

Chapel Talk  
October 15, 2008  
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Let me begin by thanking everyone out there for making this the most enjoyable, rewarding year of teaching, so far, in my 28 years of teaching. I'll elaborate on this a little later.

Anyone, who knows me, knows that I love to hear and tell stories. My mom read to me when I was little. My dad is an incredible storyteller, so I probably picked it up from him. My mother-in-law Florence was an also quite a storyteller, so I've been quite fortunate to be surrounded by people who have this gift. Stories enrich our lives, and I hope you enjoy the stories I share with you tonight.

**Don't Allow Bad First Experiences to Close the Door  
To Something You Want To Do**

My first official swimming lesson was at the Pawtucket Boys Club in June 1962. To this day I remember the sights, smells, and terror of that day. My best friend Philip and I were dropped off at the front door of the Boys Club—the same Boys Club that my dad had spent many joyous Depression Era days with his buddies. Philip and I strode into the lobby and were directed to the issue window where we picked up a metal wire basket in which to put all of our clothes and worldly possessions when we went into the changing room.

Once in the changing room, we were in the company of 25-30 other 7-10 year olds of various sizes and shapes. We were told to put our clothes in the baskets we had been issued, take the baskets to the issue window and marched, single-file out onto the pool deck. As I remember the pool deck it was cold and smelled strongly of chlorine. The four male instructors were led by Ellis Mayers and were dressed in white shorts and white T-shirts—each had a large whistle around his neck.

We were taken to the side of the deep end of the pool and told to wait. Philip and I were shivering uncontrollably partially through cold, partially through anxiety. We were paired up and put in a line. Philip and I were first in line. The water was greenish and cloudy. The water was so deep the drain at the bottom looked like a postage stamp. The instructors told us to jump in and swim to the other side. Even though neither Philip nor I knew how to swim—blind obedience took over and we jumped in. Soon after we struggled to the surface, we were grabbed, extracted from the water, and instructed to go to the shallow end (still over our heads) for the rest of our lesson time. I remember very little of the rest of this lesson program, but I can tell you I didn't really learn to swim until I was 11 years old one memorable summer on Cape Cod. Fellow 11-year old Marcia Mavrides, the first love of my life, taught me the fundamentals of the six-beat kick, the high elbow recovery of the arms, and rotary breathing of the freestyle stroke. I think Marcia was a much more powerful motivating force in my early swim career.

### **Twice Is Sometimes Nice...but don't expect things to be the same**

Your life moves only in one direction—forward, not backward. At last winter's sports assembly I ended my remarks with this statement, and thought to myself this might be a good concept to weave into a Chapel Talk. Cars come equipped with a big windshield and a really little rear view mirror. Someone used this metaphor with me one time to compare this to life. You need to focus on all that lies ahead, don't dwell on setbacks and achievements in your past. We can learn from both the bad and the good, but there is a time when we have to put each away in its own little box in the attic of our mind, heart, soul or wherever.

By the same token, sometimes we have the chance to do something over again. We did: this is 'our second tour of duty' at St. Andrew's. When you're given the chance to do something again, don't do this to recapture some magical moment from the past, because you have changed, places change, and people you knew change.

### **Surround Yourself With People Who Want You To Succeed...**

Don't fool yourself: life is a food chain. Expect the best of people...see the best in people, but also realize that it is a competitive world, and some people are much more interested in their own success than yours. This is true for life away from St. Andrew's, and (though less often) sometimes at St. Andrew's. Spend your time with people who have your best interests in mind. When you find these people, try to help them to succeed, as well. Sometimes you can do this simply by encouraging them to do their best, and congratulating them when they succeed. I share with my swimmers a quote attributed to President Kennedy. He said, 'All ships rise on an incoming tide.' It's a powerful statement to take hold of: when we succeed--and help others to succeed, we all benefit from that success.

### **Sharpening the Saw...**

I told you that this has been the best year ever for me in teaching. Last year, I didn't feel the same way. I didn't feel as though I did a particularly good job as a husband, father, teacher—or coach for that matter. I didn't feel satisfied or happy with what I was doing, in general, with my life. During spring break last year on a long car ride I took to Maine, I started thinking about what I needed to do to change. Our greatest privilege as humans, most especially Americans, is the chance to choose. We can choose to be happy or choose to be miserable. I knew I had to change because my current path was making me miserable.

Last summer as a family we camped, swam, hiked, and kayaked as we had never done before: four and one-half weeks out of eight. The weather in Maine wasn't great—cool (never bothers me) with some sun and lots of rain. I thought about the many aspects of last year that I thought could have gone better, and how I could change them. By the end of the first week of July, I felt a positive change coming over me. Sometimes when we identify the problem, the solution becomes easy.

The second week of July, I took a two-week course called Whales, Porpoises, and Seals at The College of The Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine taught by Christoph Richter, a

professor at Queens University in Ontario, Canada. The genesis for taking this course was the visit and talk last winter by Peter Heller, author of *Whale Warriors*. I had felt some apprehension about making a two-week academic commitment in the middle of the summer, especially considering the ambitious syllabus Christoph had e-mailed us in the spring. I went, yikes, do I really want to do this?

First of all, I think meeting Christoph at this time in my career was the best thing that could have happened. He had everything that I felt I had lacked last year. He was a brilliant teacher—the best I ever have had! More than anything else, he embraced so many qualities that I once had possessed, but had lost.

We alternated days in class from 8AM to 5:45PM to days on the 35-foot research vessel *Indigo* from 8AM to 7PM. Most evenings we reconvened to watch videos or discuss our day on the water. An epiphany took place for me on Thursday, July 16. The morning was cool and cloudy. We packed lunches and gear for a 30-mile boat ride to an area east of Mt. Desert Rock called The Ball Park, a favorite of humpback, minke, and finback whales.

How many of you have been on a whale watch? This generally consists of a one to two-hour ride on a high-speed whale watch vessel. You generally watch whales for 30-60 minutes; then take the ride back. The vessel is usually big (75-100'), large enough to have a restaurant and gift shop on board. At 35', the *Indigo* did not fit the description. In a previous life it had plied the waters of the Gulf of Maine as a lobster boat.

As soon as we located whales, we shut off the engines and drifted for the next 3-4 hours among these 35-55' giants as they fed on schools of herring 100' below us. Just to put a whale's size in perspective, when an 18-wheel tractor-trailer passes you on the highway, it is about 55' long. The three whales we watched: Siphon, Sonogram, and Sigma ranged from 35-55'. Humpback whales are given names based on the black and white patterns on their tail flukes. Why did this experience move me so deeply? One reason was because they were so huge, and we were so small. Yet, I didn't feel the least bit frightened even

though if any one of these whales had breached it could have sunk the *Indigo*. These peaceful marine mammals have lived in the ocean for over 35 million years. In this time, their existence has only been threatened by one species—humans. Whaling, ship strikes, entanglement in fishing gear, and overfishing are the leading causes. Christof told us that the whales would need to spend the entire day hunting for herring to sustain themselves. Before the advent of mid-water trawling and the depletion of herring these whales might complete their feeding in 3-4 hours. Why are we fishing for herring? To support the aquaculture industry that uses fishmeal made from herring to feed farm raised salmon.

We watched them feed. They would dive, spend 8-9 minutes underwater, surface and spend 4-5 minutes swimming near the surface (during which we would snap pictures and take movies). When I was in high school and college in the '70s, 'save the whales' was one of the rallying cries of the Environmental Movement. When I attended author Tom Friedman's (*Hot, Flat, and Crowded*) lecture several weeks ago, he said the crisis we are facing now isn't about whales anymore. I disagree, if after 30 years our actions are still causing the demise of these intelligent, majestic organisms—it isn't time to move on. As humans, we have the propensity to want to start noble projects, but we don't very often like to see them through to the end.

### **A Few Words on Sustainability**

We are an environmentally aware and knowledgeable community. The language that we use and the habits we practice reveal this, but remember—we can't consume our way to sustainability. Enjoy that Nino's pizza or that sandwich from Subway, but also realize that there also was a meal fixed for you here at St. Andrew's in the dining hall that did not get consumed (and all of that food will not appear as leftovers to eventually be fed on by someone). As we search online for new shoes, fleeces, etc. we should ask ourselves, do we really need these? Could we do without, or could we buy them at Goodwill and drop off a donated clothing item at the same time?

The most sustainable person I've ever met is not my friend Dr. McLean - though he's a close second. First prize goes to Joseph E. Jackson a.k.a. Mr. Vac. Mrs. Wallace and I

have an Electrolux Epic Series 6500 canister vacuum - the only vacuum cleaner on the planet that can pick up the quantity of hair produced by two border collies and a ragdoll cat. Well, that vacuum stopped working last summer and things got hairy pretty fast at home. Mrs. Wallace found Mr. Vac in the Yellow Pages, and last month I made the trip to Camden, Delaware to see if he could get our vacuum working again.

Mr. Vac's store was filled with every manner of electronic equipment: TV's, VCR's, DVR's, DVD players, vacuum cleaners, toasters, and countless TV remote controls. To each item was wire-tethered a tan-colored tag labeled with the date, diagnosis, and cost of repair. My Electrolux was added to the collection. I commented on the volume of items in his store. Mr. Vac informed me that he had three other stores in town with the same number of items in each. On the one hand I was somewhat horrified that he had all of this clutter, but on the other hand I was incredibly impressed that this wasn't going to end up in a landfill. He assured me that he could fix every item - and for a reasonable price. Our repair: \$50 for parts and \$15 for labor - ready in two days.

**Embrace Technology: Fit it to your life: Don't fit your life to it.**

I have come to the realization that technology: computers, e-mail, the web, and cell phones are not to blame for our busy lives - choice is. Here's what I mean: you have your free will to decide what you will do for how long. Computers (especially laptops) allow us to work quickly, efficiently, and endlessly. Cell phones allow us to talk and text anywhere and everywhere - even while we're talking to people face to face! The labor movement led by my grandparents and parents gave us the 40-hour week and the weekend. Now, by choice or acquiescence we work seven days a week for 60-80 hours. As I said earlier, technology allows us to do more work in less time. Text messaging and e-mail allow us to contact people on the West Coast or anywhere for that matter before they even wake in the morning - so we can give them things to do before they even get to their job site. So is there the implicit or even explicit understanding that this is the way it must be? I say no, but if you buy into the craziness, saying subconsciously that you can do all of this and more, then welcome to the world of burnout.

As a teacher, there is virtually limitless information on the web—much of it very good. This is a Golden Age. However, I have to manage the quantity of information that flows to my students. More information does not mean more knowledge. We reach a point of diminishing return - swamp your students with a mountain of information to read, and it is hard for them to prioritize what to read first or in the most discerning manner. If I decided to give my swimmers 12,000-yard workouts rather than 4,000-yard workouts, they should be 3X as fast. More likely, I'd have 3-4 very fast swimmers, and the rest would quit or be rehabbing injuries with AI and being treated by Dr. Disabella.

What has technology done for me? National Geography.com allows me to access photos of wildlife and places on this gorgeous planet I could never hope to get to. These photos together with outlines allow me to construct Keynote Presentations that take my students and me on a 40-minute adventure. I tell stories and we have conversations about ecosystems, biodiversity, or the transformations of matter. The cell phone allows me to call my 80+ year-old parents from Delaware or from any of our travels. We can stay in touch with Selena this weekend while she's on her first trip to New York. I can talk to Lyndsay from Great Duck Island off the Maine coast while she's studying the ecology of Wilson's Storm Petrels. Do we misuse/overuse this technology? Yes, when someone engaged in a face-to-face conversation with me, interrupts the conversation to answer their cell phone, or when I see a group of kids together saying nothing to one another while texting someone else at a remote location. When I am one the receiving end of four e-mails in which I was one of 10-15 people who were cc'd on the message - this is misuse and a waste of time. Sending over 300 text messages a month is a waste of time and a misuse of technology. Nobody wants to hear from you that badly, and there is no news that you could possibly have that is that urgent to merit this level of communication.

You decide whether you want to use technology to help make room in your day for more time to do what you'd really like to do, or whether you want it to frustrate you with unlimited information or unlimited requests from people for your time. Decide whether you want to receive or send mindless text messages or engage in pointless two-minute

calls from people who saw your name on their call list and they just decided to give you a call.

Remember that time is the most precious, scarce resource in your life. We'll get no more than five more hours today Wednesday, October 15 - we'll never have this day back to do over again a little differently. Time and your good health are the greatest gifts you'll ever be given.

### **Resilience—Feel the Power!**

I've been pretty fortunate in my life, and have not had to face some of the setbacks others have. I saw plenty of abject poverty in the Philippines when I was there in the 1970's as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I also saw joy and optimism there—a great appreciation for the simple things in life: family, friends, enough food, and good health. Sometimes it seemed like this was all they had.

There seem to be two types of adversity that we face in life: those that take us by surprise, and those that we bring on ourselves by conscious choices that we make.

You know people (perhaps sitting right next to you) that may be facing adversity right now. Some of the best advice I can give you to give others, is to tell them that you believe in them, that you know the strength they possess, and their ability to get through this hardship. Your ability to bounce back from adversity comes from within; it doesn't come from an outside source. I'm going to end with a quick video clip of a race very few of you saw last February. Four of your schoolmates: Tyler Gehrs, Greg Beard, Wills Cooper, and Lee Whitney embraced the concept of resilience following a disqualification in their first race of the Finals Session at The DIAA State Swimming Championships. This race the 200 yard Freestyle Relay was seven events later - enjoy.