

Memorial Service Remarks for John A. Higgins
Middletown Baptist Church
Daniel T. Roach, Jr.
November 9, 2013

It is hard to describe what John Higgins meant to me, to St. Andrew's, and to the generations of students and teachers he taught and mentored in his incredible life and career.

When I talked to Lee on the day of John's death, I felt desolated, stunned, speechless, and forlorn. I experienced the loss of a dear friend, a generous, thoughtful, and gracious colleague, and one of the great lights in the world of teaching and education. I know we live among life and death every day, but the loss of this exceptional man was difficult to bear and to accept. I could, at first, think of no way to rekindle the light, the hope, the promise of John Higgins in the life of St. Andrew's.

But as a few days passed, and I had time to reflect on John's life and our work together, I grew more hopeful, energized, and inspired by John's spirit and example. Perhaps, it is the knowledge that his voice, perspective, wisdom, and advice reside powerfully in me, his students, and his colleagues; perhaps, it is the example of the strength, courage, generosity, and faith of Lee, Molly, and Susannah; perhaps, it is the many random Yankee baseball cards John gave me over our 32 years together – they all still reside in the top drawer of my desk and represent the spirit of camaraderie and laughter we shared so often.

The greatest gift to a community, a nation, and the world is a teacher, a man or woman who possesses a passion, love, and reverence for his/her discipline, a deep respect for the dignity, character, and promise of his/her students, and an ability to communicate and transfer that genius to colleagues. In other words, an exemplary teacher changes everything in a school.

These transformational teachers are rare in the world of secondary and undergraduate education. It is unusual to find teachers who master the art of teaching and the art of human connection in the complex communities that make up our schools and colleges.

John Higgins wrote the definition of a consummate teacher and professional for me, and he did so by displaying day after day, year after year, what it meant to honor a school, a discipline, a class, a student, and a faculty.

John possessed so many abiding commitments in his life as a teacher. First, he believed in his students: he honored their individuality, their various contributions to life in the School, and the ability, work ethic, and humanity they brought to his classroom. The students always came first, and it was the students who literally brought him back to the classroom whenever he battled a particularly difficult health issue in his life.

What made John so distinctive as a teacher was his ability to teach all levels of mathematics at our school. He could take the most highly accomplished math students in the School and challenge them and honor them with seminar and tutorial instruction. He could develop confidence, self-esteem, and poise in the students who did not believe in their own ability to do math. Whether you soared towards remarkable levels of scholarship and mastery in the most challenging courses in the School or whether you literally needed a person to make you relax, think, and achieve, John Higgins was the teacher who made all the difference.

He had this beautiful understanding of two paradoxical imperatives for a teacher. First, he possessed a deep understanding and appreciation of the high level of achievement and mastery his students needed to display, and he saw it as his responsibility to guide, coach, and prepare his students for exemplary work. Secondly, he understood the interpersonal and academic lives of his students and, therefore, was always remarkably patient, kind, and encouraging. One of his most gifted students Michael Atalay, Class of 1984, describes John beautifully:

He was the best teacher I've ever had. From secondary school through college, medical school, Ph.D. residency training and fellowship, I've had literally hundreds of teachers, many outstanding and many truly world class. But none has impacted me more than John. None has affected my life's trajectory like John. For me, John Higgins stands alone.

My 8th grade daughter Annie tutored with John every Sunday for the past two years. When I asked her to describe Mr. Higgins' gifts as a teacher she said simply and eloquently:

For me, he made the mess that is math, manageable!

This devotion to the integrity and dignity of each student extended to John's commitment as Director of

Studies to design ways of honoring each student's course selection. As Academic Dean, I sat in meetings for hours with John as he refused to stop working, revising, and creating until each student's own personal schedule had been recognized and enabled.

Secondly, John expected, valued, and celebrated collegiality, collaboration, and friendship on the faculty. For him, serving as an adult role model, mentor, and teacher was a simple proposition: you did your work generously, graciously, and well – there was, in the Higgins' philosophy, no room, no time, no purpose in adult drama, dissatisfaction, or selfishness. He and I bonded over our belief that for schools to thrive, teachers had to be happy, engaged, challenged, and ever growing and developing. This was more than a theory, for John quickly became the teacher of teachers both at St. Andrew's and in Delaware through the auspices of the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Delaware. Teachers responded to John in the same way his students did: they marveled at his calm, encouraging ability to communicate so many aspects of the discipline of teaching – curriculum, assessment, learning styles, instructional methods, and philosophy, the cultivation of student curiosity, creativity, and confidence.

Many of you in this congregation have found inspiration, direction, and guidance through John's generosity and brilliance – the way you teach, the way you respect your students, the way you collaborate with colleagues, emerged from John's gentle and affirming guidance.

Finally, John displayed faith, courage, resilience, and tenacity in his life as he experienced significant health challenges and crises at the end of his career. Whether I visited him in the hospital or at home, John worked very hard to recover quickly and return to his beloved students. In the last years of his career, we would talk about retirement on a yearly basis. We would meet at least three times a year to review his retirement plans; in October, usually after comment time, he would tell me that he was pretty sure the time had come to retire; in February, he would come in to say that he would teach only two classes; in April, he would ask if he might jump up to three or four sections.

Even after his retirement, John's home was a place where Middletown students, St. Andrew's faculty, and staff children found an oasis of coherent math teaching, where St. Andrew's teachers found tutorial wisdom, good humor, and friendship, and where I always found a friend who understood, better than most, the complexity of my job. Each Thursday, Eric Finch and the Math Department eagerly awaited John's visit to our classes.

He had so much more to teach us about math, about teaching, about life, about the Civil War, baseball . . . the list goes on and on.

If I needed a reminder that John would forever be a guiding force in my life, I received one this week. Two days after his death, I received a hand-written letter from John expressing his and Lee's condolences as I mourned the loss of my father. John's last note to me was so typically thoughtful, lovely, and gracious, the very qualities he brought to all the relationships he had in his life. On behalf of all of us at St. Andrew's, we express our love to Lee, Molly, and Susannah. You have so many of us here ready to support you all at this difficult time.

We all are blessed to have learned from this man, to have loved this man, to have been transformed by this man.