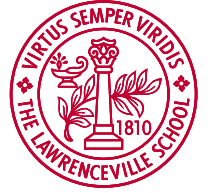


Convocation Address

Sunday, September 3, 2023

Address by Stephen S. Murray H'54 '55 '63 '65 '16 P'16 '21

The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head of School



On Being Kind

"Kindness begins where necessity ends."

- from *The Lincoln Highway* – by Amor Towles

My father used to tell me a story about his great, great grandfather, who lived in New York City at the time of the Manhattan Draft Riots, during the Civil War. These riots primarily involved working-class Irish immigrants, who were being conscripted wholesale to serve in the Union Army. It went without saying that they could not afford the \$300 commutation fee, whereby a wealthy individual could hire someone to fight in his stead.

This simmering resentment against the draft in turn led to heated racial animus against Black Americans, both freed and enslaved persons, whose dire plight elicited little sympathy from the destitute Irish, who themselves had experienced severe famine and extreme deprivation as dirt-poor tenant farmers.

Anger at being sent off to a brutal war to die for a cause they did not feel was theirs exploded into a series of uprisings and violent rampages that were quelled only when President Lincoln ordered intervention by military regiments.

In one particularly cruel episode, as my father told the story, our forebear, his great, great grandfather, Irish American himself, was out and about in lower Manhattan, and he came upon a mob that was setting off uptown to burn down an orphanage for African-American children – it was likely the Colored Orphan Asylum at 44th St. and 5th Avenue.

He raced ahead of the mob, and arrived in time to warn the inhabitants of the orphanage and help the children get out in time. The orphanage itself was burned to the ground.

I hope this story is true. I like to believe that it is, though I have never been able to independently verify it, beyond my father's telling. Either way, this extraordinary gesture of good will towards others, of following one's better instincts, makes for a proud legacy, something for future generations to strive to live up to.

But being such a lofty act also puts the gesture a bit out of reach, makes it somewhat difficult to emulate – it's more the stuff of heroes. It is easy to promise ourselves, "If I ever came upon an orphanage being threatened by a mob, I'd surely intervene." We might think well of ourselves for making such a promise, but such heroic opportunities are rare, and our resolve to do the right thing is likely, and conveniently, never to be tested.

What if we consider something slightly more ordinary, the kind of situation we are more apt to encounter in the normal course of things?

My best friend once described to me an experience she had in the fourth grade many years ago. There was a new girl who had moved into town and had joined her class mid-year. The family lived in very modest housing and were of modest means. She did not wear the right clothes or listen to the latest music.

At some point in her first few days, she had to have a routine check-up with the nurse at school, who found that she had head lice. People cringe when they hear of lice but of course it is as normal a human experience as catching the flu and can happen to anyone, regardless of their hygiene.

Well, this nurse marched down to the girl's classroom and announced that the new girl was going home because she had lice and that the rest of the class would now have to be checked.

You can imagine the reaction. Worse yet, the poor girl had to stay home for a week until the problem cleared up, and then when she returned, the cruelty started. Her classmates taunted her mercilessly, called her dirty. Having not yet had the opportunity to make friends or find acceptance, she suddenly found herself all the more isolated, the butt of a thousand daily slights. What a desperately sad, lonely, humiliating experience this must have been for her.

Soon enough, this friend of mine noticed what the girl was going through and decided to invite her over to her house for the afternoon. This led to another invitation, and another. They became friends. Suddenly this girl was no longer quite so vulnerable. Suddenly she was not entirely exposed socially. Like the bully who backs off when even just one person sticks up for the small kid, the crowd backed off and left her alone. Eventually, they too began inviting her to parties and outings, and the lice incident was entirely forgotten.

By the way, that best friend of mine? I went on to marry her. I mean, who wouldn't want to spend the rest of their life with such a person?

My point here, of course, is that while we may be inspired by stories of noble, heroic actions, it is the small, compassionate gestures in our everyday lives, that make the real difference. **The quality of life in a given community is directly determined by how frequently each of us takes advantage of the small, daily opportunities to follow our hearts - to show kindness.**

In this case, it took just a small amount of courage to go against the popular sentiment of the crowd - it made all the difference in another person's life, and it set an entirely different tone for everyone else in that classroom.

In his book, The War for Kindness, Stanford Professor Jamil Zaki writes about the profound importance of showing empathy. He says, "Empathy's most important role...is to inspire kindness: our tendency to help each other, even at a cost to ourselves." Still, he goes on, "Kindness can often feel like a luxury - the ultimate soft skill in a hard world." (p.4) He points out that Charles Darwin found kindness incompatible with his theory of natural selection, as described in his seminal work, The Descent of Man. If our natural impulse is self-preservation in a kill-or-be-killed environment, helping someone else at our own expense not only leaves us vulnerable in an unforgiving landscape, it may even lead to our demise and therefore unable to

pass on our genes. And yet, Zaki goes on to say, seen through another lens, kindness may in fact be “one of the animal kingdom’s most important survival skills.” (p.5)

This view certainly echoes the renowned Harvard socio-biologist E.O. Wilson, often best known for his groundbreaking studies of ant colonies. In his *New York Times* best seller, The Social Conquest of Earth, he reflects rather optimistically on the human condition. One of his major questions in the book is to examine, from an evolutionary perspective, how social behavior not only enhances but actually promotes survival. Ants, he had found, are highly social and, precisely because of that, highly successful. *And so are humans.*

In the human context, according to Wilson, our virtues are largely responsible for our success – evolution favors our better impulses. Compassion, collaboration, and cooperation give us an edge as we struggle for survival in the cut-throat competition of natural selection. Greed and self-interest offer few advantages to our species. We are slow and weak, and left alone to fend for ourselves, not much of a match for a swift, hungry predator with fangs and claws.

According to Ira Byock, an American physician who writes prolifically on medical care, famed anthropologist Margaret Mead makes a similar point.

She was once asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. One might have expected her response to be the making of tools, or perhaps burial rituals.

“But no, Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken then healed. [She] explained, that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink, or hunt food. (...) A broken femur that has healed is proof that someone has taken time to stay with the person..., has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. ‘Helping someone through difficulty is where civilization starts,’ said Mead. We are at our best when we serve others.”

We are at our best when we serve others. Some of the most influential thinkers of our time see this ability to care for each other as an evolved trait, something quintessentially human.

Even so, cautions Zaki, we don’t always act on this evolved trait, this natural impulse to show kindness. “We can,” he says, “but we often don’t. (...) The modern world has made kindness harder,” he writes. (p.7)

He goes on to describe the ironic phenomenon that in spite of increasing urbanization, we feel more isolated and disconnected, by nearly all measures. In a small village, passing by an individual in visible distress, we stop and find out if we can help. In a large city, how often do we walk by a homeless person suffering and in misery? The closer we live, literally on top of one another, the more distant we feel.

To this I would add the similar irony of social media. In certain ways, digital communication connects us. We are more networked, linked, “friended,” “followed,” “liked,” and “shared” than ever before in history. Facebook reports close to 3 billion active users. And it also draws us apart.

Digital platforms somehow give us license to say and do things we otherwise, in any other context, would find reprehensible. How many of you have witnessed online insults and cruelties between people who

would not dream of saying such things face to face in the common room of your House, or side by side, around a Harkness table?

Given that we have the highly evolved potential to show each other kindness, and yet we do so unreliably, we clearly have to make the effort. Which leads me to my main point, the question I want to ask this community as we kick off this school year: What kind of community do we want to be a part of? What standards of civility, empathy, respect, and kindness do we aspire to live by? We have a choice, after all.

Certainly, COVID increased the challenges we face. During the pandemic, social development was impeded because the little stuff we had taken for granted, the very things that bind us together – routine polite greetings, simple civil interactions, everyday personal touches – suddenly were not possible. In the absence of being in person, digital interactions were normalized, and social media use surged.

If I only experienced you behind a mask, or more distantly as a small square on a computer screen, or, even more distantly, as some profile with a nickname on Snapchat – why would I be invested in your well-being?

As we process some of the lessons from this period of time on our own campus – in some cases lessons learned the hard way – and as we seek to understand how we can do better, we need to recognize this choice – we need to choose to make an effort to tap into our natural empathy for each other. Recent experience right here at Lawrenceville has taught us that the stakes are high, that people can be hurt, that tragedies can occur – and so we need to get this right, for everyone's sake.

Saying something unkind because you haven't thought through how it might be perceived, or posting a mean-spirited comment on the spur of the moment, does not make someone responsible for a tragic outcome. After all, we don't always know the impact that such a gesture is going to have. But isn't that the point? We almost never know what another person is actually going through. We need to start by remembering that behind the brave smile they may put on, everyone experiences private challenges that they don't dare speak about, and we need to take to heart that comments can land hard, and they can bring about tremendous, unintended harm.

A friend from Ohio once told me a story from his high school years – a story about how, as I say, you just never know what someone else is actually going through, and that story has stayed with me.

This friend went to a big, rough-and-tumble Catholic School on the west side of Cleveland. Because of where their last names fell in the alphabet, all during middle school and on to freshman year in high school, a certain student had the same hallway locker next to him – a small, shy, pimply kid who always seemed to be alone. Except when the bullies found him.

Now, my friend was a football player who went on to be a quarterback at Yale. Even as a high school freshman, he was a pretty big, confident kid. He watched these juniors in leather jackets come around every day, and make this poor kid's life miserable. This boy was vulnerable, had no friends, and they were all over him.

One day, this friend of mine had had enough. He suddenly grabbed the biggest kid by the lapels of his

leather jacket, threw him up against a locker hard, and said, slowly, "Leave him alone, and do – not – touch – him – again. Ever." His tone made the message crystal clear. Like all bullies, he made a few blustery comments, but had nothing to actually back it up, and he walked away. My friend also walked away, and forgot completely about the interaction.

27 years later, he was at a high school reunion, sitting with a group of friends. A guy walked up to his table, composed and confident looking, and said, "Carmen, I need to thank you, you know you saved me." My friend said, "I don't think I know you." And the other guy replied, "Yes, you do – our lockers were side by side for 6 years. You stood up for me one day, and you saved my life." Carmen still didn't get it.

"I was done," he said. "Those guys had made my life hell, and I was done, I was going to end it, but when you stepped in, it changed things. I mean it, you saved my life, I am not kidding."

You just never know what a person is going through. A small gesture of unkindness can land far harder than you intend – and there is no taking it back – and by the same token, a small act of kindness can do far, far more than you anticipate.

So this is what I mean when I ask, "What kind of community do we want to be, and what are we prepared to do about it?" As I say, I believe we have a choice.

There are certain steps that we are already taking. We are rolling out, for example, a strategic plan for well-being. A number of you may recall a workshop I did last spring in the Heely room where I gathered thoughts and ideas from a number of you. From that, and with considerable input from the faculty, we have crafted a vision statement describing the kind of community we at least aspire to be:

The vision statement starts by saying:

"Lawrenceville seeks to build an even stronger community in which all members feel mutual responsibility and have the opportunity to grow and thrive physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. Overall well-being is enhanced ... in an environment that promotes kindness, respect, joy, and a measured pace of life."

We talk about the strengths of our House system, where *"every student helps make the House a fundamentally safe, friendly, and welcoming community."*

We talk about Harkness, with *"the democracy of voices around the table."*

And we talk about *"the Heart and soul of the entire community, [with] all members ... invested in positive systems of compassion, empathy, accountability, and self-advocacy... and a sincere desire to seek the best for all. Together, these become tangible aspects of the lived experience and wellbeing for all individuals, especially our students, who are central to our enduring purpose."*

But in order to fulfill this vision, we need every member of this community to lean in – and it won't take all that much if everyone participates.

Maya Angelou said, "It take courage to be kind," and she's right – but not that much. It takes cowardice to be unkind, to be cruel, that's for sure, but it does not take a ton of courage to be kind – you just need to follow your heart. The ability to do good is in every single one of you, and you just have to choose it.

We can build our community one act of kindness at a time. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa said, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

And we don't even need to overwhelm the world – we just need to shape our corner of the world – we just need to make Lawrenceville into the best possible version of itself – and I know we can do this.

So, yes, indeed, we will of course look for those loftier moments when we can do something memorable or heroic. It might be saving an orphanage from a mob, or more simply, standing up to a group of bullies.

But let's not forget those even more common, everyday opportunities – when your roommate dares you to post an embarrassing photo of someone and you refuse, or when you see a person on their own who just needs a quick friendly word to tag along to dinner or to join the game of beach volleyball over at the Big Red Sport Court.

Those moments add up, and if we act on our better impulses consistently, they become woven into the fabric that holds us together – they become the community, not just that we aspire to be, but who we are.

Just remember, back in the fourth grade, so many years ago, all it took was a simple invitation to come over to play after school, and that changed everything. And that's what I call 'being kind.' So, let's ROLL, and let's have a great year!

Thank you very much!