



HEAD OF SCHOOL BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

Saturday, May 24, 2025

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ON LEADING

“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to travel across Africa, visiting schools. I spent time in Nairobi, Kenya, Gabarone, Botswana, and then Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa. While exploring Johannesburg, I was deeply moved by a side trip to the Apartheid Museum.

As one approaches the entrance to the museum, the walkway is lined with massive steel cages filled with rough stones – each stone representing a single soul. Together, they give a visual representation of the countless Black African lives lost in the diamond and gold mines under British colonial and then Apartheid rule. I was stunned and lost in thought before even entering the museum, which itself is filled with endless artifacts and testimonials attesting to the heartbreaking inhumanity of that system.

This gave me a bit of perspective the following day as I traveled to the Tiger Kloof School, in nearby Vryburg, which a friend and former colleague of mine, David H. Matthews, had courageously opened – or I should say reopened – in defiance of the Apartheid government, a process he began in 1991, three years before the official end of government-sanctioned racial oppression and the election of Nelson Mandela. And in case you're wondering about his name, David H. Matthews happens to be the uncle of the famous Dave Matthews of the Dave Matthews Band. I am not kidding.

Tiger Kloof had been largely a trade school for black African students in the early decades of the 20th century, and its beautiful stone buildings had been built by student apprentices learning to be masons.

As the Apartheid government came to power in South Africa following World War II, they passed the Bantu Education Act, strictly limiting access by Black Africans to any form of educational advancement and relegating them to the most menial forms of labor. Even skilled trades were forbidden, and as a result, Tiger Kloof closed, and the buildings stood empty for decades, perhaps as a bitter, mocking reminder of vain attempts to elevate humanity through education.

Before Tiger Kloof, David had already headed in directions where there were no existing paths, but each time leaving a trail. In the 1970s, profoundly distressed by the degradation of his fellow countrymen, he was part of a group of idealistic young teachers who headed across the border into Botswana, where they served as the founding faculty of the Maru-a-Pula School, a coeducational, multiracial independent school. David later became headmaster.

In the early 1990s, impatient with the slow pace of change as the Apartheid system began to weaken under international pressure, David returned to South Africa and successfully led the way to reopen the abandoned buildings and relaunch Tiger Kloof, this time as a full-on academic institution with the highest aspirations for its students.

I arrived for my visit to Tiger Kloof early on a Sunday morning and was directed to the chapel, where a service was under way. I entered the beautiful space, built by the hands of students almost 100 years

earlier, and was ushered up to the front row. As I took my place, the student body erupted into song – and it was not simply music; they danced and swayed as they sang, naturally and without restraint.

It was ostensibly a Christian service, but even in the case of vaguely familiar Anglican hymns, the staid, inhibited versions I was used to sounded nothing like the vibrant renditions they were unleashing from the depths of their souls. More often than not, the songs were in Setswana, and with the unbridled, irrepressible movement, the entire experience felt distinctly African.

The choirmaster scarcely appeared to be conducting, but rather endeavoring to keep pace as the students, ebullient and unstoppable, led the way.

As they sang the various, beautifully harmonic parts, in between phrasings in the local vernacular, they broke out into trilling, jubilant ululations – full-throated and stirring. As a particular song appeared to end, often a student would spontaneously start a verse again, and the whole chapel would joyously launch back into song. The music reverberated in my chest, and my throat tightened up as I felt their infectious joy, all the more moving to me as I reflected on the recent history of Tiger Kloof and the suffering experienced by so many in this country.

Walking about the grounds of the school afterwards, the music still ringing in my ears, I was struck by a deep, peaceful stillness that seemed to reign over the campus – a kind of blessed calm. It was hard to put into words, but as I wrote in my journal that evening, I felt it in my bones.

Later that day, when I returned to my hotel on the outskirts of Johannesburg, still absorbed in thought from my visits to Tiger Kloof and the Apartheid Museum, I found myself wondering, how had this country moved so far in just 14 years? In our own country, 14 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise, Jim Crow laws were proliferating, and many of the initial successes of Reconstruction were being swept away.

To be clear, post-Apartheid South Africa, in the early years, was a complicated and at times violent place, and yet, given the history of our own country, I marveled at the joy and positivity I had witnessed in that chapel service. It was due, I believe, to how Nelson Mandela, emerging from 27 years of imprisonment, chose to lead his people, to show the world that leadership based on compassion and empathy can prevail against cynicism and brute force.

His message was that if I can forgive, so can you. His authority was not based on raw power, or fear, or the manipulation of the truth, which people sometimes mistake for leadership. He was elected for his personal qualities, which I believe drew people to him and earned their trust.

And of course, it was also the countless, collective efforts of individuals like David Matthews, who chose not to sit on the sidelines, but to act, and to also lead with similar personal qualities.

A mutual friend, Andy Taylor, who more recently served as principal of Maru-a-Pula, paid tribute to our former colleague upon his death, with the following reference to the gestures in our lives that can have an outsized impact on others, that in fact amount to a form of leadership: “When I ponder [David’s] legacy,” he wrote, “I’m reminded of the words of Robert Kennedy when he spoke before students in South Africa in 1966. (...) Kennedy said: ‘Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance....’”

The power of Mandela’s gentle humanity was not some notion that suddenly came to him when he was elected, nor did David Matthews suddenly develop empathy as a tactic in his lifelong fight against injustice. It was already part of who they were.

Of course, they still had to choose it. They still had to decide to head in directions where others had yet to tread.

Leadership is not a title, or a position, or a role – it’s a mindset. It is the ability to connect with others, and to believe in their good will. When you can demonstrate this, people will trust and will go with you. And I believe we all have it in us; we simply have to recognize it, and to act on it.

Here’s a simpler illustration that, for me, is almost more powerful because it is far closer to home. It is an experience that, as I have reflected upon it over the years, continues to reinforce my belief in what we all possess inside.

When I was a young teacher, I used to lead student trips to France, staying in rural, hardscrabble parts of the eastern provinces – quite close to the battlefields of World War I.

One such locale was in Burgundy, where we stayed in an old, partially restored 16th-century chateau – a damp, old stone structure. Abandoned for much of the 19th century and left to the elements, parts of it had been dismantled by local farmers over the years, scavenging for stone. American soldiers leaving battlefields of World War I bivouacked there briefly, and their graffiti was still discernible on walls up in the attic.

Exploring by candlelight the first time I stayed there, I could make out the name of a young corporal from St. Louis, Missouri, who had scratched out a message on a window sill. The date was Dec. 18, 1918. The guns had finally fallen silent on those battlefields just weeks before. He was far from home, it was Christmas, and as he sheltered in the old hulk of a building, I had to wonder what he had seen, what he had endured, what images haunted his sleep.

Staying there with students was little better than camping. The interior was so cold and damp that even on hot June evenings, we made regular, blazing fires in the six-foot fireplace to take away the chill.

Because vestiges of World War I surrounded us in this region, we dug into the local history. But the old battlefield sites, with green grass neatly trimmed, now bucolic, evoked little of that tragic war.

So, we tried a different approach to help our students gain a perspective. Each time we entered a village in our travels, I asked them to locate in the town square the inevitable memorial to those who had lost their lives in “La Grande Guerre,” as the French say. Every village had one, usually a small, chipped, marble plaque – with a few sad geraniums growing beside it.

They were to count the number of villagers killed in the war, and then consider the overall village population. Thirty-six men died in a village of 135. Fifty-five lost in a small town of 250; 14 lost in a rural hamlet of 65 people.

The old photos in our history books allow us to distance ourselves from the horrible reality of war, to adopt the clinical detachment of an historian. Somehow, standing in a forlorn village common, not far from the actual battlefields, the cold simple numbers seemed to have a far more immediate, wrenching, and powerful effect.

One afternoon on one such trip many years ago, to spark some reflection on their part, we said to our students, “Your ticket to dinner this evening is a poem in French that is somehow inspired by something you did or saw today.”

Dinner was brought in a by a local farmer’s wife, and we ate before a fire. At the conclusion of the meal, we went around the table, and the students read their poems – the quality and tone varied, some facetious, some sentimental, a few bordering on the serious.

Then it was Valerie’s turn. Valerie was a Nigerian girl from New York City.

Her poem was written in the first person, and as she read slowly and clearly, she situated her narrator alone in front of a hearth late at night, staring at the dying embers. The room was dark and bleak and empty. It slowly emerged that the narrator was an aging French peasant woman, alone in her small hovel. In the poem, she is recalling the loss of her son, decades earlier, in some battle whose name she could

not recall, in a war she could not understand. She had lived many, many such sad lonely evenings, and even at this advanced age, she was reliving the pain and loss quite vividly each day.

We were all deeply struck by the sad beauty of her poem, but even more so, by her ability, through empathy and insight, to travel across generations and cultures – this deeply perceptive, Nigerian American girl could not have been further in space and time from a lonely French peasant woman – and yet Valerie was able to bridge the gap, to imagine the pain, and to express such thoughts so beautifully in another language.

I find Valerie's extraordinary insight to be a source of hope, a source of optimism, that we can bridge the issues that divide us, that we can understand the pain of others, if we choose to.

As young as she was, Valerie's imagination, her empathy, and her curiosity helped her to see and understand with striking clarity someone living in a fundamentally different circumstance. And with her mesmerizing imagery and beautiful words that evening, without even seeming to try, she had us all in the palm of her hand.

This human ability to see into and understand the lives of others, this habit of mind, if you will, when we choose to exercise it, is how we reach others, how we connect with others, how we build trust with others, and if the situation calls for it, it is the basis for real leadership. This is true in smaller personalized settings, and equally true in far larger contexts.

And here I will make a bit of a leap to offer an unusual but striking comparison.

In his gripping account of his brother's management of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the world was on the brink of a nuclear cataclysm, Robert Kennedy again took the position that leadership emanates from personal connection and empathy – from our ability to be aware of, and respond to, the needs of others. It still came down to John F. Kennedy trying to understand Nikita Khrushchev, across vast cultural and ideological divides.

He wrote, "The final lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis is the importance of placing ourselves in the other country's shoes. During the crisis, President Kennedy spent more time trying to determine the effect of a particular course of action on Khrushchev or the Russians than on any other phase of what he was doing. What guided all his deliberations was an effort not to disgrace Khrushchev, not to humiliate the Soviet Union, not to have them feel they would have to escalate their response because their national security or national interests so committed them."

I have to say, there are leaders today who might call this attention to the humanity of your opponent weak-willed – and yet, it proved pivotal in avoiding catastrophe and navigating to a peaceful outcome in arguably the most dangerous crisis of the 20th century.

Allow me to bring this a little closer to home as I conclude.

All of you, as you prepare to graduate, have come of age in a complicated time, tested by circumstances that have convulsed this country, and at times our school.

Many of you watched on television on January 6, 2021, as an armed mob stormed the Capitol, trying to interrupt the confirmation of the recent election results – a jarring moment where violence marred what has historically been a peaceful transfer of presidential power.

You began your high school years, whether here or elsewhere, in the fall of 2021 — arguably the hardest year of COVID-19. At the same time, the national reckoning of Black Lives Matter was in full swing, while we reckoned right here on campus with accounts from our own alums, talking far more candidly, and painfully, about certain experiences during their time at Lawrenceville.

There were the October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks resulting in the massacre of over 1,200 innocent Israeli men, women, and children. In the ensuing invasion of Gaza, the Palestinian people, tragically, have

themselves suffered massive losses of innocent life – men, women, and children, in a war instigated by others. It is hard to conjure up a more complicated or heartbreaking set of circumstances for *all* involved there.

And there are many other kinds of unsettling circumstances and trends, such as the current uncertainty that nearly all institutions of higher education face:

- There are troubling challenges to free speech – think only of the Tufts graduate student who was detained merely for openly expressing her opinion in the school newspaper, where my son Henry, Lawrenceville Class of 2021, has been an editor.
- We are contending with government directives against inclusive programming aimed at supporting traditionally marginalized members of society.
- There are the losses in research funding for our colleges and universities, funding that has made the United States, up until now, a world leader in medical and technical innovation.
- And then of course there are ongoing, punitive, and shortsighted challenges to the visa statuses of foreign students, who bring incredible cultural richness and diversity to our communities of learning.

And in these complicated, challenging times, what have you done, how have you conducted yourselves, how have you already begun to display, and chosen to embrace, the thoughtful, good-faith leadership traits within you?

This past fall, as we approached an historically divisive presidential election, you responded with Civic Awareness Day, a largely student-driven initiative aimed at keeping us in a conversation and to meet our differences with respect and good will.

You were instrumental in making Wellness Week such a success, where we took time to slow down, to dial back, and to be in the moment with each other.

And you made Community Day a success, with student workshops focused on making connections and telling our stories.

Middy music, dance showcases, Lessons and Carols, *Into the Woods*, and most recently *Kodachrome* – are just examples of moments where performing arts have brought us together, lifted us up, and helped us feel connected as a community.

You have earned our trust and led the way with artificial intelligence, not simply your remarkably innovative, entrepreneurial approach to problem solving here on campus, but in making sure that we factor in a very human element in our solutions, that we focus on the ethical dimensions and moral implications of our uses of AI, so that innovation is not simply expedient, but that it improves society and brings us together.

I could go on and on, but here is a final snapshot that sums up my sincere, heartfelt faith in your ability to go out and make a difference.

When your school president, in his final School Meeting, had the courage to share his private misgivings, his personal regret for a very human mistake made earlier in his career, he referred to a moment when a fellow student took the time to give him a reassuring hug – giving him the simple message that he still had faith in him, that he was not alone.

Eli Lacey '25 spoke from the heart when he said, “That simple gesture reminded me I didn’t have to carry this by myself. There were friends and adults alike, ready to help if I just let them. So, I started leaning on those around me. And when I did, I was able to pick myself back up.”

And Eli's message, in turn, made each and every one of us with our own private misgivings, our own self-doubts, feel a little less alone, a little more connected.

He went on: "This year, I've tried to lead with authenticity – not just as your president, but as a fellow student walking this journey with you. I didn't want to be a symbol of perfection. I wanted to be real.

And so, as I say goodbye, I hope you remember that your worth is not found in how flawless your path is, but in how far you've come, and how bravely you've walked it."

This was a truly extraordinary message of empathetic leadership, and to me, just as important, was your response – an immediate and sustained standing ovation. We all felt a little closer that day, we all felt a bit more connected as a community.

As I said to you yesterday right here in this space, graduation is my favorite moment of the year, not because we want to bid you farewell – we are in fact sad to see you go out into that complicated world, where indeed you will be tested.

What makes this moment so reassuring, even inspiring, is that you head out to meet those challenges...

- with the good will that we have seen in you,
- the kindness you have displayed,
- your interest in supporting each other,
- your character, integrity, and hope for the future,

...qualities that have been developed and refined in you during your time here.

And this gives us a deep and abiding faith that you not only will get by, that you not only will weather the storms, but that you will all find a way to use your gifts and to head in directions where there may indeed be no paths, but you certainly will leave trails, and in doing so, **you will lead.**

Thank you very much.