



Pingry

Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear Convocation — September 8, 2023

In Our Own Way

One of my favorite plays, *Doubt*, opens with a question: “What do you do when you’re not sure?”

Before arriving at Pingry in the seventh grade, I had a standard approach to uncertainty, to new activities, and to unfamiliar situations. When I was comfortable and fairly certain that I could predict the outcome, I was all-in. But the minute obstacles appeared, especially unforeseen ones, I grew skeptical and reserved.

Nowhere was this more apparent than during my short-lived musical career.

Like many children of the 80s, I was obsessed with Bruce Springsteen’s *Born in the USA* album and in awe of Bruce’s sidekick, the larger-than-life saxophonist Clarence Clemons. So when my fourth grade music teacher asked me to pick an instrument for the year, I had visions of “Thunder Road” and immediately chose the tenor saxophone. Unfortunately, it weighed almost as much as I did.

“Here,” my music teacher said, taking away the saxophone and handing me a recorder instead. “Why don’t you start by playing Hot Cross Buns.”

Unwilling to compromise on my dreams of music stardom, I dropped the recorder and quickly shifted my attention to the piano and to mastering Billy Joel’s “Only The Good Die Young.” Rather than jumpstart my career playing to a packed house, however, my first performance was a duet with my younger sister in the basement of St. John’s Lutheran Church. And halfway through a torturous version of “Hungry Eyes,” I remember catching a glimpse of our father, who had a pained expression on his face, a look that said, “I’m missing the Giants–Eagles game for *this*.”

My musical career ended before the football game did.

My response to uncertainty only increased once I arrived at Pingry. And my suspicion was finely tuned on the day of Convocation, when my advisor reviewed the Honor Code. What does it mean to be “a responsible citizen of and contributor to the larger community and the world”? What is “the common good,” exactly, and how do I identify it, much less uphold it?

The Honor Code sure sounded nice, as an abstract concept, but as I sat through Convocation I remember looking around at the crowd and hoping that someone out there knew what the heck was going on. Because I certainly did not. Upholding and living up to the Honor Code seemed like a big deal here and an important job, but I didn't see where I fit into it.

With the benefit of hindsight — and this summer's new *Barbie* movie — I have a better understanding of what I was thinking and feeling back then, of why I didn't see myself as a leader capable of living up to the Honor Code and influencing others. In fact, if there were a soundtrack to my first Convocation as a Pingry student, it would be Ryan Gosling's all-powerful anthem "I'm Just Ken," which captures what it feels like to try to find your place in the world.

For my first few months as a Pingry student, I struggled. I had low Kenergy. I underestimated my connection to the Honor Code and my important role in building community. I mistakenly interpreted the Honor Code as a set of rules designed to reward individual achievement and punish bad behavior, like cheating. In *Barbie* terms, I believed that the Honor Code's purpose was simply to maintain order and prevent a dance-off between the Kens.

There's another cultural moment from the summer that, for me, helps to illustrate the true purpose and potential of our Honor Code. Back in June, 13-year-old Arisa Trew of Australia became the first female skateboarder to land a 720 in a competition — that's two full rotations while in the air. What made this such a historic event wasn't just her gender or her age. What made it historic was that the originator of the 720, 53-year-old legendary skateboarder Tony Hawk, was looking on and offering encouragement to Arisa and her fellow skaters.

If you watch the YouTube clips of that competition, you'll notice Tony Hawk coaching her on the sidelines, a sight that professional skateboarder Kristin Ebeling says, "reminded me just how cool skateboarding is — we want to see each other win." The more I researched Arisa's 720, the more I learned that skateboarding isn't about competitors beating one another, but about individuals coming together and helping each other to scale new heights.

When I entered Pingry as a seventh-grader, I remember feeling an intense internal pressure to perform, and to perform at a high level. It was easy for me to prioritize things that I could more easily measure and master, like homework and grades and my mile times, rather than consider vague concepts like responsibility and the common good. I knew what was required of me to tackle individual goals but was less comfortable with what the requirements were for being a true community member.

Fortunately, the longer I remained at Pingry the more I encountered faculty and students who modeled what it means to care and to be selfless. These individuals showed me that what matters is being fully present with each other, not striving to be perfect. In short, they stressed that this community, and our Honor Code, only works if everyone participates.

Junior Nataly Ruiz '25 summarized this perfectly when she described the Honor Code in just seven words. She said it means "***we hold each other to high standards.***" In her view, our high expectations of each other are a reflection of our respect for one another. And the respect we build allows us to come together and help each other to scale new heights.

One of Pingry's most respected teachers, authors, and scholars, Dr. Herbert Hahn, who taught at Pingry from 1944 to 1981, had a similar view of our shared responsibility. Speaking about his faculty colleague Richard Baldwin, Dr. Hahn wrote: "A good teacher believes in what (they are) doing...is willing to listen as well as tell...and to wait for results to show. A good teacher doesn't lose patience over the lack of depth in (their) pupils' thinking or the halting, inarticulate way in which they express themselves."

Halting and inarticulate: No two words better sum up my musical career (or my seventh grade year at Pingry). And yet I overcame my impatience and my reticence because the adults and students around me held me to high standards and continued to believe in my potential.

As I entered my freshman year, and joined the Varsity cross country team, I was fortunate to train with a senior, Chris Bender '89 whose sense of humor and perspective made a deep impression on me. He was talented and popular and intelligent, and he was also nice, humble, and interested in my development and my experience on the team.

It makes sense to me that Chris is now a successful Hollywood producer, because even at Pingry he was focused on the team, on more than his own success — he spent his energy encouraging us and ensuring that we also reached our potential. I was unsurprised to recently learn that as a college student, Chris wrote to the Bucknell University administration in an effort to convince them to adopt an Honor Code. Here's part of what he wrote:

"When I went to high school, I felt special and full of pride because I knew I was trusted. This trust and responsibility made me realize the importance of everything I did because I had a standard to live up to.

When I did what was right it made me feel good because I was living up to the standards I had accepted by attending my school and being part of that community.

No one is perfect, and I do break these rules occasionally, but in the end I always grow a little bit more because I develop a deeper understanding of these rules and of myself and of my beliefs."

I find it reassuring and humbling that this wasn't written by a Pingry adult. Chris Bender wrote it while he was still in college. He was a recent Pingry graduate, a student not much older than many of you.

It's worth remembering that Pingry's Honor Code was *also* drafted by students. It was written by students back in 1926, and then updated by students in 1988. In the nearly 100 years since it was first written, our Honor Code has always been primarily *your* document — a student document that reflects your collective vision and hope for our school.

Pingry has a long history of building community and working for the greater good. As you make your way through Pingry and through your lives, how often will you pause to consider the people around and behind you? How often will you stop to consider how you might mentor or help others — and will you do so without expecting anything in return?

In making those decisions, I hope you choose to emulate people like today's Letter-In-Life Award winner, Lyric Winik '84. In addition to now being the youngest living graduate to receive Pingry's highest honor, she now holds the distinction of being the **first** graduate to receive **both** the Letter-In-Life Award **and** the Magistri Laudandi Award. Lyric received the prestigious Magistri Laudandi Award at her 1984 graduation, and that award inscription reads as follows:

In every class there is one student who graciously gives of themselves to help the school and fellow students, and who demonstrates a personal integrity and generosity that inspires the best in others. This person's own achievements are many, yet their sense of purpose is to the greater good. While others may be identified as "the student most likely to succeed," this person is prized as "the student who helps all succeed."

My hope for this year is that we all choose to follow Lyric Winik's example of placing a premium on helping **each other** to succeed. That all of us make the effort to fully invest in more than our classes and extracurriculars and take the time not just to reflect on the Honor Code but to try and live it **in our own way**.

For some of us this will mean running for student government or volunteering to tutor a classmate or mentor a colleague; for others it might be less visible and will mean slowing down, exercising patience, asking for forgiveness or extending it.

Living the Honor Code can take endless forms and what's important is that each of us makes an effort to accept that responsibility.

Let me end by returning to the beginning, to the play *Doubt* and the character who poses that opening question — "What do you do when you're not sure?" I'm not spoiling the plot when I say that he doesn't provide the audience with a foolproof answer or a perfect solution. He does, however, offer us some wise advice: "When you are lost, you are not alone," he says. And neither are we.

Individually, we will all encounter uncertainty and face difficult choices during the year. And yet collectively we have an Honor Code that we can turn to, and a community that we can rely on. We won't be perfect, but we'll be patient with one another, we'll hold each other to high standards, and we'll grow together.

That's how we'll measure success, and that's how we'll succeed.

Let's have a great year...