branch with healthy food and fresh produce. I happened to know him, a long time Clevelander, and I asked him about the decision. He smiled and said, “We’ll lose money on this for five years at least, but people need this, and it’s good for the city.”

And other things were happening at the same time. Cleveland public schools were not standing still. Successful competition from the charter schools spurred the Cleveland Transformation Plan, a bipartisan effort championed by the city’s democratic mayor and the republican governor to invest in municipal education and to rebuild and rethink the entire school district serving 40,000 inner-city students.

And Breakthrough Schools had not stood still either. By the time I was leaving Cleveland after ten years, we were opening our tenth school, we had over 3,000 students in high-quality seats, and were educating a significant percentage of public school students in the district. Downtown Cleveland was an entirely different place, and the city was experiencing its first housing shortage in decades.

Just as a downward spiral is hard to reverse, upward momentum builds on itself, and even with the hard reality of life in a rustbelt city, these communities knew that they mattered, knew that people were prepared to invest in their children, in their homeownership, and in their futures.

They had hope.

So what do these stories mean for all of you as you prepare to start the new school year?



I received an email this summer from alumnus Injil Muhammad, Class of 2017. Injil just graduated cum laude from one of the nation’s premier universities, majoring in applied mathematics. He conveyed deep gratitude and appreciation for the preparation he received during his time here. “As I reflect on my past four years,” he wrote, “I cannot overstate the impact that Lawrenceville had on my ability to succeed in college.”

He focused on a few simple aspects, beginning with clear and persuasive speaking and writing: When it came to having a confident voice, “...the Harkness method gave me a tremendous leg up on my peers (...) As for writing, Lawrenceville’s English department even made a math major like me able to hang with the pure humanities students in writing classes.”

He spoke about the “habit of studying” and the importance of getting comfortable connecting with teachers: “I didn’t understand it while in high school, but the practice of even going to Consultation and being able to converse with your teachers is an absolutely vital skill for academic success in college.”

And finally, he spoke about relationships formed here, a network of trusted, supportive friends who kept him “...steady throughout the highs and lows of college.”

I read in his email an excitement, almost an impatience, to go off into the world to put to good use his talents and abilities. And so, as we embark upon the year, take to heart Injil’s experience: make the most of your time here – do not waste a moment.

I wrote in my first Convocation remarks to this community six years ago, “We are here in ... one of the very great schools, preserved as a place of enduring beauty and strength because what we do here is important. 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 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, compassion, and understanding in order to make it a better place.”

So take advantage of this opportunity you have all been given. And whatever you do, whatever lives you eventually choose, whatever professions you pursue, find ways to sow the seeds of possibility, of opportunity, of hope.

Among my network in Cleveland were social workers, bankers, public servants, lawyers, teachers, even the owner of a car dealership – and they all had something to contribute simply because they cared and wanted to be involved. They were all aware of the challenges – of “the brutal facts of the current reality” in a struggling city – but that did *not* paralyze the collective effort, that did *not* become a reason not to try.

When I think back to my earliest days as a teacher on the outskirts of Paris, I am haunted by the dim prospects that I know my students faced.



And yet, as I look out at all of you here today, as I sensed your energy arriving back on campus and the joy last week at House Olympics, as I see you rolling up your sleeves and leaning into your work, I am reassured and confident that you will indeed take advantage of Lawrenceville, and when called upon in later years, will do your part.

As for me, having seen what is possible, what can be accomplished to improve the lives of others, this gives me great hope.

Thank you very much.