



Dear Lawrenceville Community,

At our first School Meeting of 2025, with the student body bustling and brimming with stories from their recent winter break and holidays, I had a chance to offer a few reflections to the community on my fall sabbatical, and how my time away had served to reinforce my enduring belief in our deep and abiding commitment to community wellbeing, and the equally important campus ethos of Harkness teaching and community discourse.

First, I conveyed how much I had missed life on campus and being a part of all the exciting events that I glimpsed from afar on social media. From the hype and energy of [House Olympics](#), to the spectacular fall musical production of [Into the Woods](#), to the joyous [celebration of Diwali](#), to the raucous (and victorious) spirit of [Hill Weekend](#), to the quiet solemnity of [Lessons and Carols](#) in the Chapel, it was not easy being away, though it was reassuring to know that the usual uplifting school events were as successful as ever.

I also thanked Assistant Heads of School Mrs. Kosoff and Dr. Scott and all of my colleagues, faculty and staff, for their extraordinary, ongoing efforts to make all of this happen so successfully in my absence. And most of all, I thanked the students for their buoyant, upbeat embrace of life at Lawrenceville. Knowing that the community was thriving allowed me to disconnect just a bit and take advantage of this respite.

As hard as it was to be away, I told the students, I did make good use of my time! Sarah and I were able to be with our children and granddaughter for extended periods, and we attended a number of fall family events that otherwise would have been near impossible. I was able to do a late-summer hike up Mount Katahdin in Maine with three of my children, I was able to go fishing as temperatures cooled and the fish were returning to Rhode Island waters from up north, my vegetable garden yielded a September bumper crop, and the fall clamming was excellent. I reflected to the community that even as they were all tending to campus wellbeing throughout the fall with our commitment to [House, Harkness, Heart](#), and even as we were launching our January [Wellness Week](#), I, too, had the gift of time to tend to my own wellbeing. Caring for ourselves, and for one another, is central to our community building efforts and helps develop the capacity and courage to lead in various aspects of our lives as teachers and learners. Our ability to meet challenges with resilience, work toward our aspirations, and contribute to the rich fabric of life on campus starts with tending to our own needs and those of others around us.

I was also able to travel, going places and experiencing things that we had long hoped and dreamed of doing. We chose destinations that offered opportunities to learn and to see the world from a rather different point of view. In early October, we spent 10 days in Turkey, exploring the ruins of Ephesus and sailing among the Aegean islands in a traditional, wooden-hulled gulet, and where we happened upon countless traces and remnants of competing Mediterranean cultures dating back to antiquity.

Then in November, we traveled to Japan, and spent time in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka. In addition to the warmth of the people we met, the extraordinary history and architecture, and the incredible cuisine, one of the many highlights was a 5 a.m. visit to the Tokyo bluefin tuna auction, where we met and conversed with an interesting

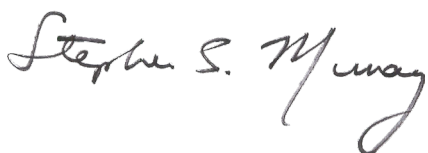
array of the professionals involved there, and experienced up-close this incredible intersection of commerce and culture. These moments inspired me to think about how important it is to be fully immersed in the global community right here at Lawrenceville – not only the rich diversity of thought, culture, and beliefs, but also our responsibility to cultivate spirited inquiry and to bridge lines of difference to make us stronger communicators, leaders, and citizens.

Just as important, I had time over the past several months to read and reflect in ways that my typical professional routines simply don't allow. And as I said to the students, just as we sought new experiences in our travels, I was not looking for authors with whom I would necessarily agree, in fact in many cases, I made choices that I knew would challenge my thinking or offer conflicting perspectives. Jonathan Haidt's *Anxious Generation* offered a very thoughtful take on the insidious effects of ubiquitous cell phones and social media, and at the same time, I know that it is not as simple as depriving adolescents of access to their phones. We need to continue to give them the tools and understanding to make their own informed, healthy decisions about social media and screen time. Ultimately our graduates will need to manage this issue in their lives well beyond high school – cell phones seem to be here to stay.

My readings also offered a range of lenses for viewing, or in some cases reconsidering, what I had previously thought to be familiar issues. I devoured Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*, which depicted the opioid epidemic in Appalachia and societal biases against rural folk. While traveling in Turkey, I read *1453*, a history of the "fall" of Constantinople from an Ottoman point of view, "a proud date in Turkey," a woman sitting next to me on the plane remarked. The carefully researched novel, *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa, gave a gripping, heart-breaking, multi-generational Palestinian perspective on their experience in the Middle East since 1948. And to consider a competing perspective, I read Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Israel Alone*, a French philosopher's *cri de coeur* on the double standard that the international community imposes on Israel and its existential need to defend itself in the face of systemic antisemitism.

As I said to the students, my readings were aimed at tending to my intellectual wellbeing, though not necessarily my intellectual comfort, because of course, learning involves getting out of our comfort zones and challenging our assumptions. In so many ways, this time for reflection on complex issues reminded me of what we strive to do for our students in all settings on campus, but especially around the Harkness tables and in the common rooms in our Houses. The opportunity to listen to each other, to question each other, and to disagree respectfully with each other is a fundamental part of our community's wellbeing as we work together to learn and grow. These experiences, in turn, develop critically important habits of mind that Lawrentians take with them out into the world, and it is my belief that this has never been more important or more relevant.

My time away was indeed renewing in so many ways, and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity. And as I return to campus and re-immense myself in the life of the School, my appreciation for this remarkable institution has never been greater.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen S. Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Stephen S. Murray H'54 '55 '63 '65 '16 P'16 '21
The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head of School