

Baccalaureate Chapel
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The greatest gift this community has given me is that I have learned to trust, and be trusted by, other human beings. My karma dictated 22 years ago that I come back to high school to learn what healthy bonds between individuals are all about, and this community has modelled for me how to honor these connections. Back in the early 70's, after I skipped the 8th grade due to a family move, becoming a very young and immature teenager, I was much more worried about the width of my bell-bottomed pants, the length of my hair, whether paisley went with plaid or if my unibrow was a good look. The thought of allowing any one to have access to the person that I was, the core place where all of my fears and hopes were rooted, never occurred. This is what you all have confirmed for me - that our vulnerabilities can grow into our greatest strengths, that in opening ourselves up honestly, we can make the greatest friendships.

Trust. Everything here at St Andrew's turns on this genuine connection. Trust is the hinge on which the relationship between a teacher and a student opens. What we teachers and coaches bring to you in the studio, classroom or playing field is a framing of possibility; of what might and can be achieved. This promise of growth and transformation is at the center of the teacher/student relationship and it will take root and strengthen only if you, the student, have faith that my lead, as a teacher, is worth following. The trust that you all bring to this community of learning, this openness to tackling what is new and challenging, moves me every time I am fortunate enough to work with you in partnership and it has been the most rewarding dimension of my time here - this fellowship of the journey we take together. I know I will miss this.

My family would tell you that I have the gift of forgetting, that on receiving vital information one day, I am apt to have a hazy memory of it the next. In spite of this selective recall, however, I remember every AHA! moment that a student has experienced in the studio. It is always a marvel and a wonder to me: a cause for celebrating the ability of the human mind to comprehend a truth that was not understood before. The bridge crossed, the synapse fired, the eyes alight with new intensity. As a teacher, I have been honored to be in the front row for so many of these moments where a student truly sees for the first time and every one of these experiences has been exciting and rewarding for me to be a part of. And the great thing about this process in the art studio is how simple our means are. Paper, charcoal, an eraser and a student meet a question: how is an egg round; where are the eyes in the face; what is the difference in a portrait if the subject is looking directly at you or away?

Investigating together what we take for granted, plumbing the natural patterns that make our world beautiful, tactile and surprising all at once, has been my great privilege. You all, having gained the confidence to see the world for yourselves, to form personal judgements and opinions and then to act in response to these observations - this not only makes us teachers look pretty fantastic but it also means that anything is possible for you, wherever you set your sights. You have learned how to learn, how to listen to one another, how to propel yourselves forward with questions, but perhaps the most important investment you've made is the willingness to trust others who come from families, places and experiences quite different from your own. Its Mayela (from Jakarta) exclaiming about her roommate (from Winston-Salem), "How can I possibly go on, knowing Ann Yancey will not be the first and last person I see every day and night?" Its wide-eyed Carson, on his second day as a new fourth former, walking with Sue to Starbucks, being schooled by this rhapsodic young woman, *in detail*, about how Seoul is nothing like New York City. Or Theo, a scholar/super-hero, farm boy from upstate NY, recalling how, during the Environmental Science trip to Antietam this spring, he and Nambdi, from Newark by way of Nigeria, flipped their canoe into the freezing river soon after beginning a 3-hour trip, but by dint of mutual trust and creativity, managed to finish the journey with big grins on both their faces. Its this cross-section of personality and personal history, of shared discoveries, that has made SAS an exciting and rewarding place for us all to live. And even though the criticism is occasionally leveled that we are our own small universe, a bubble, if you will, this has also been a place to incubate and grow deep relationships. In a recent conversation we had in the studio, Liza reflected on the fact that she'll probably never be part of a community like this again, almost medieval in the daily rituals we follow, removed from much of the world's noise, hype and tension, a place where we can interact with one another in multiple settings and where one can care about being a student, about being active in a school community. This is a blessing, even if sometimes in disguise.

For me, the value has also been about being ultimately, surprisingly, useful to you; seeing that the lessons from the studio and classroom have a practical effect in the lives of graduates.

I received a letter from a 2017 alum last year, who was struggling on the anniversary of a close friend's death. She admitted to feeling pretty low:

"I woke up this the morning and everything seemed to be in slow motion. As I walked around campus, my feet sludged through the mixture of snow and mud, barely leaving the ground. What's the point?....I thought. I felt the feelings and emotions ...starting to pile back on. As my tears started to well up, I looked up and saw the snowflakes slowly falling through the air. They were beginning to coat the branches of the trees and everything had a soft blanket of white. It made me think back to class for the past three years where we would talk about visual moments.

You always reminded us that no matter where you look, you can find something beautiful, interesting, inspiring, as long as you look with open eyes. There are visual moments all around us and it is up to us to be able to see them. We just have to open up to new perspectives, to noticing the things that are right in front of us. This morning you helped me to see that there can be good and hope even when all I feel is loss and grief”

Needless to say, I was deeply humbled by her willingness to share these thoughts with me. In acknowledging vulnerability and pain, this young woman was able to work through her experience and she was moved to acknowledge it without fear of shame. St. Andrew’s allows us to be human. Knowing that this community is capable of understanding, and supporting, the imperfections at the core of every one of us, is a huge part of what makes this place so special. As Leonard Cohen sang: “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

And this is what family does - we take care of one another. And this is the heart of the religious affiliation of the school, I think: we are all challenged by our circumstances in sometimes extraordinary, always unpredictable, ways, and how we respond to what the world throws at us is the measure of what we value. The ability and willingness of our adult community to be transparent about themselves, to demonstrate that they don’t have all the answers, and struggle themselves to find measure in truth, is a generosity of spirit I’ve been so proud to be a part of. This frame of education - teachers working with students to find out what the important questions are to ask, and both pursuing the material at hand with the courage to encounter ambiguity and deep complexity - this focus has put us all on the path of lifelong learning. Althea recently reflected on this somewhat mysterious process whereby incoming students find themselves gradually forged into, and willfully seeking, a new version of themselves. “I was a nerdy, quiet and self-conscious III Former, although I knew I had a powerful, dramatic inner voice. The school allowed me to marry these two sides of myself. A chapel talk I gave as a III Former on the challenges of being a bi-racial child, led me to jump at the chance of performing at an open-mic night, and all the conversations in the classroom and dorms, coupled with the multiple performance opportunities we have here, gave me the confidence to be ready for anything the future has in store.”

And so, I will leave you with this question: How will you find your way, class of 2019, and who is going to love and support you as this new chapter in your life begins, and you roll down that long driveway in an overpacked car to a future that is unknowable? Well, look around at every single person in this chapel right now, and you’ll begin to see an answer unfold.....