Convocation Address

Sunday, September 7, 2025

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ON LAUGHTER

"There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt." **—Erma Bombeck**

"If you wish to glimpse inside a human soul and get to know someone, don't bother analyzing his ways of being silent, of talking, of weeping, of seeing how much he is moved by noble ideas; you will get better results if you just watch him laugh. If he laughs well, he's a good person." **—Fyodor Dostoyevsky**

In the opening scene of *Madame Bovary*, a masterful 19th-century novel of hopelessly unfulfilled desire and the empty promises of bourgeois society, author Gustave Flaubert depicts the painfully awkward experience of an adolescent boy, arriving mid-year as a new student at the local middle school.

A classmate describes him as a tall, gangly country boy, with bangs cut straight across his forehead, ill-fitting clothes, chapped hands used to outdoor living, and rough, hobnail work shoes.

What truly stood out, however, was his outlandish headgear, a strange composite of styles and colors: part bearskin cap, part Russian chapka, and festooned with colored stripes of cloth, a yellow tassel, and a shiny visor. It was wholly unlike their slick, sporty caps that they would deftly toss under the bench as they entered class

During afternoon lessons, painfully shy, the boy sat attentively with ramrod posture, as if in church, his sorry-looking hat perched on his knees, not daring to part with it as the others had on their way in after lunch. When the professor noticed this and asked him to stand, the hat fell to the ground, to the chuckling amusement of his classmates. He quickly went to pick it up, only to have his neighbor knock it back to the ground with a sharp jab of his elbow, prompting the professor to erupt, "For Heaven's sake, would you get rid of that God-awful helmet already!" At this point, the entire class fell over themselves in peals of raucous laughter, which completely undid the poor boy, who now did not know what to do with himself or his hat, so he promptly sat back down with his headgear back on his knees.

But the mortification did not end there. The teacher, now beside himself, asked the new boy to stand back up and to give his name. With lips quivering, he simply couldn't get the words out in any intelligible fashion, further infuriating the teacher, re-inviting an even more exuberant chorus of jeering laughter. When the professor finally reestablished order and the last guffaws were stifled, the poor boy ended up relegated to the dunce's corner for the remainder of the day, where he sat motionless, eyes downcast, enduring the periodic spitballs from various parts of the room that spattered against his face. His time-out in the corner would only last for an afternoon, but the excruciating embarrassment of that first day, with the jeers of his classmates still ringing in his ears, would stick with him for far longer.

Such is the cruelty of laughter.

But what of its healing power? Laughter, after all, plain and simple, can also be an extraordinary force for good – "the best medicine," as they say.

At the conclusion of another great work of literature, Shakespeare's King Lear is reunited with his daughter, Cordelia, whom he had spurned, in favor of the treacherous older daughters, leading to great suffering and the unraveling of his kingdom. When the full extent of his betrayal is revealed, and when he has little left to lose, he reconciles with Cordelia, and all he wants to do is spend his final days in lighthearted companionship, *and to laugh*, with the one daughter who has always loved him and been faithful:

"When thou dost ask me blessing," says Lear,
"I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh..."

It is said that one of the defining characteristics of our species, one of the traits that make us distinctly human, is our spontaneous, natural impulse to laugh. And yet when we try to unpack and understand this deceptively simple reaction, we find clear answers to be somewhat elusive.

How can this same gesture convey such uplifting, innocent joy at times – joy that brings us together and heals – and at others, carry such a bitterly cruel bite?

In the opening lines of a lengthy essay titled *Laughter*, French philosopher Henri Bergson asks his reader, "What is the meaning of laughter? What, in the end, makes something laughable? What might we find in common among the slapstick scowl of a clown, a clever pun, a vaudevillian malapropism, and the subtly refined satire of highbrow theater?"

How is it, he marvels, that they *all*, in their rather disparate ways, provoke this uniquely human response of laughter?

Bergson goes on to point out that beneath even the most lighthearted, spontaneous snicker can lie hidden a layer of malice, whether intended or not, depending on who is on the giving end, and how it may be perceived on the receiving end.

To illustrate this somewhat enigmatic complexity, he paints a picturesque, and rather telling, tableau:

The swirling, churning ocean, with waves buffeting the surface, creates light wispy sea foam that is occasionally left behind on the beach by receding waves. A delighted child playing nearby scoops up a handful of this tempting, frothy effervescence, only to stare in wonder, when she opens her fist, to find that the enchanting bubbles have vanished, leaving behind merely the salty dregs of water. Much like laughter, born of similarly complex natural forces, the sparkling foam intrigues and attracts us, but try to grasp it, or dissect it, or better yet to take a taste, in order to understand what it is made of, and inevitably it melts away, leaving nothing but a hint of bitterness on the tongue.

Indeed, we have such a broad range of expressions of mirth or humor at our disposal, each with its own intricacy. A good, hearty belly laugh can be a soul-releasing expression of pure joy, or a sharply sarcastic comeuppance; we giggle at our most relaxed intimate moments with a loved one, while giggling also betrays nervous anxiety or trepidation that we may be feeling; and we can taunt and tease the opposing team in a good-natured sports rivalry, and at the same time, as in the opening scene of Flaubert's novel, these same taunting hoots and jeers at an *individual's* expense can be distinctly hurtful. And all somehow related under the overarching umbrella of laughter.

My earliest encounters with this latter form, the unkind mocking of an individual, and in fact among my earliest memories, occurred riding the bus to my local public school; I was probably about six. In the rough-and-tumble world of those bus trips, the hulking fifth and sixth graders ruled, and they did so from the rear seats.

On the more benign end of things, if you were late and didn't make it to the bus stop, and you had to come running straight to the bus from your doorstep while everyone watched and waited, often with your mother huffing and puffing alongside, stuffing your forgotten homework assignment into your book bag, you would be greeted, as you boarded the bus, with loud, spirited mockery and heckling. While slightly embarrassing, the discomfort passed quickly because the laughter was about a passing circumstance, not some personal trait or characteristic that defined you.

Far meaner was the taunting and teasing that certain individuals were subjected to – singled out by the fifth and sixth graders – precisely because of traits that were simply part of who they were: freckles, or hairstyle, or body type, or a distinctive sounding voice, anything they deemed worthy of ongoing, derisive ridicule.

I remember one girl who lived down the street – she wore braces, had a striking, frizzy mop of brown hair, and let's just say she was not built like a gymnast – and they were relentless in their gleeful mockery and laughter directed at her. One day she wore a beret, maybe to try to hide her unruly hair, and that only made it worse. She probably cried herself to sleep at night, but she did her level best every day not to respond or let on how much it hurt.

As an adult, I happen to know that she became a minister, and has spent her adult life healing and comforting others, modeling empathy and forgiveness. Was this because of lessons she learned early on from those boys at the back of the bus about how it feels to be treated so poorly? I suspect so, at least in part, and God bless her that she chose to channel her pain in such a lovely way, but her journey cannot have been easy.

Such experiences made a big impression on me as a kid. I think it is why I have always been bothered by bullies – and I am not just talking about the eighth-grade goons who give sixth graders swirlies in the boys' locker room. I am also talking about the Queen Bees who know just how to humiliate the shy, vulnerable girl who showed up to gym class, proud of her new, but inexpensive, sneakers. One whispered comment in front of her, a smirk, and a suppressed laugh is all it takes, and the shy girl is devastated.

In the same way, I've never liked practical jokes. The rhetorical "Jeez, can't you take a joke?" really isn't a fair question, is it? Who likes to be made to look foolish, after all? In the rare circumstance where the prankster is truly trusted and the gesture is done affectionately, perhaps, but most often, there is a barb embedded in the practical joke, a weakness exposed, with the intent to prick or embarrass the victim in front of others.

Better yet, when it can be caught on film and broadcast widely. There was a long-running reality TV series on MTV called *Punk'd*, catering to a societal fascination with seeing people get caught unawares and humiliated. The more we see this kind of treatment of others, the more it is normalized, and we accept it with a shrug and a chuckle. "Getting punk'd" has become part of our lexicon.

And if we are talking about public exposure, how about social media, which is one of the more pressing issues that, with our help, your generation needs to contend with, and learn to manage, in healthier ways. And while I do believe there are, here and there, positive aspects of online community and connection, you've all seen or experienced, in one form or another, the unhealthy side.

Somehow, things you would never dream of saying face to face to a Housemate, or to a neighbor at the Harkness table, become fair game in the anonymous, emotionally detached, addictive, online world, where you encounter people who seem to find delight in someone else's misery or social exclusion. The awkward video that someone took without the person's knowledge gets posted, and they'll never get it down. The painful, mocking laughter on the bus that my neighbor endured was tough, but at least it was limited to a busload of kids – how about a thousand LOLs, or ten thousand?

My point here is not to dwell on the ways in which laughter can have a negative, hurtful side, but rather to keep that aspect from being normalized, to keep us from becoming inured to the sting it can carry. And just as important, that we lean in to the infectious joy we can experience when laughter comes from the heart.

My hope, as we kick off the year, is that we will keep this in mind as we each take an active interest, and each play a part, in shaping the community in which we want to live.

King Lear reminds us of the simple, healing power of laughter, but I'll bring it a step closer to home as we think about the positive impact in our own community.

Some of you will recall our January observance of Martin Luther King Day Jr. about a year and a half ago, where Rev. [Violet] Lee, Avianna Zampardi '24, Xavier Penn '25 , and Mr. [Zaheer] Ali spoke so movingly, and we were also graced with a rather remarkable musical performance by Mr. Timi "Keys" Esan.

Afterwards, we all headed to the Clark Music Center for refreshments and a bit of an afterparty. We all crowded in, enjoyed a late evening dessert and delighted in the wonderful musical improvisation from Mr. Esan, but what struck me more than anything was the pervasive laughter in that room.

It hardly needs to be said that at that moment, we were still, as a community, in so many ways, recovering from COVID, from years of masking, remote and hybrid learning, and other limits on our ability to socialize with each other in normal and healthy ways.

And we were also recovering, still, from the tragic loss of a number of community members – losses that touched all of us deeply, the most recent occurring just one year prior to that January gathering.

I remember thinking at the time, that we all just needed to be in a room together, to let the music lift our spirits, and to let the laughter feed our souls. It came time for 9 p.m. check-in, and the mood in the room remained exuberant. As fast as the students could call out a favorite song title to Mr. Esan, he'd pick it right up and play it back to them. There were large clusters of students, arm in arm, singing along, grinning ear to ear. I asked Dean

[of Students Blake] Eldridge if we could let this go on for just a little longer, and he needed no convincing. If laughter is indeed the best medicine, our community got a good dose that evening.

And how about the Circle and Crescent doing line dancing this past Thursday evening? Those of you who were a part of that were falling over yourselves, downright giddy, as 450 of you tried to get the moves right in unison.

Or just yesterday at House Olympics? You did not let the weather put a damper on your spirits – that was one of the most upbeat, uproarious House Olympics I have ever seen – and all we were able to do was Rock, Paper, Scissors in the Kirby Arts Center. How good did it feel to let loose, to cheer for your House, to try to drown out the other House cheers, and to laugh, not *at*, but *with* each other? What a way to set a tone and to kick off the new year.

We can find countless examples of mean-spirited, hurtful humor at the expense of someone else, humor that pulls us apart, but the upside of goodhearted humor, and the laughter that comes with it, is so much more powerful in the way that it brings us all *together*.

So, as we think about the year we want to have together, as we kick things off, let me finish with two quick Lawrenceville stories that I think sum up who we are when we are at our best.

During my first fall term at Lawrenceville, ten years ago, I was busily trying to get to know the place, trying to get glimpses of the deeper culture, what really goes on among students and how they actually treat each other. And as we got to the end of the fall term and the night before the first day of exams, I was intrigued to hear an announcement from the School president that Student Council was organizing a talent show in the Bath House that ran through dinner, right up to early check-in for study hours. Now, it's the night before final exams, and I am thinking, "Wow, when things get stressful here, these students come together. This is not a school full of students huddling in their rooms, not sharing their notes, hoping to score better than their peers. This feels very different from most other places I have been."

So, yes, I am intrigued and I stop by to see for myself. The place is packed, and one after another, various acts get up to perform. Some are more on the humorous side, a bit facetious and bordering on slapstick; others are remarkably talented, but all adding to a spirited, happy atmosphere.

As the evening wound down and we got close to check-in time, this Second Former gets up, all by herself, to play something on her acoustic guitar. Pigtails and braces, all of 14 years old, and *all by herself*. I thought to myself, "OK, this might be a risky move, more power to her." Then she starts to play, and she belts out this song, just absolutely crushes it. She finishes playing, and there is a moment of silence, and then the place explodes with cheers, and she is bathed in the warmest, most supportive laughter and applause. And she broke out into a huge, unselfconscious, irrepressible grin as the sentiment in the room filled her soul.

Two things struck me that evening: First, the warmth of the support that felt so kind and genuine.

And second, this Second Former had been on this campus all of nine weeks, and already she knew that she could get up in front of several hundred Upper Formers, and that this in fact was not a risk, that this was the kind of place where you can do that. And she was right. This told me a lot about Lawrenceville in those early days when I was still getting to know this place.

Sometime after that, perhaps a year or two later, I was speaking to a large group of prospective parents in the Heely Room, and I told this story about the talent show as a way to describe Lawrenceville at its best.

At the end of my story, a parent volunteer who was in attendance, mother of a Third Former, raised her hand and asked if she could share her own story to reinforce my piece on how students treat each other here at Lawrenceville.

She said that earlier that year, their family had to attend a funeral for a relative the weekend before an exam period, and her son had to miss a whole series of review sessions that the teachers had organized, and he was beside himself with anxiety over the upcoming exams. A group of his friends gave up their entire Sunday, when they themselves could have been studying, and walked him through all of the study preparation he had missed.

As she finished her story, she tried to say, "That's Lawrenceville for you," but her throat tightened for a moment with emotion as she thought about her son's friendships, and then just as easily, she broke into heartfelt laughter, a genuine laughter that loosened up her throat and allowed her to say more clearly, "and that's Lawrenceville for you."

Indeed.

We all know that laughter can have a potently negative, armor-piercing impact, and I believe it is so important that we all be keenly aware of that, to know in advance when there is the potential for a joke or sarcastic remark, or worse, a social media post, to sting, to hurt someone, to divide us. And yet, just as important, we also know that when it's the right kind of jest, when a warm chuckle comes from a place of deep caring and love, laughter may well be just about the "best medicine" to strengthen and reinforce the community we aspire to be.
It could, in fact, be the best possible way to welcome everyone to OUR House.

And that's something worth having a good laugh about. Let's all remember that as we kick off this new year. I am so looking forward to it!

Thank you very much.