

# HEAD LINES

*A message from Chip Denton, Head of School*



*The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.*  
– C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

September 2023

Dear Trinity Community,

The start of school is the end of summer. And here at the end of Trinity's 28th summer, I find myself asking, "What are summers for?" For a school that espouses a "rich yet unhurried" education, summer may offer a new start for rhythm and rest that helps us thrive and flourish. Even for those of us who don't take a break from working, summer can be a change, which is sometimes as good as a rest, as they say.



**Summer, for me, is a time for reading.** I remember our vacations by the books I read in this place and that: Pawleys Island was *Les Miserables*; California, *Cry, the Beloved Country*; Colorado, Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. The last few summers, on family trips to Maine, a friend showed me a used bookstore in Farmington called Twice Sold Tales, a dusty and delightful place. I love stopping there on our way to our destination, browsing the homemade shelves, looking for that book that might jump out at me. I always have several (too many, too heavy) in my bookbag just in case, but the serendipity of finding a treasure is part of the fun. Two summers ago it was *The Trumpeter of Krakow*. This summer it was George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*. It's as if these books found me.

This adventure of finding a book I wasn't looking for may be an unconscious imitation of my lifelong literary mentor, C. S. Lewis. When he was a teenager, a precocious and confirmed atheist, waiting at a train station, he turned to the bookstall. "I picked out an Everyman in a dirty jacket, *Phantastes, a Faerie Romance*, George MacDonald," he said. "Then the train came in. I can still remember the voice of the porter calling out the village names Saxon and sweet as a nut—'Bookham, Effingham, Horsley train.' That evening I began to read my new book." This chance find changed Lewis's life. His adolescent and twenty-something letters to his friend Arthur Greeves reveal that he went from one MacDonald book to another and that *Phantastes* became for him a sort of devotional work. An older, more mature, and Christian Lewis would later write in *Surprised by Joy*, "**That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized;** the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.... I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*."

I hope that this summer many of you took the time to read MacDonald's *The Golden Key*, our Trinity Reads book for 2023. And I hope you found there some whiff of the aroma that Lewis sensed back in 1916. Aroma is probably the right sort of description of MacDonald's power—I can't capture his message in a proposition. How does one describe a taste, a smell? MacDonald's is the scent of truth, goodness, and beauty, but especially of *goodness*. It's an experience you can't put in a précis. As Mossy's aunt says, "He has to find that out for himself." If you haven't yet, go read the book and find out for yourself.

**Such mythic tales of goodness are essential to our students' education.** Their lives—on social media, in contemporary fiction, and in our broken and dysfunctional world—will sing them songs of cynicism, anger,

fear, mistrust, resentment, entitlement, and self. Especially of self, King Self. But where will they hear of the country from which the shadows come? Where will they meet the Beautiful Grandmother who rises, takes them up in her arms, and says, “Ah, you are come at last! I have been looking for you a long time”? Where will they learn that “no girl need be afraid to go with a youth that has the golden key”?

**The reading of such tales develops the imagination the way lifting weights develops our muscles.** And the training of the imagination is a part of education too often overlooked. Lewis talks about this in a much more sophisticated way in a book our faculty read this summer, *The Abolition of Man*. There he says that the development of sentiments and emotional reactions that are in accord with reality is essential to a good education. Between the thought “I should tell the truth” and the feeling “I am afraid to tell the truth” is the noble sentiment “it is beautiful to tell the truth,” and the habit of telling the truth.

Trinity’s former Athletic Director Sue Eckstein, a college and professional golfer, used to tell me that the main reason she wanted a golf team was so that the players could learn to keep a scorecard honestly. The temptations to cheat, just a stroke here or there, are fierce. But the stories and examples of honest players and the disciplined practice of marking every shot shapes young players into the kind of women and men who will have the propensity to tell the truth in more important parts of their lives.

These just and noble sentiments, in line with the Way of Wisdom and Truth, are formed by habit and by imagination, and they mediate between our rational and appetitive selves. In the face of great and deadly temptations, in the fog of doubt, **it is our stable sentiments, shaped by a vision of the True, Good, and Beautiful, that will see us through.** I think of Lewis’s Puddleglum, who in the dark underworld, entranced by the witch’s incense and soothing plausible lies, remembered the sun above and the goodness of Narnia and plopped his marshwiggly foot right into the witch’s fire. That was an act governed not by appetite, nor by reason (which was weak and clouded), but by something else deep and reliable. You might say that we read books like *The Golden Key* to make Puddleglums of us all. May his tribe increase, and may Trinity School send forth platoons of such creatures.

This work of irrigating the deserts of students’ sensibilities is good work that teachers can do for *every* student, whether Christian or not. As a Christian school, we understand that **all virtue is rooted in Christ**, and that true virtue—the goodness that attends our salvation from sin—comes only through the atonement of Christ and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. But not all of our students are there, believing that, ready to receive that. And must we wait until their hearts are strangely warmed by the Spirit before we ask them to tell the truth even when it hurts or to keep their promises or to put the interests of others before their own? Far from it. What Lewis calls The Way is something we call all of our students to. Even if we know that the irrigation of their moral deserts will never save them, it will train them to be better sons and daughters, better husbands and wives, better employees, better citizens.

But not, of course, perfect ones. And they will have to find out for themselves that perfection is our Father’s standard. When they fail, as we all do, they will have the contact info for the One who came to save not the righteous but the unrighteous. He will wait patiently for them, and he stands ready to forgive and to heal. “And when I see thee as thou art, I’ll praise thee as I ought.”

Here’s to another great year of education in Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chip Denton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Chip Denton  
Head of School