

Chapel Talk
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I would like to announce to Messrs. Thornton and Roach that I grew three facial hairs last night.

In the strictest sense, this is not a religious talk; I'll leave that subject to my father, a Presbyterian minister, who was here this weekend. As we walked across campus, he answered to "Hello, Mr. Speers," while I had to respond to "Hey Wilbur!" "Hey Opie!" "Hey Spero!" "Spill Weers!" Even he doesn't think I'm a teacher.

If you need a title, this is called "The Hurt of Being Human." What I'd like to speak to you about very briefly this evening is probably the one aspect of my short tenure at St. Andrew's that has intrigued me the most. In many ways this phenomenon seems characteristic of your age, that volatile adolescence of waking emotions and discovered life. We have a saying in our family that you're really not alive until you're ten years old, and there may be some truth in that absurdity.

What I found, is that in this discovery of unknown feelings that begins at about your age, there is an honest hesitation to confront these emotions. There is nothing 'unhuman' about this. The confrontation of admitting to yourself, or, God help you, to another, that perhaps you like him or her more than as an acquaintance, is a monumental undertaking. How many of you have ever taken that risk with a boyfriend -girlfriend, parent, even a simple expression of real appreciation to a roommate, brother, sister, teacher, friend? Or, just as important, how many of you have dared to be constructively critical of a friend, trying to say difficult things because you care about him or her? The fear, the risk involved to take such a step, is immense. The possibility of rejection is petrifying. I get nervous just confronting someone over marks, or handing back less than satisfactory papers. Emotions, happy and painful ones, are arduous, demanding companions. In Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, which the VIth Form read last year, Bazarov says that "the man who gets angry at his pain is sure to conquer it." Half of the ball game, it seems to me, is just admitting to those emotions, not being afraid of them, not being scared to admit to the hurt of being human. Bazarov took it actively; he got mad, and did something. This is all part of growing up, being able to "Believe your pain." I make nothing easy of this step; but those of you who've had the courage of your fears and feelings to start to grapple with pain and confusion and the question "Why?" are making that passage into a fuller, certainly more conscious, life.

Maybe because I'm an English teacher who can't spell, knows little grammar, and scored 400 on the SAT Verbal, but I admire people who own up to their foibles and confusions. Saying "I don't understand" is sometimes the most honest answer we can give. I had a professor who once remarked that "if you're confused, that's a healthy state of being," because then you're wrestling with the problem, battling the question, seeking among the possibilities. And sometimes the only way to reach that state of understanding is to take a few wrong steps and then really start to look at yourself.

There's a great statement in Dr. Zhivago about this, where Zhivago, a Russian fighting against the Revolution, says to his lover Laura:

"I don't think I could love you so much if you had nothing to complain of and nothing to regret. I don't like people who have never fallen or stumbled. Their virtue is lifeless and of little value. Life hasn't revealed its beauty to them."

Let me return to my first point, and amend it slightly. The challenge of expressing feelings and fears is not just for you, but for all of us. Maybe what I'm saying is that the journey you're beginning now, these initial explorations, doesn't end, doesn't really get easier either. Maybe it gets more important to say such things as we get older.

To help you understand this better, I want to share with you an experience that helped me come to grips with these intangible friends. It is a very personal, emotional experience, but it needs sharing. Telling you is still part of my process of wrestling with these sensations.

I spent last Christmas with a very special family of mine, and just after New Year's Day, before returning back here, the father of the family suddenly, quite unexpectedly, died of a stroke. His wife, three daughters and I were right there when it happened. He was watching us play tennis, and never felt a thing. This was the first time I had ever seen death, even, as I tried to save him, hold and taste death. There were many tears that afternoon and evening. Most of us had nightmares for months, and still do. There was confusion and hurt and disbelief. The middle sister, age 17, screamed in anger at the clinic that this just wasn't so. And then those gnawing, unending questions of "Why us?" "Why Dad?" "Why?" that come from such a deep abyss of pain. A hug of quiet affection was the only real reply to those searches.

But I guess what amazed me most about that family was their willingness to confront their grief and anguish head-on. And they did it in marvelous ways of loving tears, comfort, incredible

support, and laughter. Laughing and smiling have never been so important. It wasn't insensitive humor, but more the full expression of the emotions, the tears and the laughter. There was nothing easy or nice about facing the death of their father, yet they were not afraid to show their love in the face of death. For three days the mother took on all the suffering and tears of her daughters, giving and giving and giving, helping them out; and then the last night she too had the courage to break down. You should have seen the way the three girls surrounded her with hugs and Kleenex, giving back the strength she had given them.

Watching them, sharing this with them, taught me more about life and love than anything else did. We had to "believe our pain," because it was right there. They took that sorrow, that unanswerable grief and loss, and made it live, laugh, love, hug, cry, move onward, begin again. This was their expression of their love for Dad.

Mr. Roach read about a giving tree that, like this family, had an incredible capacity to love. It showed its love even in the offering of its stump, all it had left, for the boy to sit upon: "And the tree was happy." A simple expression out of the hurt of being human; a fuller life, with earned awareness. Let me close with the last stanza of a poem that screaming, searching middle sister wrote about her father for his service. It is as grand an exaltation of all these thoughts as there is:

When the sick feeling rolls in on me,
Thick and blurry,
How you reassure me.
"Distance cannot weaken us," you said,
"Because we are the closest family
In the world."
Yes, we'll be in touch Dad,
Because there are things to say.