



HEAD OF SCHOOL BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

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

ON CERTAINTY

Like a tempting siren song, absolute certainty beguiles, drawing us near enticing, deceptive shores. But beware the honeysweet lure of unexamined conviction; ships have been dashed on those rocky shoals. Seek the discomfort of subtlety and complexity – those waters are no easier to navigate, but the perils less hidden and less fraught.



It was December 17, 1983, and I was traveling from Paris, where I was studying at the time, to visit friends in Great Britain. After a rough, nighttime ferry crossing of the English Channel, I boarded a train from Dover to London.

Minutes from Victoria Station, our final destination, my train suddenly stopped dead, and we waited for two hours on the tracks without any official explanation. Eventually I would learn that the Irish Republican Army had set off a car bomb outside of Harrods Limited department store, timed to go off at the height of weekend Christmas shopping. Three police officers and three civilians were killed, and it injured 90 people, including a number of children.

Of course, the proximity to the incident was unsettling, but mostly, I recall reflecting on what would lead someone to engage in such an abominable act of terrorism. I had been studying Irish literature and history, and I was well steeped in the long-standing, bitter grievances of the Irish under British rule, so that gave me some context.

Later that same weekend, I found myself in pub with a number of students from Cambridge University, and the topic of conversation was of course the bombing. As we were talking, I made the point that, without condoning the actions of the IRA, people will resort to violence when systematically deprived of freedom and hope. One of the Cantabrigians, a certain James from Glasgow, Scotland, who did not lack for confidence, vehemently contradicted me. I'll admit it, I took the bait, and shot back with a lengthy dissertation on the Irish experience over the centuries.

- I began with Oliver Cromwell's 17th-century, genocidal conquest of the island. Some estimates put the loss of life during the campaign at one third or more of the population.
- There ensued mass confiscations of land, the banning of the Gaelic language, laws forbidding Catholics from living in towns, and crushing rents on farmers reduced to tenant farming, impoverishing the Irish peasantry for hundreds of years.
- Then there was the Irish Potato Famine in the 19th century, which resulted in over a million deaths, during which the British government continued to export out of Ireland vast quantities of food.
- In the 1916 Easter Uprising, British forces suppressed the poorly armed rebels by shelling urban areas, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths. And then as recently as 1972, there was Bloody Sunday, in which British soldiers shot and killed 26 unarmed protesters in Northern Ireland.

So indeed, given such history, I argued, while admittedly barbaric, I was not entirely shocked that people, under certain conditions, can be pushed to commit atrocities in return.

With undisguised disdain, James retorted, “You cannot claim to disavow the bombing of civilians while somehow rationalizing the violence. Opposition to terrorism is a moral absolute.” The argument that one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter failed on him, and needless to say, we found no common ground over the course of a long and heated debate.

As I have thought back on that experience, it has not been to relitigate who was right and who was wrong. In all honesty, I now wonder at my own moral relativism, and I have thought a great deal, and not without a touch of admiration, about his moral rectitude, his certainty.

There are of course things worth being certain about, and opposition to terrorism in any form, at any cost, may be one of them. In the end, however, while certainty provides comfort and ease of mind, it just as often obscures important complexity–competing truths, as it were–as we seek to understand the kinds of situations that rarely lend themselves to simplistic analyses.

On face value, it is true that terrorism is worthy of condemnation, but Nat Turner led a violent uprising against slaveowners – from their perspective, he was a “terrorist” – yet if you remove all means of hope of escape from dire, unspeakable suffering, what means are left? Depending on your perspective, there are compelling, heartbreaking histories of attempts to stand up to overwhelming power by American Indians, Armenians in Turkey, Polish Jews in Warsaw, Kurds, Palestinians, Uyghurs, the Darfurians of South Sudan, and yes, at times in their history, the Irish.

Does the moral absolute of my Scottish friend apply in all cases?

One way to consider that is to examine the implications of overweening confidence, or certainty, through an historical lens. Let’s in fact look more closely at the Irish Potato Famine, during which close to 30 percent of the Irish population either succumbed to starvation or emigrated to America.

It is almost impossible to understand what happened without taking into account the influence of the 19th-century demographer and economist Thomas Malthus. He had a somewhat speculative theory that food resources would never keep pace, over time, with explosive population growth, and that therefore catastrophic misery and poverty for most humans was inevitable. For the good of human society, only “war, famine, or moral restraint” could check this dangerous dynamic, he confidently asserted. This Malthusian theory was widely accepted and had an enormous impact on British social policy.

“According to Malthusian doctrine,” writes Professor Irwin Sherman of the University of California, Riverside, “any increase in the Irish population would be due to their carnal and vicious nature. Famine would control this population explosion, and in Malthusian terms this was deserved. The Irish, the British opined, were hopelessly inferior and incurably filled with vice and so they deserved the famine, which would exert control over their excessive breeding.”

And was this an isolated application of this poorly tested, unexamined conviction? Hardly. For much of the 19th century, under British rule in drought-prone India, the policy was to allow famine to act as a form of population control. The grim calculus was that such a practice was for the betterment of all; why save individuals only to condemn them to a life of suffering due to overpopulation? In spite of the boom in agricultural production that occurred throughout the 19th century due to mechanization and other improvements, they clung to outdated theories with catastrophic certainty.

Now, let’s bring this closer to home – let’s think about “certainty” in other environments, such as academic communities.

Dr. Ilana Redstone is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Illinois, and she studies campus discourse, especially efforts to communicate across ideological divides. In a *Washington Post* essay earlier this spring, she wrote about recent strife on Stanford University’s campus that arose over an

invitation to allow a conservative scholar to speak; he happened to be a judge who sits on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. And in describing the events on campus, she refers to what she calls “the certainty trap,” which “gives us the satisfying sense of righteousness we need to judge harshly, condemn and dismiss people with whom we disagree.”

According to Prof. Redstone, the protestors made a number unexamined assertions that, when unpacked, had not been entirely or sufficiently scrutinized. She doesn’t conclude that the concerns were entirely without merit; she just feels that fair and reasonable questions were not asked before going to the barricades.

“Those issues,” she writes, “where we feel most threatened by disagreement are the ones where we most need to be able to talk with one another,” and it is frequently our moral certainty that “holds us back,” that “puts up walls.”

There apparently has been a phenomenon occurring at Grinnell University that similarly impedes campus debate—students refer to it as the “Grinnell smackdown” – where people who took opposing views on complex, sensitive topics, or who misspoke and did not use the latest terminology or most progressive vocabulary were outed on social media and publicly blasted. Campus leaders finally called in a mediator trained in restorative justice just to get people to talk, to hear each other, and to work on tolerating differing perspectives. Creating a more permissive climate for opposing views to be heard is vital to academic institutions – after all, learning stops when disagreement is shut down.

Dr. Randall Kennedy is a professor at Harvard Law School. He is a graduate of Princeton University, a Rhodes Scholar, and earned his law degree from Yale. Prof. Kennedy, whose parents fled the Jim Crow South of the 1950s, is known for taking unusual, sometimes unorthodox stands on prevailing societal attitudes, for inviting debate by asking difficult questions that challenge our comfortable assumptions and convictions.

I heard him speak once on the question of Woodrow Wilson’s complicated legacy at Princeton. Wilson, whose “Fourteen Points” led to the formation of the League of Nations, and under whose presidency women gained the right to vote, also was responsible for the wholesale and humiliating resegregation of the U.S. Postal Service, which some saw as tantamount to presidential approval of Jim Crow policies of the South.

Kennedy was not there to defend Wilson; quite the contrary. He merely asked that if we are to condemn the former president, perhaps remove his name from what, up to that point, had been the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton, don’t we need to apply that same standard evenly?

He brought up the example of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a Civil Rights-Era minister in Birmingham, Alabama, who was called by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “the most courageous civil rights fighter in the South.” In his later years, as a conservative Christian leader in Cincinnati, he sided against gay rights protections being sought by politicians in the city. Should we, asked Kennedy, remove the reverend’s name from the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport?

Or Paul Robeson. He was the son of an escaped slave, was the valedictorian of Somerville High School in New Jersey in 1915, was denied admission to Princeton due to his race, eventually graduated from Columbia Law School, and became one of the great stage actors of the 20th century and the first Black actor to play Othello opposite a White woman on Broadway in 1943.

Robeson also unapologetically eulogized Joseph Stalin, whose murder of civilians rivaled that of Adolf Hitler, and he did so long after Stalin’s crimes against humanity were well known.

There is a Paul Robeson House at Princeton, there is a Paul Robeson Street in town, and there are Paul Robeson High Schools in Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Chicago. Do we remove his name, cancel his memory?

We can't have it both ways, argues Kennedy. One can and should condemn President Wilson for many things that he did and said, but our righteous indignation needs to extend to issues equally. If we demonize some with whom we disagree while giving others a pass, even putting them on pedestals – might we be guilty of hypocrisy, of selective morality? Put another way: Stick to your principles, but leave room for moral complexity in examining complex circumstances; few people are **all good** or **all bad**, and we need to be able to consider perspectives that make us uncomfortable.

After all, Fidel Castro spoke here at Lawrenceville in the 1950s – I happen to disagree with a great many things he has said and done, and yet, if he were alive today and willing to return to Lawrenceville, he would be welcome to speak, even though I know a number of our alums would be outraged.

And how do we, here at Lawrenceville, manage campus discourse? How do we work at taking a principled stand on important issues and yet remain open and respectful of opposing views? How do we avoid the “certainty trap” – the easy, tempting impulse to “judge harshly, condemn and dismiss people with whom we disagree”?

In my view we are at our best around the Harkness table. When we respect the overall ethic of informed debate, that opposing views, even fundamentally different views, are to be examined, not rejected out of hand. This draws us together, makes us closer around the table even as we disagree.

And we are at our best when we extend that ethic beyond the classroom, when that respectful discourse characterizes our interactions in the House and across the campus.

We of course are not perfect, **but my message to you today** is that I have seen extraordinary courage and leadership from this class in ways that have brought us closer, that have helped us bridge our differences, and that honor our Lawrenceville ideals.

- In some communities, the impulse is to put up walls. Politics, for example, quickly becomes divisive, with everyone hunkering down behind their unassailable convictions: “For me to be right, you have to be wrong.” Here, in this community, you brought us together over politics with our new tradition of Democracy Day, emphasizing the non-partisan value of civic engagement.
- In the wake of Stella’s tragic death, you gave me guidance on how and when to come together – and you were right.
- Student Council reimagined School Meeting as a way to help us be more present, more connected.
- It was students who helped envision Community Day, and the Alumni Panel you asked for modeled diversity of opinion and diversity of experience at Lawrenceville – and it brought us closer together, perhaps made some of us in this community feel less alone.
- Just the other day, two of you presented in a faculty meeting your own initiative to be responsive to the needs of our faculty and staff. Having been through a year when you felt the support and care of so many of your teachers, you wanted to do something to reciprocate, to show your appreciation and your care in return.
- When I walked through Kirby Science Center and the Gruss Center for Art and Design Wednesday evening for the Academic Showcase, I saw an extraordinarily impressive diversity of academic interests and creative projects – with much of the school turning out to celebrate your achievements -- **and the sharing of such a broad range of ideas drew us together**.
- And just yesterday at the Underform Prize Ceremony, hearing the exuberant cheers for their classmates, and all of you, earlier this afternoon, celebrating your fellow Fifth Formers’ achievements with loud abandon, your unselfish generosity of spirit was on full display – this is who you have been, and this is who you are as you prepare to graduate.

This is the tone you have set as Leaders. This is the year you have helped to create. And you did this amid, or in spite of, countless challenges that were not of your making. Your time here was never characterized by comfortable certainty. The past four years, if nothing else, have taught you that events in life can play out with tremendous uncertainty. Absolute certainty, while tempting, is illusory.

A pandemic can strike, and change entirely how you thought your high school years were supposed to play out. So did you allow this dispiriting knowledge to diminish your commitment to make the most of your time here? Did you allow it to dampen your hopes and dreams for the future? You have demonstrated a very different kind of resolve.

In September at Convocation, I spoke of my faith in all of you: “What inspires my awe and respect,” I said, “is your ability to emerge out of the challenges of recent years, to have faced sacrifice and disappointment, as you all have, and still muster the kind of hopeful, forwarding-looking passion I have seen and sensed so clearly” as this year, your Fifth Form year, commenced.

Over the course of your time here, and especially this year, your strength of heart has been tested and your lack of entitlement, born of sacrifices you have endured, has been proven.

You do not need the world to offer predictable, simplistic waters to navigate; such a tempting vision of the future is indeed a siren song. The world offers complexity, irony, even tragedy at times, and no amount of wishing will change that.

But what I do know is that you are prepared to take this on, to embrace life, knowing you can't always control it. I know that you will thrive as you work to make your mark and improve your part of the world, **just as you have made your mark here**, by showing us that you did not let the uncertainties you encountered define your experience, that you chose, with courage and determination, to write a very different story about your time here, and in doing so, you have left Lawrenceville a better, stronger place. **Of that, I am certain.**

Thank you very much.