



Pingry

Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear Graduation — June 11, 2023

Sometimes, despite great teachers and excellent instruction, we ignore sound advice and make odd choices. For some of us, these poor choices and learning experiences tend to occur most frequently during our first “real” job, and this was certainly the case with me. Barely a month into my career as an English teacher, I was faced with an assignment that filled me with self-doubt and panic — teaching all 24 books of Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey* to a class of freshmen.

As the days went on, and Odysseus wandered and got lost, I also got lost and my students became confused and restless. And halfway through Book 9, where Odysseus and his men find themselves in the land of the lotus eaters and lose all desire to do anything, my students revolted, throwing their books into the center of the room and refusing to continue.

At this critical juncture, I did what any young English teacher in the 1990s would do: I turned to the most famous English teacher movie of all time — *Dead Poets Society* — and recalled the actions of Robin Williams’ charismatic teacher, a character named Mr. Keating. (That my 9th Grade English teacher at Pingry was also named Mr. Keating seemed like a good omen and filled me with a misguided sense of optimism.) Of course, I thought to myself, if I just imitate the *movie version* of Mr. Keating, my students will stop protesting, they’ll pick their dictionary-sized copies of *The Odyssey* from up off the floor, and we’ll happily finish Homer’s epic poem.

If you’re familiar with the film *Dead Poets Society*, you know what happens next: I climbed onto my desk and dared my tired students to seize the day and consider a new perspective. While Robin Williams earned an Oscar nomination for his role in *Dead Poets Society*, unfortunately I wasn’t as persuasive. And the more passionately I spoke, the more skeptical my students became.

I don’t recall exactly when the Head of School entered the room, but she was no less moved by my argument or my creative use of jazz hands. “Mr. Lear,” she said, silencing the room like Harry Potter’s Headmistress Umbridge, “get down before you get hurt.”

I did, slowly and awkwardly, and the rest of the class is a blur. Interestingly, however, the end of that day is remarkably clear, even now; for that afternoon I was scheduled to meet with my former English teacher, the *real* Mr. Keating, to go for a run on the Basking Ridge Campus. And

when I arrived at Pingry, I saw him sitting in his usual space, conferencing with a student at his round table in the hallway.

And watching him talk this student through an essay draft, something he had done countless times with me only five years prior, I began to remember the many other influential Pingry teachers and coaches that I also had — like Coach Ed Scott and Mr. LaValley, Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Geacintov — individuals who, like Mr. Keating, made time every day to sit patiently with me and answer my many (many) questions.

These teachers didn't stand on desks or rely on gimmicks to get me to care — they simply showed up, day after day, and by doing so made me believe in my own ability to improve. They convinced me that I had an opportunity and a responsibility to contribute in some way to this impressive community.

In 1978, award-winning journalist and *60 Minutes* correspondent Andy Rooney wrote an essay about his high school history teacher, Dr. Herbert Hahn, who left Albany, New York, in 1945 to join the faculty at Pingry, where he remained for 37 years.

In his essay, Mr. Rooney asks the following question:

“How many teachers do you have in your life? Between grade school, high school, and college, if you're lucky enough to go to college, I suppose you have about fifty teachers.”

And of those fifty, he writes that Dr. Hahn was “great” because, “It didn't really matter what Dr. Hahn's class was called. He taught life and his subject was of secondary importance. When we were fourteen and fifteen, he talked to us as though we were human beings, not children.”

Seniors, please take a minute to reflect on the adults who've made an impact on your Pingry education, who treated you with this kind of respect and who helped you to arrive at this impressive stage:

- The parents and grandparents who ferried you, not unlike Charon, the ferryman in Hades, to never-ending practices and sleepovers and college visits;
- Consider the teachers who spent their last days of summer break **here** at school, filling their classrooms with books and posters, colorful artwork and candy, in preparation for your arrival;
- The nurses and administrators, bus drivers, facilities team members, and SAGE employees who smiled as they welcomed you to campus each day;
- The adults who gave you a second chance after you took those ill-advised cannonballs at the senior retreat...

While it's common and understandable to celebrate the big gesture, the *Jerry Maguire*-style

farewell or the dramatic climb atop the desk, the Pingry relationships that I cherish (and the ones that I suspect you're recalling now) were instead built quietly over time, during conference periods and advisory, during rehearsals, after-school enrichment, bus rides and labs; and they share a common ingredient: they relied on other individuals making the decision to show up, and to do so daily, for someone else's benefit. Often for **your** benefit.

I discovered a lot at Pingry, but more than anything I learned that showing up repeatedly is what builds community. And to do that, you don't need an advanced degree or a particular background. You simply have to commit to helping others, to avoiding short-cuts, and to prioritizing your relationships.

Amazon's founder Jeff Bezos has written that, "Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room."

There are several places on campus honoring the life and memory of Pingry student John Taylor Babbitt from the Class of 2007, who tragically died of sudden cardiac arrest during his junior year at Pingry. The upper turf field bears his name, and there is an annual John Taylor Babbitt Walk held on the Basking Ridge Campus each spring; in addition, there is a plaque leading to the Bugliari World Cup Field and the varsity baseball field that reads:

A loving brother and son / A loyal friend and teammate / Kind, charismatic, hard-working, and fun-loving / When measured in years, his life was far too short, / When measured in love and happiness, / his life was far-reaching.

John's life and example inspire all of us to consider some fundamental questions:

- How are we measuring happiness and success?
- What legacy are we building or leaving behind?
- Around what tables and in what spaces are we working together, sharing a joke, or simply watching a show in comfortable silence?

Seniors, as you pick up your diploma and get ready to begin your next Odyssey, you'll notice that there is also a book, the memoir *Stay True* by Hua Hsu, for you to take home. This is our small gift to you. (I know what you're thinking: A book! That's amazing!)

Although you'll be busy in the months ahead, I hope you find the time to read it, because it's a wonderful reminder of the importance of friendship and the potential you each have now to live a life that is far-reaching and filled with happiness.

As you begin your next adventure, you'll undoubtedly be asked to make countless tough choices. Our collective hope for you is that you remember three things along the way:

- to stay true to yourself in the process;
- to stay true to the friendships that you've made at Pingry; and
- to stay true to the values that your parents and your teachers have instilled in you.

To answer Jeff Bezos' question, I already know what we'll say about you next year when you're no longer in our classrooms and on our campuses: we'll miss you and the many ways that you made coming to school each day so much fun. (And also challenging, but mostly fun.)

Odysseus eventually made his way back home to Ithaca, but it took him ten long years. I hope you return a lot sooner to share your stories with us. Congratulations, graduates of the Pingry Class of 2023, your next adventure has officially begun.