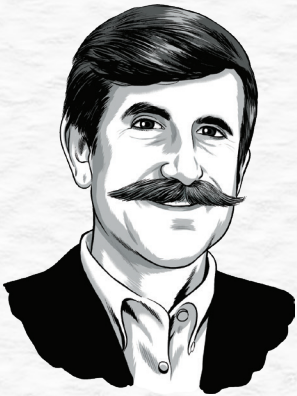




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“On Courage”

Address by Stephen S. Murray H'54 '55 '65 '16 P'16 '21 • Thirteenth Head of School of The Lawrenceville School

With her signature, deeply resonant vocals, Mavis Staples, of the Staples Singers, is one of the truly great voices of R&B. She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999 and the Blues Hall of Fame in 2017.

She was also a civil rights activist. In part because of the family's fame in gospel music circles, they met and became a favorite of Martin Luther King. They toured with Dr. King, gave concerts to raise money for the cause, and their music became closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

Later in life, during an interview, she told a harrowing story of touring in Mississippi in the 1960s. It was late at night, and she was driving — her father, sister, and brother were all sleeping. She stopped to get gas, and asked the young man if he wouldn't mind wiping the windshield and then if she could get a receipt. He stared at her for quite some time, then said, "If you want a cash receipt," and he used the *n-word*, "...you come over to the office." Her father heard this exchange, and got out of the car to confront him — "Why would you call my daughter that word?" — "And Pops," as she called her father, "clocked him." After a scuffle in which Pops gave better than he got, the man came after him with a crowbar, and he had to jump back in the car, "Mavis, drive!" he said.

A few miles down the road, they were pulled over by men with dogs and shotguns and handcuffed, because the gas station attendant had called the sheriff, claiming he'd been robbed. "I thought they were taking us into the woods to lynch us," she said, "I've never been so happy to see a jail — they took us to jail." Eventually, the Staples were able to show they had paid for the gas and they were allowed to leave. But imagine, just imagine a situation where you were genuinely fearful that sheriff deputies might just as soon kill you as arrest you.

Then again, some of you may be thinking there are indeed many Americans who can imagine that.

In spite of that experience and others, no amount of Jim Crow intimidation could silence her, or accept the humiliating conditions imposed upon people of color at that time. On tour, they would make sandwiches and eat in the car, rather than dine in segregated restaurants. With her trademark, rich, deep bass tones, at a time of profound racial divisions and hatreds, she sang out hopefully, forcefully, and justly:

“If you’re ready,
come on,
go with me...
no hatred will be tolerated,
(...)
Peace and love will grow between the races,
come, go with me.”

As Mavis Staples shows us, courage comes in many forms.

Courage is also my father-in-law parachuting behind enemy lines with the 101st Airborne in the early hours before the D-Day invasion, June 6, 1944. The guy was afraid of heights, and still he volunteered. One practice jump, and off he went to help change the course of the deadliest war in human history. Of course, he had misgivings, and certainly had to contain his fear.

A graduate of Harvard, and a classmate of John F. Kennedy, he enlisted when America entered World War II.

In the late afternoon of June 5, 1944, as he walked out onto the airfield in England, a lieutenant leading his platoon, he described in letters home to my mother-in-law how puny he felt walking toward the plane, under “dull leaden clouds,” feeling the crushing weight of world events spinning out of control. The idea he expressed was a kind of anxious disbelief that a plan, a human endeavor, could ever reel it all back in, could ever make things right again in the world.

“It was a strange feeling,” he wrote, “to be a part of that long, quiet, shuffling, ferocious column of brown and green clad men. [...] Airports are always so huge, flat, windswept and desolate and our thin columns seemed to be made up of such tiny humans.”

In spite of these misgivings, he went on to participate in the low-altitude, night time drop, in the rain, with enemy soldiers everywhere, that was the inspiration for Saving Private Ryan and the documentary Band of Brothers. For sure, that was courage — and I cannot begin to imagine his nerves as he got ready to jump out of the plane into the darkness.

Dr. Anne Hallward, of Harvard Medical School and assistant professor of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine, talks about courage in interesting ways, and she makes a distinction I had never considered.

“Bravery,” she says, “involves the suppression of fear,” so acts of bravery are done in the absence of fear, perhaps sometimes recklessly. When one demonstrates “courage,” on the other hand, it is “doing something in spite of your fear.” She goes on to point out the root of the word is derived from the French “coeur” or heart. Being courageous then is to be full of heart or wholehearted. You are not suppressing your emotions in taking action – you are acting with emotion, with “heart” – Mavis Staples and my father-in-law certainly experienced their fears, and still they acted.

Some acts of courage are more spontaneous. A number of years ago, Wesley Autry, a Navy veteran and construction worker, was standing on a subway platform in Harlem with his two little girls. All of a sudden, a man standing nearby began to suffer a seizure and fell onto the tracks between the rails, just as the train was pulling into the station. With only a moment to react, Autry leaped onto the tracks and covered the man with his own body, pinning the still-convulsing man down into a grimy puddle of water. The space was about a foot deep, barely enough for their two bodies, and with “his heart pounding,” he later told a reporter, he had to press down on the other man. The train passed so closely overhead, with brakes screeching, the undercarriage of the car smudged his blue cap with grease. People on the platform screamed, and Autry responded, “We’re O.K. down here, but I’ve got two daughters up there. Let them know their father’s O.K.” When asked later about his act of heroism, he simply responded, “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help, I did what I felt was right.”

And sometimes, a seemingly simple act of courage can impact the course of history. In the aftermath of the savage murder of her son, Emmett, Mamie Till knew that no all-white jury in 1950’s Mississippi would convict the men responsible for his death. She refused to quietly accept that fact, and she made the decision to have an open casket at his funeral. “I think everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till,” she said. Her decision ensured that 50,000 people attending the service saw what had been done to him with their own eyes, and this searing image of brutality became a rallying point in the cause for Civil Rights.

More recently, stories abound of Ukrainian courage as the much more modestly equipped soldiers and volunteer militias have stood their ground against the vaunted, mechanized Russian army, which has mounted the largest military mobilization in Europe since World War II. The David v. Goliath metaphors have proliferated since the early days of the war with the now famous, expletive-rich response of the Ukrainian border guards on Snake Island. It does take a bit sand, when you are out of ammunition and under serious bombardment, to tell the commander of a Russian warship who is demanding your surrender, to go “f*** yourself.”

I am inspired by these stories of courage, and I deeply admire these individuals who rose to the occasion, not even though – but, precisely because – I imagine their hearts racing and their knees trembling as they acted on their convictions.

Today, however, I want to talk about a different, quieter form of courage, in this case courage that I have witnessed up close, and that I also deeply admire. **Your courage.**

I’ll start with what it took to navigate life here at Lawrenceville during the past 27 months of the pandemic. All of the normal challenges, such as making friends in the House, finding your voice around the Harkness table, performing in the school musical, trying out for the wrestling team, studying together for a math test, singing with an a cappella group, tutoring a middle school student in Trenton with our community service program – all of this was fundamentally changed. These basic elements of the Lawrenceville experience were either significantly diminished because we were masking and social distancing, or altogether cancelled.

How many of you, for example, had invested years of training and preparation in a particular sport, only to learn that your entire football season or your entire ice hockey season, or basketball or indoor track — simply was not going to happen. At all.

In the early stages of Covid, we had socially distanced House Olympics, we improvised intra-squad scrimmages because we could not play other schools, we closed common rooms, and half your classes were on zoom. And then we shut down for the entire winter term of your IV Form year.

And you know what I did not hear? Complaints.

You understood that protesting was not going to change the basic reality of the situation, and you learned the important lesson that we are not owed anything, we are not entitled necessarily to four uninterrupted, carefree years of high school.

But it took courage to face that reality. Instead of wasting time on what had been taken away, you chose to recognize what you did have, like the ability to be on campus at all when much of the country was still shut down and isolating at home.

As we slowly were able to re-emerge from hybrid teaching, take our masks off and sing, and return to inter-scholastic competition — you appreciated each improvement, and made every second count. I think about the visible joy on the faces of the cast of the Addams Family this past fall. I was not sure who was having more fun, all of you actors on stage, or the audience, laughing along with you.

And when we were able to play a full schedule of athletic contests this year, you didn't waste a moment thinking about last year and what might have been, you poured your hearts into the here and now. I think of moments like the Boys Hockey victory over Hill — for the MAPL championship. Hill was a strong team, but you guys just wanted it more — and then when I announced a day off in the locker room afterwards, I got the sweatiest group hug in my life.

I think of Softball's unbelievable comeback story against undefeated Hun. Down by 7 runs, they started a rally and got within 3 runs. With two outs in the final inning, two runners on base, IVth Former Mia Bocian, who was just back from an injury, hit a bomb, over the fence, tying the game and sending us into extra innings and an eventual victory. The dugout exploded. Talk about all heart.

I think about how it felt when we were able to do the public speaking contest in School meeting this spring — for the first time in three years — something we previously would have taken for granted, suddenly took on a whole new level of importance. Your applause for our finalists brought the house down, and clearly showed how much you were appreciating the simple fact that we were in school meeting, masks off, and enjoying the moment.

And then there was the courage you demonstrated at the Town Hall — it was Sunday evening, February 27, I won't forget that date. Annie and Student Council took the lead in facilitating the gathering — and with honest candor, sometimes strong emotion, you conveyed exactly what you were feeling and exactly what we — the faculty, the administration, and me personally — needed to hear. In order to have a shot at overcoming the challenges we had all been facing for so many months, there had to be honest communication — and you made it clear to us that you were not feeling heard, and that we needed to listen. **That took courage.**

And I want to talk about your courage in the face of the bewildering, heartbreaking events of this spring.

It takes courage to pause in the face of tragedy and confront what happened. In pausing as a community, we were not suppressing our fears or misgivings — I know that you prefects, in Dickinson of course, but across all of our Houses, felt tremendous uncertainty, and yet you stayed steady in your roles, helping and comforting younger members of this community when they needed it most. So many of you contributed to the memorial out in front of Dickinson, so many of you turned out for the lantern lighting down by the pond, and so many of you paused and wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Reid, all of which meant so much to them, they told me over and over.

And just as important as pausing for a time, it also took courage to move forward, not move on, as Joe Kelly reminded us, but move forward.

We moved forward when the Lawrentians had the courage to sing at Jack's service and when a number of you spoke so beautifully in remembrance of him.

We moved forward when our actors went ahead and performed Our Town.

We moved forward when the Track Team won States, when Boys Lacrosse traveled to Connecticut to beat Deerfield, and when the girls traveled to New Hampshire to beat St. Paul's, Exeter, and Andover for the SEAL cup.

None of that was easy, but it was very important for you to muster the courage to help this community move forward. And you did.

So... I love to listen to Mavis Staples challenge the backstabbers and the haters, and I am inspired by my father-in-law's heroic actions on D-Day. Mamie Till's decision energized a movement toward justice, and let us hope that the unflinching determination of the Ukrainian army leads to peace — and in all these cases, I profoundly admire such steadfast conviction.

But it is you and your courage that I am focused on today. In coping with the challenges of these past two years, you have acquired resilience and a kind of wisdom that many adults never quite attain. You have quietly demonstrated determination to prevail during your time here, and having shown it here, it becomes part of who you are, part of what you take with you as you prepare to leave. And I know you will be able to call upon that courage over and over as you confront challenges and difficulties ahead.

Part of the wisdom you have acquired is the acceptance that there will be challenges — but you also bring the faith and confidence to confront such difficulties with the courage each of you will always carry within.

Knowing that about you, gives me hope and fills my heart.

Thank you very much.