

HEAD LINES

A message from Chip Denton, Head of School



April 2022

Dear Trinity Community,

Be Curious. Perhaps you've seen the Viking Cruises commercial in which Chairman Torstein Hagen shares his family values (kindness, honesty, and hard work) and adds a fourth, which he celebrates in his thick, delectable Norwegian accent: "Be COOR-i-us!"



Apparently curiosity sells more than cruises. How many school mission statements aver that one of their goals is to produce curious learners? **Trinity School is no exception, for our Expanded Mission Statement, explicating what we mean by a "rich" education, states that "even the youngest children are curious about their world. They are inquisitive, active learners..."** From second graders observing the hatching of chicks to Middle School students preparing for Science Expo to Upper School students in Winterim soaking up the basic principles of aerodynamics—all these are exemplars of Trinity's mission at work, where students are exploring God's world and learning to think God's thoughts after him. I remember Pat Bassett, former president of the National Association of Independent Schools, promoting the 21st-century skills that schools should develop in their students. There were six of them, which he alliterated as the "Six C's," and one of them was curiosity.

It might come as a surprise to us, then, to learn that there is an important stream of Christian thought that is suspicious of curiosity. Paul Griffiths (The Vice of Curiosity) points us to Augustine's claim that a certain way of knowing is shaped by a distorted will, one that aims to own and control that which it knows. Augustine thought that curiosity was the posture of one who approached knowledge primarily as a *possessor* and not as a *participant*, with a sort of intellectual greed rather than a charity of mind. The curious one wants to learn something the way a greedy person hoards things, says the Bishop of Hippo. In fact, the very notion of intellectual property would not be meaningful except in a culture where knowledge is something that can be possessed.

Perhaps you think this is too harsh, and it might be, but a little skepticism might be healthy: Why do we think it is a status symbol to have read *many* books? Why is the mark of true scholarship the discovery of something *new*? Why are we often reluctant to share our knowledge with others? Perhaps the story of Pandora, whose curiosity set loose upon the world all manner of evil, is a cautionary tale for our day too, and especially for a school.

There is another way. When we learn something, especially when we learn it well, we *participate* in something beyond ourselves. In this way of thinking, knowledge is a form of communion. You may well ask, "Communion with whom?" Well, with the company of those who have learned this before us, to be sure,

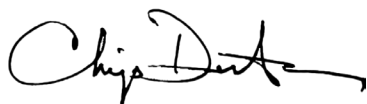
which accounts for most of our knowledge. But even in the unusual cases in which we discover or think up something unique, we are still part of a circle of knowing that transcends us. “The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them,” promised Jesus in John 14:21. True knowing cannot be separated from loving. And Jesus’s invitation is to a *communion*, not a possession: “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (3:20). **This circle of knowing into which we are invited, into which we invite every Trinity student, is fundamentally *personal*. It is a circle of knowing and being known that is rooted in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who have always and ever known one another in love.** I think of Rublev’s justly famous icon of the Trinity, in which the three distinct persons equally divine sit in adoring fellowship with one another around a meal. I like to think that with each important act of learning we are invited into *that* circle. I like to think that at Trinity School we are always inviting students into this circle of knowing.

Every year, Mrs. Crain from the IT Department supplies the second grade classes with chicken eggs from her “girls” in the pen behind her house. The students place these in incubators and learn all about the cycle of a chicken’s life and the hatching of eggs, learning also the virtue of patience as they wait for the appointed day. On a Monday in early April this spring, young chicks began to poke out of their shells. Great was the excitement at this emergence of new life. The fact that this was not the first (or last) time that this has happened in no way diminished our students’ joy. In a simple and second-grade way, they were entering into a knowledge that was not theirs to *own* but theirs to *share*. And share they did.

I think also of our Humanities classes and the choices that teachers make about reading. So little time, so many books. Some schools pride themselves on the long list of classics and great works covered—and these schools have their reward. But we all make choices, and one of the choices of a charitable frame of mind is to spend unhurried time with a great work, to give it the opportunity to lead us into things we did not know that we knew. One good book, even one good question about a particularly good book, can spark long conversations about justice, love, commitment, shame, and all manner of important things. A student who has been blessed with a teacher who designs a class around this kind of shared learning experience will remember that class for the rest of her life. And the memory will be a grateful one, for she recognizes that such knowing is not an accomplishment so much as a gift.

So I come not to eliminate curiosity, but to refine it, to turn it from a selfish and self-centered attempt to possess knowledge into an other-centered participation in the life of God with others. If Trinity School can shape learning experiences like this for our students, from TK–12, we will be giving them a gift that—very literally—lasts for eternity.

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chip Denton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chip Denton
Head of School