Convocation Address

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The Shelby Cullom Davis Class of 1926 Head of School

On the Journey Itself

On a warm June evening in 1984, on a platform of the Paris Metro, I found myself carefully sizing up seven individuals who had suddenly surrounded me.

Moments earlier, I had been boarding a crowded subway train with a group of friends. Feeling someone pressing me from behind, my hand went to my back pocket, and I knew in an instant that my wallet, which I had just used to pay my fare, was missing.

I stepped back off the train, which left the station with my companions, and spun around to confront the young man immediately behind me, his hands still pressed into my back. In the best street French that I could muster, I said, "My wallet is missing, and I think you have it."

In the best street French he could muster – and his was pretty good – he responded, as the six members of his crew gathered in, "Accuse me again, and I will smash your goddam face in."

Now as much as I might identify with Jason Bourne from time to time, I decided in the moment not to take on all seven of these gentlemen at once. Convinced that discretion indeed was the better part of valor, I boarded the next train and caught up to my friends at the following station, minus my wallet.

So the evening hadn't gotten off to a great start, and worse yet, I was set to leave the following morning on a solo hitchhiking trip around Ireland, a chance for reflection after a year of living abroad, and something that I'd been looking forward to for some time.

I stuck to my plan, and headed out early the next day with just a passport and my few remaining travelers checks, which had survived the encounter on the Metro platform, along with a small backpack, an old sleeping bag, and a bit of tarp that I planned to pitch in farmers' fields at night in the event of rain.

Catching rides as best I could, I traveled for the better part of the next two days, across the English Channel and up to Scotland, where the ferry was more affordable on my limited budget.

Arriving in Ireland after a morning crossing, I splurged and bought a large chocolate bar at a vending machine in the ferry terminal in case I got hungry later in the day, and stuck it in the pocket of my old jeans. The sun grew hot as I made my way, and by mid-afternoon, I felt I had earned a bit of sustenance. Sticking my hand into my pocket, the pocket of my *only* pair of trousers since I was traveling light, I encountered a mass of wet, molten, gooey chocolate that had fully escaped the confines of the flimsy wrapper. My only pair of trousers. I sighed wearily.

That night, the romance of sleeping out in cow fields grew thin as it began to rain, and my meager tarp did little to protect me. The romance grew even thinner as I tried to get to sleep, and I began to imagine that I could hear something gently, slowly moving in the tall grass right by my head. After finally dozing off, I suddenly awoke to find that a large black slug had found its way into my hair, and when I say large, I mean a good three inches, and there were two more on the edge of my sleeping bag, apparently attracted to my warmth in the cool, damp, night air.

I sighed again, perhaps with more than a touch of exasperation – this was not exactly the contemplative trip I had envisioned at the outset, traversing bucolic landscapes along picturesque, rural byways and reposing comfortably in gentle, verdant pastures.

The following morning, the rain hadn't let up, and so I set out along the secluded road, looking pretty sorry and drenched, hoping for a ride at some point. I walked for the next few miles, finally arriving in a small, rather remote village.

I stopped into a local shop, bought a cup of piping hot tea, and for a bit of breakfast, a small loaf of Irish soda bread with raisins. As I stepped back out onto the sidewalk, I noticed the rain had stopped, the clouds were parting, and I caught a glimpse of the sun.

I found a bench in the village square, took a sip of tea and had a bite of soda bread, and found the combination was actually not too bad. The hot tea really hit the spot, and with a bit of food in me and a touch of sunlight on my face, things were finally looking up. After a bit longer in the sun, my clothes began to dry, and I was even able to spread out my sodden sleeping bag.

Feeling better, I headed out of the village, where the road took a sharp turn up a steep hill. Confident that no one would stop to pick up a hitchhiker on such a hill, I kept walking, but stuck out my thumb just in case.

Halfway up the hill, an 18-wheeler, with a grinding manual gear shift, screeched to a halt. I hopped into the passenger side, and introduced myself. "Paddy Nestor's the name," he responded, "And you sound like a Yank! What brings you here?" And off we drove. After an hour of lively conversation, it was almost noon, and he pulled into a roadside pub, where he explained he was meeting some fellow truckers. "C'mon, you're good company, and I'm done with my shift. It's time for a beer."

The warmth of his group made me feel at home immediately, and when I ordered a Guinness, Paddy laughed to his comrades, "Don't let the Yank pay for a thing, he even likes proper Irish ale!"

After a fine lunch dining on local pub fare (I seem to recall steak and kidney pie) and listening to the truckers' entertaining banter and dry Irish humor, Paddy said, "I have a mate coming along in 20 minutes. We've radioed to him that he is to pick you up and bring you to the next town – **we'll get you where you're going**."

And suddenly, in that instant, where I had been intending to go – in fact where I had been rather impatient to go – seemed far less important to me than where I was in that very moment with those good people, whom I had met by chance.

Indeed, things on this journey *were* looking up. And to be sure, as the days went on, even with its inauspicious start, the trip ended up being one of my most memorable, lucky, unpredictable adventures that I had during that rather wonderful time living in Europe.

As I think back on that, other journeys come to mind, journeys that at the outset, also didn't go as planned:

- Getting caught in a serious November ice storm, high on the Presidential Ridge in the White Mountains, with the sun going down.
- Wrecking our wooden canoe in the rapids, in a remote area of the Northern Quebec wilderness, hundreds of miles from the nearest logging road.
- Landing in Nairobi airport at midnight, our luggage hopelessly lost with low likelihood of recovery, and the general atmosphere among the large crowd spiraling down into frustrated chaos.
- Trying to avoid serious altitude sickness above 14,000 feet on the edge of the Tibetan plateau, with local, traditional herbal remedies.

In each case, with a bit of patience, it was the setbacks that helped put things in perspective, helped turn the focus to what actually mattered.

As I reflect back on what I have gained from such experiences, the poem "Ithaka" by the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy comes to mind.

"As you set out for Ithaka," he cautions, don't worry about potential mishaps and dangers, "Laestrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon" – he tells us that they only pose as obstacles if we let them. It's more about what we do along the way, after all, not where we think we are headed or expect to arrive:

"Hope your road is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery," he encourages us,

May there be many summer mornings when,
With what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber, and ebony...

He reminds us, "don't hurry the journey," because while the allure of the destination was the impetus for the trip perhaps, it was never simply about getting there, and he wistfully concludes,

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey,
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

"What these Ithakas mean."

Cavafy is not telling us not to have goals, not to aim high and to seek an exciting future – he says after all, "Keep Ithaka always in your mind, Arriving there is what you're destined for."

But his real message is, just as important, don't forget to savor your time on the road, what you see and learn along the way at those "Phoenician trading stations" and in those "many Egyptian cities," where, as he says, you can "… learn, and go on learning."

So how does this advice, this reminder from our poet, connect to our current circumstances, right here at Lawrenceville, as together we prepare to launch the new year, as we consider the journey that lies immediately before us?

And I might add that it should come as no surprise that the question has a special poignancy for me, and perhaps for you Fifth Formers, as we both look ahead to our final year in this community.

In recent weeks, as I have walked the campus, it occurred to me that our poet not only conjures up for me exotic Mediterranean sites and foreign, mythical obstacles encountered by Odysseus in his travels. The spirit of the poem also brings me much closer to home, and in fact touches intimately so much that is intrinsically Lawrenceville in rather remarkable ways.

Those of you who are new may be just beginning to notice, others among you may be well aware, that the meandering contours of the pathways and the placement of the buildings around us is quite purposeful.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the famed landscape architect who designed significant portions of our historic campus, did not believe in the predictable, geometric forms of classical architecture, where your destination is always in your line of sight, and where the walkways are merely an efficient and direct means of arriving there. He chose curving roadways and footpaths, with the magnificent trees often slightly obscuring what awaits us around the bend – inviting us to pause and delight in the pleasant surroundings for a moment, while also enticing and intriguing us about what might lie ahead just out of sight – making the moments along the way just as compelling as where we might end up at the end.

I would even go so far as to say that the curves of our Harkness tables invite a similar intrigue and curiosity. Sitting in rigid rows, staring at the back of the person ahead of you, listening and taking notes on the day's lesson, is one kind of learning experience.

There is a world of difference sitting around that oval space in our classrooms here. As important, or more, than the culminating exam at the end of the term, is your day-to-day, moment-by-moment, experience.

Turning to your left to hear your neighbor around the bend of the table make an intriguing observation, only to be countered by a voice to your right, which offers a different opinion – that's what grabs your attention, invites you to join in with your own thoughts, the wise teacher pulling back just a bit to allow you to work it out among yourselves, knowing that it was not about arriving at a particular answer, a predictable destination of sorts, but that the process of thrashing it out in the moment, testing your own thinking and considering the views of others along the way, is what really matters.

The very design and placement of our new Tsai Field House and our dining area of Tsai Commons is also purposeful and very much in keeping with the original heart and soul of this campus. It begins with the gradual, meandering approach along our new ring road, which offers views of lush gardens along the way and glimpses of buildings through the trees, inviting the visitor to wonder what lies ahead.

As you arrive at this first area of campus, you'll notice that the Field House sits on the edge of an oval greenspace – a Harkness table of sorts, noted one of our architects on the project – with buildings seated around the perimeter as equals. The very height of Tsai Commons was designed to be a few feet lower than the neighboring Kirby House, with much of the mass of the rest of the structure built down the natural slope behind, so that the Field House would not dominate or take over, but rather sit together around the table with the other structures – our Crescent Houses, Bunn Library, the Chapel, Kirby Math and Science, Mackenzie.

Olmsted wanted the very design and layout of campus, his placement of trees, his spacing of buildings, to teach, to reflect our values. And in particular, to avoid leading us straight to an answer, to immediate certainty, in some efficient linear fashion, but rather to take our time along the way, to learn as we go. And this is very much my hope for all of you as we make our way in the days and weeks ahead. **Ithaka will be there at the end**, and do keep such important goals, such destinations, in mind, and they may indeed be, as Cavafy says, "what you're destined for." And yet at the same time ...

- when you want to pause after class to ask your teacher one more question simply because you are curious;
- when you think you might go knock on a friend's door because they looked a bit down at check-in;
- when a teammate asks if you want to stay and shoot after practice;
- when the dress rehearsal conflicts with other things you have going on, but you're still inclined to show up to support your roommate, who's worked so hard on the tech crew;
- when it's a warm September evening, and you just feel like taking a walk to think

... trust your instincts in those moments, and **take the time**.

So, as we launch the new year, I am sensing great joy and energy out there. I certainly heard it yesterday at House Olympics!

I am so looking forward to this final year with all of you, **and especially you Fifth Formers** – we'll be graduating together in a way, which warms my heart.

As for me, as I mentioned to all of you, I'll be heading off to Istanbul, Türkiye, next year, where I may indeed encounter "Laestrygonians, Cyclops, [or] angry Poseidon" along the winding curves of the Bosporus – but such obstacles won't dissuade or deter me, any more than a stolen wallet, a melted chocolate bar, or a wet sleeping bag did.

I can't wait to see what lies just around the bend for me this year with all of you, as we enjoy our time together, and then what awaits me ahead on my next journey.