

Chapel Talk  
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## Loneliness

Good morning! What a whirlwind this week has been! To our newest students: congratulations on completing your first week! To returning students, I hope you are feeling back at home at St. Andrew's.

In today's Chapel, you will sign the honor pledge. It is a promise you make as an individual; your personal integrity depends on keeping that promise. But it is also a promise you are making in community, before everyone here, saying that your actions will come from a place of integrity, your work will be authentically yours, and that you expect the same from each of us. We sign the honor pledge each year at this Chapel service so that we can all see that we are not alone in living honorably—an undertaking that can sometimes make our choices hard in the short term, but one which I promise you will make your life easier in the long run.

Taking responsibility for yourself is a necessity if you are to live a meaningful life. This is true when it comes to the honor code, and it is true in every other aspect of our lives: you are accountable for your education, your athletic training, your health—making good choices about food, sleep, and, yes, even COVID precautions—and your behavior. Boarding school in general, including St. Andrew's, is designed to help you take responsibility for yourself, to grow in independence and autonomy during your time here.

But there is a reason that your path toward greater independence occurs in the context of an educational community. We are all in school to improve ourselves, but we can only do that with the help of others. If you were attempting to learn and grow by yourself, you would not get very far. That is the simple reason why we are all here: for each other. The success of one of us is the success of all of us.

This morning, I want to tell you: you are not alone.

Research shows that about one-third of young Americans are lonely at school. That means that if you look to your left, and look to your right, and count yourself—chances are that at least one of you has been lonely in the past week or two. And, much as we would like to blame everything that is wrong right now on the pandemic, we know that rates of loneliness in young people have been rising since 2012. Writing in *The New York Times* this summer, psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jean M. Twenge explained that their research shows this rise in loneliness correlates directly to increasing numbers of teenagers having cell phones.

In their essay, they ask, “Now, after nearly 18 months of social distancing, contagion fears, anxious parenting, remote schooling and increased reliance on devices, will students spontaneously put away their phones and switch back to old-fashioned in-person socializing, at least for the hours that they are together in school?”

My answer, for us at St. Andrew’s, is a resounding “yes.”

Here are three ways to fight loneliness. I hope you will think of, and share with us, many more.

First: Be present, and be here. When you are on your screens, you are somewhere else. Behavior change is hard, but I know you can do it. Put away your phones and your laptops and embrace the humans around you. Be curious about them. Ask them questions—it’s the best way to start a conversation.

Be present, and be here.

Second: Invest yourself in our rituals. St. Andrew’s has great rituals, even if they have been altered over the past 18 months. Family-style meals, Chapel, classes, study hall, brush-and-wash, study breaks, school meeting—these rituals have stood the test of time and bring us together. When you fully participate in these moments—excited to see your friends, curious about how they are doing, generous in sharing of yourself—you learn, grow, and find joy.

Invest yourself in our rituals.

Third: Take advantage of this place and space. One of St. Andrew’s most renowned graduates, Holly Whyte, class of 1935, was a noted pioneer of urban design and space planning. I have always believed that his experience at St. Andrew’s was one reason he had such novel insights about people and place. Our campus is well designed for meaningful human interaction. It features a dense, populated core, or village, in the midst of a glorious open, green space. As we move about the campus and its buildings each day, we collide—in hallways, stairwells, common rooms, the Front Lawn. Holly once wrote, “What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people.” As you are moving about St. Andrew’s, look up. People are everywhere, and to be with these people is the reason you are here. If you see someone else, and you have a moment, linger in that place and start a conversation. Soon, others will join.

Make the most of this place and space.

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Even if you remember to do these three things, it's important to recognize that everyone is lonely sometimes. That is completely normal, even more so during a global pandemic that has kept us all away from each other by necessity. Some of you might feel lonely right now, or have felt alone at some point during the last week, in spite of the square dances, the best efforts of your Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the embrace of the faculty, the presence of your roommates, and every other opportunity to connect that St. Andrew's has offered this week.

If you are feeling lonely, reach out to others around you in this community: a peer, a VI Former, an advisor, or a counselor. We are all here to love and support you. You are not the only one feeling this way, I promise you!

In fact, at the very end of her book *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy Day acknowledges how pervasive loneliness is, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community." Although Day begins by saying, "We have all known the long loneliness..."—she offers a solution. Love, and community.

Now, community is a word we use a lot around here. In the St. Andrew's word cloud, it is probably in 72-point font. But community isn't something that happens because we talk about it. And it doesn't happen just because we are all here in this place together. This year, I do not want you to make the mistake of thinking that because we are all in one place at one time—instead of spread around the globe in our homes and on our screens—that we are a community.

Community happens because each one of us makes it happen. Community is entirely dependent upon your actions, your behaviors. You, yourself, have the power to create our community!

Each of you is responsible for making this community: every time you walk onto your dorm, into a classroom, into the chapel, into the dining hall. Put away your phone and your computer. Be present, and be here. Invest yourself in our rituals. Make the most of our place and space.

Just like honor and integrity, community is a collective practice made possible by individual decisions and habits. And you are, personally, accountable for that.