



HEAD OF SCHOOL BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

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ON TRUST

“Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time.” - Maya Angelou

“When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.” - Fred Rogers

“Trust life, and it will teach you, in joy and sorrow, all you need to know.” - James Baldwin



Some of the most valuable lessons in life blindsides you, right out of nowhere. You think you're seeing a situation clearly, just for what it is, then suddenly, there's a change in perspective, and things take on a whole new meaning.

One of mine occurred early in my career, while teaching in a boarding school.

A colleague and I were offering an interdisciplinary course on the Holocaust, delving into the distinctly human capacity for cruelty and inhumanity. Looking through various lenses of history, literature, philosophy, and the science of human behavior, we explored:

- how a modern society can spin wildly out of control in spite of legal protections, humanist ethics, and religious values;
- how, on a large scale, people can be disempowered and rendered helpless;
- and what options, realistically, are available to individuals when faced with what can only be described as evil.

It was a heavy subject for a senior spring elective, but with our Harkness approach, we had lively discussions, and our students were generally quite engaged.

As the spring was progressing, my colleague and I were discussing how we might shake things up, perhaps add a ripple to the usual calm, reflective discussions in the safe, familiar setting of our classroom.

One of our readings at that point in the course examined the natural impulse of in-groups to marginalize out-groups. It was an essay based on a rather chilling experiment in a 3rd grade class in 1970, where the teacher pitted students with blue eyes in the class against students with brown eyes. The resulting impact on the children was striking and rather disturbing.

We considered trying a version of this in-group/out-group dynamic with our own students. “We’ve just read the essay,” I said, “they’ll see right through it.” As I thought further about it, it occurred to me that we almost knew each other too well to pull this off – I had previously taught or coached or lived in a dorm with nearly every kid in the class, but it seemed worth trying something just a little different.

As part of the set up, we spent the next few days making off-hand comments here and there, like, “Hey I know it’s senior spring, but you guys need to keep your effort up.” Or, “Was everyone prepared today? Our discussion was kind of flat. Let’s keep focused here.”

We were just getting into a book called “The Nazi Seizure of Power” by William Sheridan Allen. It is a well-researched, densely written account of the Nazi takeover of German society, one small town at a time, by infiltrating local political structures and social entities such as book clubs and choral societies. The homework assignment for the following day was a long, borderline tedious, set of chapters.

When students arrived for class, there was a sign on the door saying, “Please report to the Small Auditorium,” which was a small, joyless, basement lecture room with poor lighting. As students entered, we instructed them to sit apart, separating themselves from each other. They dutifully complied.

I was up front at a lectern. My colleague was seated nearby with his grade book out. We had determined ahead of time that students with names that began with letters A-M were the in-group, while students in the second half of the alphabet were the out-group.

With a serious tone, I began: “We’ve been disappointed with your overall commitment to this course lately, so we need better accountability. I will be asking questions on last night’s reading, and Mr. McKelvey will be grading the quality of your answers.”

There was an uncomfortable rustling in the room, but their silence conveyed their acquiescence.

I started with the questions, which were unfairly detailed – even with a good-faith effort on the reading, it would be hard to recall the specifics. My questions were an abrupt departure from the usual flow of discussion, and yet they eagerly raised their hands, hoping to get a favorable rating. I called exclusively on the in-group, praising their answers regardless of accuracy. At one point, a student whose last name fell later in the alphabet blurted out an answer, anxious to get some credit. I drily remarked, “Look, if you haven’t done the reading, please don’t make it apparent to your classmates.”

After a good 15-20, uncomfortable minutes, one of my students, who probably knew me the best (he had been my prefect, water polo captain, and French student), and whose name began with ‘H,’ raised his hand and said with a somewhat quavering voice, “Mr. Murray, what’s going on here??” I responded, “Well, Jon, what do you think is going on?” He responded, “I don’t know, but I really don’t like it.”

I smiled and stepped away from the podium, and said, “Well it was a bit of a setup, couldn’t you all tell?”

There was a huge, communal exhale of pent-up anxiety, and there was a torrent of responses:

-- “No! We couldn’t figure out what was going on!”

-- “It was scary!”

-- “We didn’t feel we could say anything. You were like a different person, Mr. Murray!”

They were unprepared, they said, for how quickly and easily they were made to feel helpless, and equally important, I too was unprepared for the amount of control I had, and how things might have gone more seriously awry if Jon hadn’t spoken up.

Once I fully explained the situation, our conversation turned quickly back to Nazi Germany. Earlier in the course, students had questioned why Jewish citizens hadn’t resisted more effectively, and they suddenly had a whole new perspective. If we could so easily and effectively be rendered powerless in the safe, reassuring environment of a classroom, they reasoned, just imagine what it would be like if the entire legal, bureaucratic, and military machinery of the state were turned on you.

It was a valuable lesson, and I was sure they would not soon forget it, but I too had much to reflect on.

How had I so misread the situation? Where did this influence and authority come from, especially since they knew me so well and had so many reasons to trust me. And then it dawned on me, that was precisely it – it was about trust. And this was where my learning began.

When you have earned trust, when someone has placed their trust in you, they are allowing themselves to be vulnerable, and therefore this trust comes with enormous responsibility, never to be taken lightly, never to be underestimated. The trusting soul can so easily be taken advantage of – in my case, it was inadvertent and we stopped before it went too far, but my students were still as shaken as I was afterwards, precisely because it had happened so easily.

And when someone is intent on taking advantage, that trust is that much more easily abused.

Literature is replete with stories of trust, and, frequently, the betrayal of that trust.

- When Brutus plunges the knife into Caesar in the Shakespearean tragedy, Caesar's shock is not at the treason of the other conspirators, it is the betrayal he feels from a friend.
- In George Orwell's Animal Farm, a biting satire of the Russian Revolution, Boxer the horse works to the point of collapse because of his good-natured allegiance to authority, and he is eventually sent to his death at the hands of the knacker, to the glue factory, because of his blind faith.
- And when Piggy dies in William Golding's Lord of the Flies, the tragedy is all the more poignant because the chaos and violence that erupts on the island began among a group of friends who turned on each other.

But, of course, there are just as many reassuring, uplifting examples of trust. Precisely because trust can so easily be abused or betrayed, we are inspired by examples of faith and steadfast loyalty.

- The Lord of the Rings trilogy, full of fantastical characters, rings of power, and epic battles, is also a story of friendship, and it is upon friendship that the entire story turns:

“But it does not seem that I can trust anyone,” said Frodo...

‘It all depends on what you want,’ put in Merry. ‘You can trust us to stick with you through thick and thin--to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours--closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word.

We are your friends, Frodo.”

- And friendship and trust are at the heart of the story of Harry Potter. One of Albus Dumbledore's last urgent pleas in the final book of the series was “Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him.”

Later in the book, Harry is overcome with doubt, questioning whether Dumbledore had actually cared about him.

“He had trusted Dumbledore, believed him the embodiment of goodness and wisdom. All was ashes: How much more could he lose?” Hermione never falters. “He loved you,” Hermione whispered. “I know he loved you.”

As I have continued to reflect on this question of trust, in my own experience, in my own small way, I have come to see how blessed I have been by trust that others have placed in me. It is in fact what has given so much meaning to my work as an educator.

A number of years ago, I had one of those close relationships with a student that seem to happen only in a boarding school. In this case, Drake played on my water polo team for four years, eventually serving as captain. He lived in my dorm with me for three years as my advisee, and then as a senior, one of my proctors. We also shared a love of fishing, and we frequently spoke about a plan to fish the Deerfield River together, which is a great trout stream. Though with the busy lives we both led, we never seemed to find the time to actually do it.

Everything changed the fall of his senior year.

It was the day before Thanksgiving break, the last day of exams. I was in the middle of shaving before running out the door to proctor an exam, I think I had a two-year-old child clinging to one of my ankles, and my wife handed me the telephone, saying, "It's Drake's mom." I got on, and his mother said, "Steve, Drake's father just died, he dropped dead of a heart attack early this morning."

I had to ask her to repeat it. He was at the hospital, hadn't been declared dead yet, but she felt it was all but certain.

I knew she had younger children, so I offered to drive him home – they lived 2 hours away. I showed up at his room a little later that morning, told him I was going to be giving him a ride. He just smiled and shrugged and said, "Okay." The whole way home in the car, he never asked me why. I always felt he had a funny intuition not to ask.

I walked with him into his kitchen to see his mom, and right then and there, she told him the news. This young man's life kind of came apart at that moment, and I remember the helpless feeling of not being able to put it back together for him. I doubt he remembers much about that winter, nor do I, except that I know we spent a lot of time together.

Later that same year, his senior year, May came along, and it was spring parents weekend. Traditionally, that was a big weekend for parents of graduating seniors to come to campus one last time before graduation.

As academic dean at the time, with families of rising juniors and graduating seniors, it was one of my busiest weekends of the year, with appointments all day Friday and Saturday.

I was moving through campus, in a rush to get somewhere, and I bumped into him. He had a kind of distracted, faraway look on his face. It took me a second, and I suddenly thought,

"For God's sake, it's Parents Weekend."

I said, "Drake, how are you doing?"

"Not so great."

"Is your mom coming?" I asked.

"No, she's got stuff with the younger kids."

I paused. Then said, "Do you want to go fishing?"

He looked at me, "Now?"

I said, "Yeah, now. I'll pick you up in 15 minutes."

I called my assistant and told her to cancel my meetings. She asked where I was going, and I said, "Fishing."

And we spent the rest of the day down by the river. We didn't talk a whole lot, we just fished.

It has now been many years. We are still in touch off and on, though less frequently these days – he is married to a great woman and has lovely kids. I still get a knot in my throat when I do see him.

One of the privileges of this work, of living in these kinds of special communities, is the opportunity to build trust, to earn trust, to be worthy of trust, and sometimes, it's as simple as just being there for someone.

And this is where I'd like to turn this back to all of you. I am confident I speak for my faculty colleagues when I thank you Fifth Formers, you, the class of 2024, for your trust in us.

And if I take as a measure of that trust, the extraordinary, countless ways that you have demonstrated the ability to thrive when faced with adversity, I believe that the faculty mentors, coaches, and teachers, who have taken such interest in all of you, who have invested so much care in all of you, have been worthy of that trust. I have only to think about your pinning ceremony earlier this week, and the number of you who turned to your head of house, to a coach, to a teacher, to an advisor.

So many of you in recent days have recalled what it felt like to arrive here as Second Formers in the early days of the pandemic, experiencing masking and isolation, grab-and-go meals eaten alone. In the winter of your Third Form year, a number of you recalled the now infamous Town Hall meeting where a great deal of pent-up frustration was expressed. And that was before we as a community, in the space of less than a year, experienced the tragic loss of two students.

You never let this slow you down, you never let this prevent you from absolutely thriving. If anything, knowing there were no guarantees, knowing that you were not automatically entitled to four story-book years of high school, made you appreciate and savor the opportunities all the more. You placed your trust in us, and in return, you have blossomed before our eyes.

This year alone:

Student Council set a whole new tone of leadership during orientation, and brought the entire School together.

Our various Academic Showcases this year offered a dizzying and endless array of your impressive research and scholarship:

- Genetic manipulations of fruit flies,
- Original translations of Chinese poetry
- Archival research into Lawrenceville's own history
- Social justice activism and community organizing
- Applications of AI far beyond my understanding
- Studies of water quality in our campus streams and ponds
- The challenge of raising mental health awareness among athletes

In the fall, *Amélie* warmed our hearts, our dance showcases enthralled us, The Lawrentians sang with haunting beauty at Lessons and Carols, and Midday Music, Cabaret Night, and jazz and orchestra concerts lifted our spirits over and over.

Our public speaking contest finalists on the KAC stage captivated us.

While some campuses were torn apart by discord, our JSO and SWANA, together in School Meeting, called for a moment of silence for all civilian deaths in the current war in the Middle East.

Wellness Day was a homerun, largely because it was so student-driven.

Our track team broke more records than I can count, and at one point our girls 4x100 was second in the nation. I watched our girls squash team compete for a national title, and yes, our boys lacrosse team did too.

Just the other day I listened to a series of presentations on Case Studies in International Policy, which were overseen by actual policy experts at the Department of Defense.

And what about the less public moments that say as much or more about you as a class?

- The prefects who routinely set aside their homework to tutor a housemate or just to listen.
- Students who served thanklessly on Disciplinary Committees, ensuring that a student perspective was carefully considered in seeking fair and consistent outcomes.
- The Fifth Former who wrote her senior reflection on gratitude – essentially a long thank you note: “To my beloved Lawrenceville family, thank you for believing in me when I lacked confidence, ...for trusting me to lead when I felt clueless and inadequate, and for teaching me the life skills that I will need to navigate the road ahead.”
- Or the varsity crew athlete who I ran into just after Stotesbury the other day. When asked how the day went, he furrowed his brow and responded, “We lost by 2 tenths of a second.” Then with a wry smile and a shrug, this humble Division I athlete said, “It wasn’t the outcome I was hoping for, but it was still a great season.”
- I could go on and on and on.

You placed your trust in us, and in return, you have blossomed before our eyes. Tomorrow, you will receive your diplomas and head out into the world. But in leaving here, you will take with you something you now know in your hearts.

Carefully, thoughtfully placing your trust in others is a leap of faith, and it is a gift as well. That leap of faith has meant the world to us, and that bit of vulnerable exposure is far outweighed by the support and the relationships you have enjoyed with the teachers, coaches, and mentors here today, who have encouraged your success. My faculty colleagues and I are deeply grateful for this opportunity – it truly has been a privilege.

And just as important, as you make your way in the years ahead, be worthy of the faith and trust others place in you, because that too is a gift, and as I learned, it is a gift and a responsibility that will feed your soul. While few things in this world are ever constant, in that at least, you should have faith, and yes, trust.

Thank you very much.