

Chapel Talk
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Why do we constantly get in trouble for what we say? We use language to experiment, test, project who we would like to be, or at least who we would like people to *think* we are. Sometimes, words get us into trouble. As assistant headmaster, I am constantly asked to interpret what the meaning of a particular phrase, action, or even visual image is supposed to mean and whether it is appropriate for a community like ours. Mr. Roach is constantly saying that he expects our private lives to be consistent with our public personas. Does this mean that we may never use profanity on corridor if we are not to use that language when we meet an admission guest? Or does it mean that who we are and how we treat others remains unchanged in whatever context we are in? I would submit that we communicate with each other very differently depending on where we are and with whom we are speaking. Words mean nothing out of context or worse, the speaker's intent and the listener's understanding can be completely warped.

Rarely are our actions as bold, as extreme or as exemplary as our words. As Mr. Brown is apt to say, "The older I get, the stronger I was". We tend to exaggerate our actions when we describe our exploits. Certainly this is true of "boy talk" on corridor. We become bigger, faster, stronger, or, in some cases, we become David in his fight against Goliath. A number of years ago, an advisee of mine named Rox was involved in the typical back and forth wars between Hillier and Fleming as one group of III Form boys raids the other corridor and then retreats to the safety of numbers. I happened to be on duty during one of these escapades. Now Rox was a big III Former and he thought that he was very brave to rumble through Fleming corridor as his smaller peers clung to his back. When I came on the scene, the excitement had risen to a feverish pitch so I decided to put a halt to the rampaging. All of the kids heeded my request except for Rox. He continued to race around the corner by Mr. Kennedy's apartment in an attempt to cross into enemy territory. Finally, I grabbed Rox by his pajamas and forcefully told him to cease and desist. Several years later, I heard Rox recounting his exploits and how I had seized him by the throat with one hand and lifted him off of his feet. Needless to say, Rox's memory of the event far exceeded the reality.

We use language freely and experimentally and, at times, we take it too far. How do you know when you have crossed that invisible line from harmless boasting, teasing, roasting to hazing and harassment? We have heard many stories from Mr. Roach about incidents of hazing at other schools where seemingly harmless pranks get carried away and become hurtful and mean-spirited. I am sure that we can think of some situations here that we would like to take back and do over again.

No one has said that growing up is easy. Experimenting with language and watching for reactions is certainly safer than experimenting with actions. When I say to a member of the soccer team that I am going to drop kick them to the next planet, I do not mean that I will literally drop kick them. I am simply expressing some type of frustration with their play. What we learn as we mature is that words in one specific context are not appropriate in another setting. Even worse, taking words out of context and then sharing them with others can lead to gross misunderstanding. After all, isn't that how rumors eat away at a community?

I know someone who loves to argue. He is stubborn and takes extreme positions for the sake of argument. If he cannot win a verbal argument, he resorts to wrestling. This approach, as you can imagine, can be problematic in debating a topic with your mother or grandmother. You might not want to wrestle her to the ground.

As a community, we love to make DVDs to show at school assembly to promote events, games, dances...I am the guy who previews these works of artistic expression. Invariably, the creators of these productions push, and often exceed the limit of what I feel comfortable sharing with the entire community. Why is it that humor must include bad language or heavy sexual innuendo? And, who is the judge of the intent -- the creators or the audience? Several years ago, a group of senior girls made a DVD to promote an upcoming dance. In the film, they tried to entice the student body to participate in this event. They used all of the charm that they had at their disposal. You can imagine how this behavior might have been viewed. Some members of the community were outraged that they would demean themselves in this way. How could they present themselves to the community as sexual objects? How could they be involved in a film that objectified women? Some very good conversations followed in the wake of that film. From the girls' perspective, they were having fun, promoting an event in a way that would catch some attention and, in no way, felt demeaned by the production. They had a strong sense of self and felt that playing that role in no

way compromised who they were. So, again, I ask the question: who is the judge - -the creator or the viewer?

We have recently had the privilege of reading a new student publication called “Cardinal Sin”. The authors of this publication are wordsmiths who cleverly present issues in an irreverent and tongue-in cheek way. They are bold in their anonymity-or are they really anonymous? After all, how many students in this community use the word *DANK*? Or, I wonder who “Sloth” could be--clearly, someone who is taking Colonial History and likes to complicate simple concepts with big words. Does their anonymity contribute to the mystique of the publication? Is their use of language less restricted because they do not assign their names to their articles?

This is a trait that has happened through the centuries. Take Thomas Paine, for example. As all III Form students of history know, Thomas Paine used a pseudonym when writing his famous pamphlet, *Common Sense*. This decision, rather than the actual pamphlet, was, in fact, common sense because his words were treasonous and he would have risked being beheaded.

One of the favorite pastimes of our students is talking on corridor late at night. What do the guys talk about during these late-night sessions? How about the girls? I spoke with a number of VI Formers the other day and asked them. Since they knew that I was speaking in Chapel, they chose to talk about how it is that boys and girls study and how study habits affect sleep. Of course these are generalizations, but it is clear that the VI Form boys feel that the girls use part of study hall to study and part of it to socialize and talk about how much work they have. Then, from 10-11:15, they socialize and complain some more. The more work they have, the more dramatic it becomes until, at around 11:15, they sit down for serious study and work until all of their work is done and done well. As one boy said, “the girls plan for an all-nighter 4 days in advance - what sense does that make? Why don’t they just get the work done and stop stressing out?” According to the girls with whom I spoke, the boys, like the girls, use study hall to work and to socialize. Like the girls they take from 10-11:15 off. At 11:15, they start studying again and they go to bed not when their work is necessarily done but when they get tired. If the work is not done, so be it. It will get done at some other time. Rather than bragging about how late they stayed up, they tend to downplay how hard they worked. Both exaggerate but they exaggerate in different directions. Of course, these generalizations are ridiculous but there may be some truth hidden in there. Is one approach better than the other? Should the boys be

more like the girls or vice versa? What can we learn about each other from their use of language in describing simple study and sleep habits?

Language is very powerful. Clearly, we need to be extremely careful about how we use language because it can quickly lead to misunderstanding and hurt. We must be equally cognizant of how we interpret language. In either case, the context in which words are spoken plays a critical role and needs to be considered carefully or else we will continue to constantly get ourselves into trouble for what we say.