The Beauty of Difficulty: Why the Hard Things Change Us

The speech I meant to give, and the slides nobody got to see, from the morning the lights went out.

The power went out a few minutes before I was scheduled to speak. No slides. No microphone. Twelve hundred people in a gym, and the room went dark.

So I gave it from memory, and I am sure I dropped a line or two. What I will not forget is the room. Pre-K through twelfth grade, in the dark, with nothing on the screen to look at and nothing to do but listen — and they listened. Our four-year-olds sat still. Our seniors leaned in. Standing in the middle of that, I understood something about this school that no strategic plan will ever quite capture.

The speech was about difficulty. The morning seemed determined to make the point for me.

Several of you have asked for the text. Here it is, as written.

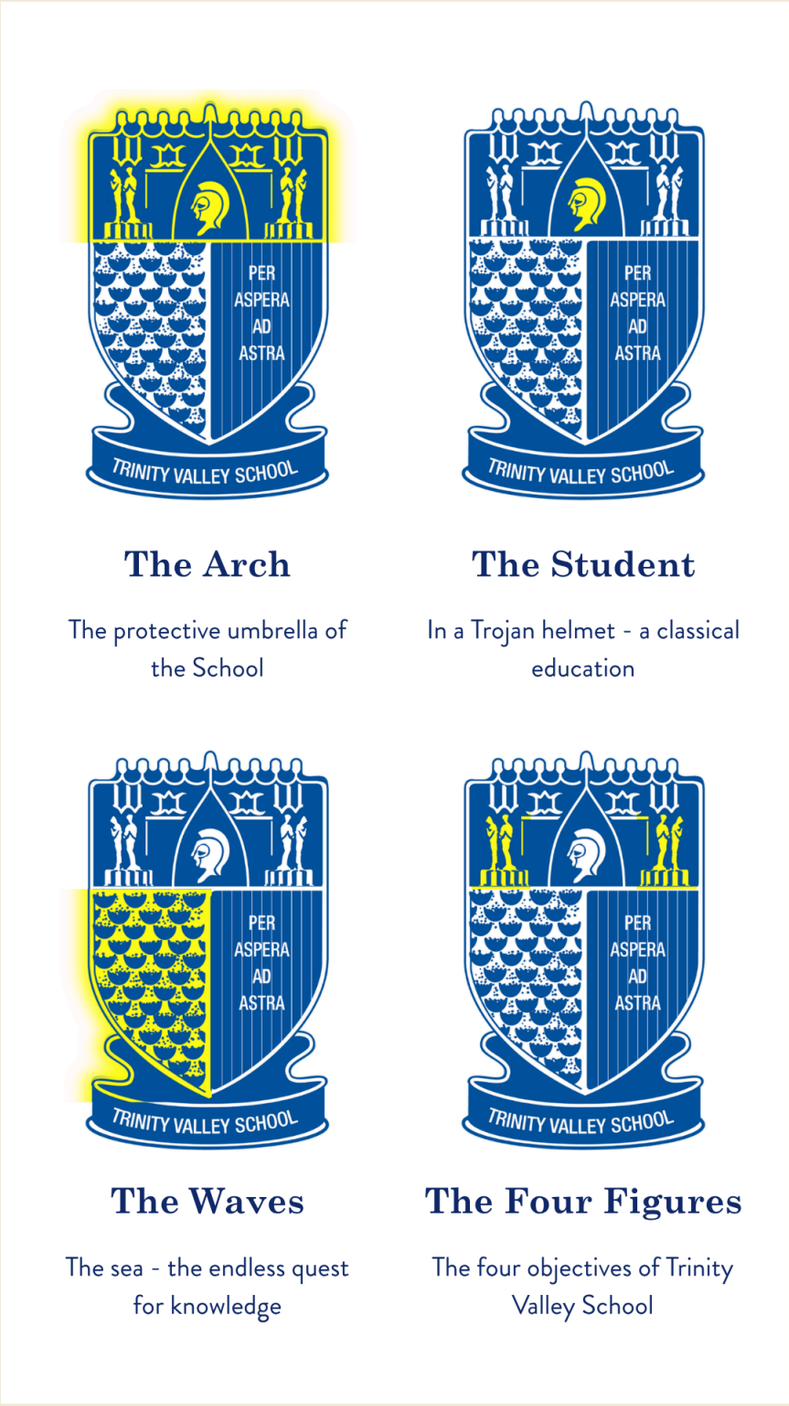
— ***Ben Courchesne, Head of School***

Good morning.

Before I say anything else, everybody, look up here.

You have all seen this. It's on the walls around school. It's on letters that go home to your parents. It was on the website your family looked at before you ever set foot on this campus. Most of you have walked past it hundreds of times.

At the top, an arch — that's the roof of this school over your head. In the middle, a student in a Trojan helmet, for a classical education, for Greek and Latin, and a great conversation that got started a long time ago-one you enter into when you come to Trinity Valley. At the bottom, waves, for the sea, for the endless quest for knowledge.



And right here, four small figures.

Raise your hand if you can tell me what those four figures are.

Keep them up. Seniors, some of you have been here thirteen years. Do you know?

Now put them down, because I couldn't have answered it either. Two years ago I'd have gotten it wrong.

Those four figures are the oldest thing at Trinity Valley School. Older than this gym. Older than this campus on Dutch Branch, and the campus on McCart before it. They are sixty-seven years old today, and they are the reason every one of us is in this room.

You just saw Mr. Seleny's face on this screen. In 1959, he and a few friends of a school that barely existed — six ten-year-old boys, a rented room, a downtown building that had been abandoned longer than it had ever been used — sat down and wrote out what they wanted for their students. They came up with four things. They called them objectives.

The Four Objectives, 1959

Fine scholarship with its fulfillment at college
The development of wide constructive interests
Intelligent citizenship
Spiritual and moral development which promotes lasting values

Those four figures on the shield. That's them.



Fine Scholarship with its fulfillment at college

The development of wide constructive interests

Intelligent citizenship

Spiritual and moral development which promotes lasting values

Now, Lower School, I need your help. First and second grade especially, because you have been working on exactly this.

A noun is a person, a place, a thing, or an idea. *Trojan. Gym. Popcorn. Goodness.*

A verb is something you do. *Run. Read. Sing. Help.*

Hold on to that. It's about to matter.

Last year was my first year as your Head of School, and I spent most of it listening — to teachers, to parents, to alumni who graduated before I was born, and to a lot of you. Underneath all of it, I kept hearing one question in different forms: who are we, and what do we actually stand for?

So we asked. Last winter, nearly a thousand people in this community sat down with a long survey — students, parents, alumni, faculty, staff, trustees. A steering committee carried it through the winter and the spring. In June, our Board of Trustees approved a renewed mission and values, unanimously.

Here's what we did with Mr. Seleny's four objectives.

We kept every one. We didn't cut any. We didn't add a fifth.

We changed the part of speech.

The Four Values, 2026

We pursue fine scholarship, in and out of the classroom.
We develop wide constructive interests.
We practice intelligent citizenship.
We cultivate moral and spiritual growth.

Pursue. Develop. Practice. Cultivate. Four verbs.

That sounds like a small edit. It's the whole thing.

The organizational psychologist Karl Weick spent a career on one question: how can I know what I think until I see what I say? Here is my version of it for this school. How can I know who I am until I see what I do? How can I know what I value until I see where I walk?

Kindergarten, here's what that means. A noun is something you have. A verb is something you do. You can't keep a value in a drawer. You find out what you value by watching where your feet go.

So let me tell you what these four ask of you — and what's hard about each one. Every one of them has a hard part, and I want you to hear it, because the hard part is where the whole thing happens.

We pursue fine scholarship. We take learning seriously, and not only between 8:00 and 3:30. High standards. Real curiosity. Something learned from every experience, including the bad ones.

The hard part is attention. Staying with one difficult thing long enough to actually understand it, in a world built by very smart people to interrupt you every few seconds. Third grade, here's your version: the hard part is when the problem doesn't come easy, and you stay anyway. Upper School, here's yours: the hard part is doing your own thinking when there's a machine sitting right there offering to do it for you.

We develop wide constructive interests. Try things. On the stage and in the arena, in the studio and in nature. Take a healthy risk. Find out you're good at something you'd never have guessed, and make new friends along the way.

The hard part is being bad at something in public, and this one gets harder as you get older. A fifth grader will try anything. A junior has a reputation to protect. If you're sixteen and you walk into an audition where everybody already knows what they're doing and you don't, that feels like it costs you something real. Do it anyway.

We practice intelligent citizenship. You belong to something bigger than yourself, and we expect you to put in more than your share. We expect you to be givers more than takers. That's why you have more freedom here than students get at a lot of schools, and more responsibility.

The hard part is other people. Working across a real disagreement without turning the other person into an enemy. Staying respectful when you're certain you're right. And doing the unglamorous thing — picking up what you didn't drop, with nobody around to see you do it.

We cultivate moral and spiritual growth. We care about the whole person, not the intellect alone. We ask hard questions about right and wrong.

The hard part is in our own words: we weigh the integrity of our words against our actions, and we own the difference when they part. Every person in this gym has a gap between what they say and what they do. The value isn't having no gap. It's telling the truth about yours.

Four verbs. Four hard parts. Which brings me to the sentence we put above all of them.

The Mission

Trinity Valley School teaches young people to love the pursuit of excellence, to forge a bond between goodness and knowledge, and to meet challenge with resilience in order to lead lives of meaning and purpose — per aspera ad astra, through difficulty to the stars.

Now, remember the helmet on the shield, the one that stands for a classical education? This is what it's for. Stay with me, because we're going to Greece for a minute.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greeks had a proverb. Four words. *Chalepa ta kala*.

χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά

cha-le-PA ta ka-LA

Beautiful things are difficult.

Say it with me. Cha-le-PA. Ta ka-LA.

It means: beautiful things are difficult.

Nobody knows who said it first. It was already old when Socrates was alive, and he liked it enough that Plato puts it in his mouth — he's arguing about what beauty even is, he can't get to the bottom of it, and he ends by shrugging and saying, well, *chalepa ta kala*. The good things are hard. That's how you know they're the good things.

Four hundred years later, a Roman named Seneca picks up the same idea and writes a line I'd like every one of you to hear: there is no easy road from the earth to the stars.

That sentence is where our motto comes from. That's *per aspera ad astra*.

And notice what our founders did with it. They could have gone with two words. *Ad astra*. To the stars. Clean, hopeful, looks fantastic on a banner. Instead, Mr. Seleny put the difficulty out in front — *per aspera*, through hardship — and this school has kept it there for sixty-seven years. Every head of school since could have quietly let it go. Nobody did.

Because the difficulty isn't the toll you pay on the way to the stars. The difficulty is where the change happens. It's the part that makes you into somebody who can get there.

Seneca has one more line, and it's the one I'd tattoo on this gym if they'd let me. *It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare. It is because we do not dare that things are difficult*.

Fifth grade, here's what he means. We usually think it goes like this: the thing is hard, so I'm scared of it. Seneca flips it around. It's scary, so we stay away from it, so it stays hard forever. The only thing that has ever made a hard thing easier is doing it.

This is true of people, not just tasks. Meeting someone new is hard, especially if they seem strange to you, or very different from you. Our mission asks us to go through the nervousness anyway and forge a bond. Journalist Mónica Guzmán puts the cost of not doing it as plainly as it can be put: "Whoever is underrepresented in your life will be overrepresented in your imagination." Where we have no people, she writes, we supply monsters; where we have no possibilities, we supply disasters. That, she says, is the challenge of a polarized world.

So when we ask difficult things of you — intellectually, socially, physically, emotionally — we're not doing it because difficulty is good for children. We're doing it because we have watched, for sixty-seven years and understood for millennia, what happens to a person who finds out they can handle something they were sure they couldn't. *Chalepa ta kala*.

A recent MIT report on how artificial intelligence will change education arrives at the same place: your education is a productive struggle, and its most important product is not a grade or a diploma. It is you — your growth, your maturity, your own imagination, insight, and judgment.

You are the beautiful, difficult thing.



Here's the last thing I'll say about Mr. Seleny.

He was a Hungarian refugee. He was a concert pianist. He had lost a country. And in a rented room in a condemned building, with six students, he wrote down four things he wanted — for children who had not been born yet.

That's what a legacy is. Writing something down, and meaning it hard enough that people you will never meet are still using it sixty-seven years later.

Every one of you is one of those children. He never met you. He wrote it for you anyway.

So — one assignment.

In a few minutes you'll head back to class or advisory, and each of you gets one sticky note. You answer one question. Then every one of them — all of you, every teacher — goes up on a single canvas twelve feet across. When it's finished, two words come out of it in white. *Ad astra*. To the stars.

My favorite part: the white notes, the ones that will make the words, are written by our pre-K students, by the seniors, and by your teachers. The four-year-olds and the eighteen-year-olds and the adults who teach them, all writing the same two words.



Now, I've told you what these four values say. Four people are about to come up here and tell you what they *do*, which is the part that counts — one from Lower School, one from Middle School, one from Upper School, and one of our teachers. They'll make this more real than I can.

Four figures on a shield. Our values. Sixty-seven years old. Now you know their names.

Think about them whenever you see the shield.

Happy Founders Day, you beautiful difficult things. Per aspera ad astra.

Delivered in the Trinity Valley School gymnasium on Founders Day 2026, to students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, faculty, staff, trustees, and guests — in the dark.