

Chapel Talk  
Nigel Furlonge  
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### **On Being a Student**

Last year, I was a student again. The program I completed was one in Private School Leadership at the Klingenstein Center in Teachers College at Columbia University. Each year a group of 35 experienced independent school teachers go through a learning adventure as a cohort, taking classes, visiting schools, doing group projects, and, of course, exploring together the City of New York. Because of this program's focus on education, I was frequently reflecting on my own past as a student while simultaneously being a student. This reflection is the central subject of this chapel talk.

During my middle and high school years, I was lucky enough to have attended one of the most demanding, but enriching schools in the country, Boston Latin School. Much like St. Andrew's, I knew even as a young 6<sup>th</sup> grader that by being accepted to Boston Latin, I was joining a community that would enrich me for the rest my life.

Boston Latin School was a hard school – mostly in all the ways in which it is easy for school to be hard. On orientation day, the Headmaster herded us into the auditorium and said after pointing to all the famous names inscribed on the frieze, “Look to the left of you, look to the right of you. If you are here at graduation, they won't be.” Scary. Daunting. And unfortunately, true. As an 11 year-old 7<sup>th</sup> grader at Latin these words and this moment – repeated to all incoming Boston Latin students – were marked on us all indelibly.

At Latin School, we had six plus hours of homework each night. We were also ranked at the end of each year. For some reason, I guess it was important for some to know where everyone stood. Boston Latin students read and write a lot. In fact, we had not one, but two English classes our first year. This school espouses an education informed by traditions honed and cultivated over the past few centuries since the school's founding in 1635. Over the summers, we would read and were tested on 7-10.

One long-standing tradition at Latin School is Declamation. Each student would declaim – that is, recite a formal piece of prose or poetry in front of one’s classmates – 3 times a year. I, of course, detested declamation. I didn’t see the point of having to memorize a passage and prove you’d memorized it through a public performance. I do understand the purpose now.

My first few years at Latin I did quite well - getting into all the honors classes I possibly could. I also took advantage – well, my parents and teachers pushed me to take advantage – of summer enrichment programs. One summer before my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, I even went to the prestigious Tanglewood music camp in the beautiful Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts. Few people in this world can honestly begin a story with, “This one time at band camp...” Fewer still have attended band camp without being able to play an instrument, like I did. Yes, you heard me correctly, I cannot now, nor have I ever been able to play an instrument. It’s still a mystery how I ended up at Tanglewood that summer. There I was with no instrument, just walking around for a week taking pictures with a Polaroid camera the counselors gave me. While writing this chapel talk, I called my mother said to ask her how I could have ended up there? She said, “I’m so sorry...we thought they would teach you how to play music. Had we known, we would have gotten you a flute or something.”

I had the normal ups and down that many people have in high school. When I didn’t work hard, I didn’t do as well. When I did invest myself in my studies, I did just fine. Of the many experiences I can recall from being a high school student, two moments stand out for me from my sophomore year, which was by far the most difficult year for me.

The first was in a Chemistry Honors class where we were learning to “balance equations.” Ms. Ivaska gave back a test, looked out at the class and said in her thick Lithuanian accent, “Some parts of Chemistry can’t be learned by everyone...when it comes to balancing equations, some people can do it, some can’t.” Even then, I thought to myself, I don’t think teachers are supposed to say that. Clearly she had a fixed view of what students could and could not accomplish. Current research suggests that she was wrong. Unfortunately, perhaps

the damage was done to some of my peers; reinforcing for many the idea that they could only learn the things they had an “aptitude” for. If you were a student in that chemistry class, what would your incentive be to continue to work hard?

A second formative memory for me was in Ms. Shevlin’s Honor’s English class. This was the last time I would ever have to do Declamation - which I’d done 3 times a year since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I was reciting the opening of William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. I’d like to do a re-enactment of that Declamation right now...

Duke Orsino:

“If music be the food of love, play on;” Ahm...Yeah...this is not going to happen. I’m sorry.

I remember walking the walk of shame back to my chair thinking, “I shouldn’t have waited until the night before to memorize the speech.” I guess I was hoping that Ms. Shevlin would just fail me and let me get on with the rest of the year. No such luck. She made me do the Declamation 3 days later. What Ms. Shevlin didn’t say, but was implicit in her making me redo the Declamation, was, “Who do you think you are, young man? For over three centuries, every student has done Declamation. Who do you think you are to opt out of this?” Most of my classmates were just cracking up when this happened – as would many of you if you saw my public failing. I do remember this book-wormy type girl in the front of the room looking at me strangely. She wasn’t laughing. If anything she looked embarrassed for me. You all know now her as Ms. Furlonge. I’m fairly positive that Ms. Furlonge wasn’t thinking at that moment: “Yeah, this is definitely the guy I’m going to marry.”

There are quite a few aspects of my life at Boston Latin that I wouldn’t want to replicate in schools. Nevertheless, for all the hours of study here’s a sliver of what I learned in high school – lessons that resonate with me to this day. In some ways, what I appreciate most about my time there is that I learned how to make mistakes - or more precisely why I made the mistakes I did. I believed that if I made a misstep, I’d have a chance to make amends. However, those opportunities are not unlimited, so don’t squander them. I learned that, when you sign your name on a piece of paper, you should do so honorably and with

integrity. I learned that someone is always looking out for you, mostly for your benefit, whether it's your parents, your peers, or your teachers. I learned how to sit still for 5 or 6 hours at a time alone. I learned how to lose track of time while completely engrossed in an idea. I learned the importance of meeting one's obligations and commitments. I learned to meet deadlines. I learned to respect the schools' traditions—because someday they will be your own. I learned from the college process not to allow anyone – or certainly not an institution that couldn't possibly know you – to define you. I learned that having a formal education tells me nothing about a person's intelligence, curiosity, or generosity.

Suffice it to say that my experience as a student this past year in New York was a bit different from my high school experience. There really were not any times that I was unprepared for class. But, I was held after class by one of my teachers once—what a dreadful feeling. Last year, I was required to take a law class. As I tried to decide between the two available classes, people in the know told me to choose Professor Hubert's class. They said that, although he lectures a lot he tells great stories, he doesn't treat you like a law student, he's funny, and he is a generous grader. I heard through the grapevine that I should stay away from option #2: Professor Sigall. She was reportedly a bit dry, puts students on the spot by challenging their thinking in class, and is a tough grader. So the choice was easy—off to Sigall's class I went. I thought if I'm going to be at Columbia taking a class in the law school, I'm going all in.

So, I get my midterm paper back and as I'm leaving with my friends—Professor Sigall says, “Can I see you for a moment?” I hadn't even looked at my paper yet—so I'm worried. After the slow walk of anticipatory shame up to the podium from where she dispensed her legal wisdom each week, Professor Sigall says, “Look, stop interpreting the law...just say what it is...and don't be profound...just offer direct quotes.” She also said, “You might want to use a tape recorder or something...your writing is...well, let's just say your class comments are better than your written work.” The next week, she handed out samples of what she wanted in terms of excellent writing.

It was crystal clear to me what I needed to do. By the time the final came around, I knew exactly what to do. As I thought about this class later, I was reminded about something all students know: teachers have differing visions of what excellence is. Teachers have different notions about what accomplished writing is in their respective fields. And it is reasonable to me that there are distinct discipline-specific expectations. I also believe that, as a student, it was my responsibility to rise to the specific expectations of legal analysis.

Another interesting moment happened in another class that I loved entitled **Privatization and School Choice** taught by the director of the Klingenstein center, Pearl Rock Kane. In her class, we visited all kinds of schools in the city, in addition to reading the giants of educational theory. Over the course of the term, we designed our own democratic ideal of education. On the midterm essay, we knew we would be graded based on a check, which demonstrated a solid, thorough analysis or a check plus, which showed a deep, compelling understanding.

On the day she handed this paper back, she noted how pleased she was. Everyone had gotten a check and there were quite a few check pluses. Then she said there was at least one paper that couldn't be graded on a check plus. So she created a check plus-plus. And then she talked for about 20 minutes about some of the ideas that these essays generated for her. Maybe she wanted to see how we would react. In every academic setting, there are those who are hyper conscious about grades. My program was no different. In our cohort, there happened to be a group of four or five younger teachers in their mid to late 20s. I thought they were going to explode with anticipation before we got the papers back. I remember everyone went out in the hallway and read over their comments. I got my paper near the end of the distribution and put it in my bag. I never look at my paper comments right away since I prefer private reflection. On my way out, I could hear my classmates whispering to each other: Who got the check plus-plus? Was there only one? Did you get the check plus-plus? I had this weird feeling of being back in high school where everyone wanted to know everyone's rank. I've never quite understood why such knowledge is useful.

Obviously, in my philosophical ideal for a student, ranking or position amongst one's peers doesn't enter into my thinking. So what's the point of all this education, all this learning, and all this schooling? Clearly, students should be inquisitive, curious, and passionate. As a student, you should be empathetic to ideas differing from your own. In fact, you should work incredibly hard to try on ideas that are anathema to your own thinking. The mark of a great student is that he or she is open to changing his or her mind based on new evidence or reinterpreted old evidence. Students should shy away from binary – that is, either/or – thinking. Seek simple, elegant questions; but distrust simple, undemanding answers. These suggestions may sound obvious, but I've always thought that what we *believe* about the world is ironically more important than what we *know* about it. So it's one thing to know what makes a "good" student, it is quite another to believe that these qualities can be taught and learned in the dance we call an education.

These characteristics above describe what makes for a great student. They are traits that describe many of you already. Yet even these are not the goal of being a student. Instead, I want to frame being a student in a slightly different way. **What if the goal is to be a self-regulated learner?** What does being a self-regulated learner mean? A self-regulated learner thinks strategically, rather than in the haphazard, even sloppy, manner that characterized some of my high school work. How do you practice self-regulated learning? I think the possibility and realization of this kind of learner lies in further questions: What do you do when you don't know what to do? Do you stop, step back and reflect? Or do you move on and say, I can't do this?

I'm not suggesting that you should already have these strategies in place. This is the point of what you are learning here at St. Andrew's. It's incredibly cliché to say you should "think outside the box." I would argue, first you should think about the box itself. Why does the box exist? How was it constructed? By whom? For what purpose? From whose perspective? The faculty members at St. Andrew's are joining you and coaching you in a process where you are learning what to do when you don't know what to do. They are here helping you to define the boxes we've constructed around Physics, and Chinese, and Art History. So that when you understand these disciplines deeply, you might think creatively and intentionally

about shifting and moving beyond those structural boundaries. This process of your being a student hopefully isn't a journey with a fixed destination. Don't let it be. Instead, conceive of your learning transformation more so like traveling a spiral, never-ending staircase. As teachers, we can look over and see all our students at your different athletic, social, spiritual, academic, and artistic learning points. Hopefully, you can do the same with us because as adults we learn just as much if not more from you.