



Pingry

Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear Convocation — September 10, 2026

This was a good summer for movies, and there were two in particular that I was excited to see: *The Odyssey* and *Spider-Man*. Of the two, I was most interested in *The Odyssey*, but for largely superficial reasons. Its hero, played by Matt Damon, is middle-aged like I am.

In one battle scene, the filmmakers needed to make a group of warriors appear enormous. They used forced perspective, pairing seven-foot-tall performers with performers under five feet tall. Damon's body double was Devyn Dalton, a 4-foot-6 stuntwoman.

So, like many middle-aged people, this version of Odysseus occasionally benefits from some assistance.

Odysseus is a famously complicated and flawed hero. He struggles at critical moments, sometimes falling asleep or failing to act decisively. He frequently depends on his crew or the gods to help him find his way.

And of all of Odysseus's qualities, the one I found most relatable was his near-constant fatigue.

I know that feeling.

As a Pingry student in the 1980s, I often felt overwhelmed, confused, or ambivalent about topics as varied as Physics, poetry, and the Honor Code. Like Odysseus, I was sometimes lost, and perhaps half-asleep, in assemblies such as this one. My intentions were generally good, but my actions and my attention were inconsistent.

Particularly as a new Middle School student, and then as a ninth grader entering the Upper School, I was so busy trying to catch up academically and socially, to meet with teachers and make friends, that I didn't pay especially close attention to the Honor Code. Instead, I trusted that other people would interpret and embody it for me.

In my mind, that was a job for my excellent teachers and coaches, for the mature seniors and responsible peer leaders, and for the elected members of student government. They understood the Honor Code. They would carry it for the rest of us.

While Odysseus has some valid reasons to explain his fatigue and tendency to ignore and off-load tasks, including Circe, the Lotus-Eaters, and a journey home that lasts ten years, my excuse is less compelling.

I have the unique ability to fall asleep in almost any moving vehicle. Even if I am in the middle of a conversation, or someone is telling me something important, like, say, my wife Eleanor, I will sometimes fall asleep suddenly, in a matter of seconds.

My unheroic superpower emerged in college, and the origin story isn't flattering. I was traveling with one of my roommates from Brussels to Paris by train. Because my mother is Belgian and I speak French, my roommate — not surprisingly — was relying on me to serve as our interpreter and tour guide.

It was a great plan — until we boarded the wrong train, I promptly fell asleep, and we ended up in Germany instead of France.

My error was compounded by the cosmically unhelpful employees at the Information Desk in the Cologne train station. They took turns shrugging their shoulders and looking at one another while repeating the phrase, “Wir können nur Deutsch.”

Translated, this means something like: “You silly lost Americans, with your Big Macs and your Spider-Mans and your NBA. Maybe next time you’ll pay better attention.”

We did, eventually, make it to Paris, thanks to the patience and help of strangers. And I still wish, in hindsight, that I had been less passive and acted a bit more like Tom Holland's youthful and creative Spider-Man to problem-solve my way home.

Coincidentally, Tom Holland acted alongside Matt Damon in *The Odyssey*, playing his son Telemachus. So for fun, I asked Claude the following question: What would you call a movie where 55-year-old Matt Damon plays Spider-Man trying to make his way from Germany to France? And Claude suggested the following movie titles:

- *Spider-Man: Far From Limber*
- *Saving Private Parker*
- and my favorite:
- *Spider-Man: No Way I'm Jumping Off That Roof Without an Anti-Inflammatory*

None of these made me feel inspired or optimistic. Then this summer, while watching a documentary as modest as *The Odyssey* is epic, I finally woke up. I began to understand how this story doesn't just highlight one of my flaws, it also helps to explain my early relationship with the Honor Code. And provide a simple roadmap for how to act, at *any* age.

The documentary is called *Saved by the Beauty of the World*, and it is about the life and work of the poet Mary Oliver. If I had to summarize her poetry in one sentence, it would be this:

What we pay attention to grows.

Oliver's poems are filled with people who spend their days watching, listening, wondering, and asking questions. The speaker in one poem takes pride in knowing "how to pay attention." Another ends with the line, "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."

Oliver once said, "If you give something a lot of attention, very often you end up loving it."

Think about almost anything you love: a sport, an instrument, a subject, a place, a friendship. You probably didn't come to love it by rushing past it. You spent time with it. You noticed details. You began to understand it more fully. You became invested.

Paying attention sounds easy enough, but we all know that it is not. Each day, there are countless forces competing for our attention. Some are large and powerful, like the Siren song of an internet designed to keep us scrolling and clicking.

Others are smaller but no less consuming in the moment: a challenge match in tennis, an audition for the Buttondowns or Balladeers, a chemistry test, a difficult conversation with a friend, or the question of where you are going to sit at lunch.

Faced with all of these daily trials, it is understandable that we sometimes go on autopilot. It can be tempting to look away, to become a sleepy passenger who's just along for the ride, or to let someone else do the difficult work of noticing, interpreting, and acting.

And this temptation is not limited to students. Speaking on behalf of the adults in the audience this morning, we are just as busy, just as preoccupied, and sometimes just as sleepy as you are.

Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* begins with the line, "Tell me about a complicated man." The truth is that all of us are complicated people. We lead full and sometimes contradictory lives. We become distracted. We make mistakes. We don't always live up to our own intentions.

The Honor Code understands this. It is aspirational. It describes not simply what we must do, but what we should do. It does not assume that doing the right thing will always be easy or obvious. Instead, it gives us a shared vocabulary and a sense of direction.

Words such as "community" and "decent" remind us that we are part of something larger than ourselves. And two other words, found in **both** our Mission and in our Honor Code, bring that responsibility into focus: "For others."

Those two words matter because attention cannot end with ourselves. At the beginning of a school year, it is natural to focus on our individual lives and goals. What classes am I taking? Will I make the team or get the part? What grades will I earn? Will I find my people? What will this year mean for college?

Those questions are real and important. But the Honor Code asks us to widen the frame — and to also ask:

- Who else can I encourage?
- Who might need to be included?
- How are my choices affecting my classmates, teammates, and teachers?
- What can I contribute?
- What kind of community am I helping to create?

The Honor Code asks us to pay attention to one another and to then act on what we notice. It does not ask us to wait our turn, to defer to a teacher, a senior, a team captain, or an elected student leader to carry that responsibility for us.

And this action rarely requires a heroic gesture worthy of Odysseus. More often, it means noticing that someone is sitting alone. It means listening when a teacher or friend gives you difficult feedback.

It means resisting the urge to laugh at someone else's expense. It means considering how one choice, even a small one, affects the larger community. It means seeing something that needs to be done and not assuming that someone else will do it. And it means choosing academic honesty and integrity, even and especially when the pressure is high and a shortcut is tempting.

Mary Oliver describes attention as “the beginning of devotion.” Our Letter-in-Life recipient this year, Dr. Robert Fullilove III from the Class of 1962, shows us what can happen when attention deepens into curiosity, empathy, devotion, and ultimately action.

As a student at Pingry, Dr. Fullilove developed a love of French language and culture. That curiosity encouraged him to look beyond the borders of his own experience and to become, in the truest sense, a citizen of the world.

Throughout his life, he has paid sustained attention to people and histories and neighborhoods that others too often overlook. We see that in his decades of work in prisons and with incarcerated individuals.

We see it in the memorial he helped establish in Nantes, France, to acknowledge the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. And we see it in a life devoted to honoring human dignity while acknowledging our shared flaws and our continuing responsibility to do better.

Dr. Fullilove reminds us that lifelong learning is not restricted to students or to school. Personal growth remains possible at every stage of life. He shows us that paying attention can change not only the person who is looking, but also the people and communities that person chooses to see and serve.

Many of us want to do something heroic. The grand gesture, the headline, the home run, or the dramatic solution can be alluring.

But during this academic year, I would ask that we instead take a more modest approach: Let us try to be fully human. Let us resist the temptation to become sleepy passengers who are just along for the ride.

Let us act with decency and consider how our choices affect our classmates and colleagues. Let us pay attention to the people who are trying to help us — and to the people we have the opportunity to help.

Be curious enough to notice what you do not yet understand.

Be kind enough to notice what someone else may need.

Be here enough to give the people and experiences in front of you your full attention.

Odysseus eventually makes it home, but he does not get there alone. His journey depends on the intervention of his crew, strangers, and even the gods.

At Pingry, we will also depend on one another this year. But we cannot wait for someone else to notice, to care, or to act in our place.

We know what we should do. Now let's do it.