

Chapel Talk
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I want to talk tonight about St. Andrew's, about our country, about your—our—role and purpose in these two worlds; and about how what can happen here at St. Andrew's, how what you can allow yourself to experience at this School, in this community of three-hundred individuals, can enable you to experience and understand and scratch some meaning out upon that larger world which is filled with chaos, cold humanity, senseless actions and words, senseless illusions of nuclear domination, even a senseless reality of nuclear death. Let me first define these two environments, what I see as their relationship, and what I see as our collective challenge to that world beyond St. Andrew's, whether it be a world we encounter at the Christiana Mall, during vacations, after graduation, or after our years here as faculty and staff.

To be blunt with you, St. Andrew's is the last community in which you will live that will care for you, that will listen to you, that will help you grapple with Maya Angelou's poignant question, "Am I worth it?" It is the only environment I know where people are talked about by their first name, because the last name is not needed for identification. This School is the last community that will fully listen to your cares and needs: where a headmaster and teachers want to listen; where students, because of their age, can listen and appreciate; where wisdom is still a pinnacle to attain, not a prideful boast of achievement. We exist in a world where we truly need each other: adults need adults for support and enrichment; adults need youth for excitement and challenge; young people need adults as examples and sage-sounding boards; young need young for security during their terrifying journey into age, for mutual discovery, and for joy.

What does this unique situation and wealth give us? It certainly provides us with an opportunity to learn and grow, explore and perceive, dare and stumble. But this richness also entails a vital responsibility; and it is exactly at those moments when we ignore or forget that duty that St. Andrew's becomes a cage of cliques, each defined by its isolated table in the dining room. We come to let language define the limits of our outreach: we reduce members of the opposite sex to a physical function through sexist labels or explicit posters that adorn rooms on corridors A through

M; we categorize those of non-White Anglo Saxon Protestant heritage as "minorities," objectifying them through offensive racial slurs. We become a hoard of cacophonous grippers, and our season of gripping begins today, February 1, the first day of the month that incarnates the words "depression," "doldrum," "boredom," and "exhaustion." Yet remember that Merlyn told King Arthur in Mr. Carpenter's favorite book:

The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and tremble in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then -to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate.

We are all remiss if we fail to learn—not learning how to spell "receive" or math tables or conjugations—but learning of and from each other. Use those dorms for late night talks that are so much more important than any assignment; use a walk to catch-up with a friend; even use lunch to meet someone "new." In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize novel published last year, one of her more lowly, narrow-minded characters comes to realize that we are alive "to wonder, to ask"—because that awe and exploration brings meaning to existence.

Yet why is this capacity to understand, to be sensitive, in Professor Heath's phrase, to be empathetic, so vital and so crucial at St. Andrew's? Think for a moment of the world beyond our driveway: seniors are about to go off to college, great learning halls where you stand or fall alone; where teachers are busy with their research; where administrators are preoccupied with fundraising; where you receive grades—but no comments—no one will take the time to write about you; it might even be hard to find a teacher who will take the time to know you. You are entering a world where you are less noticed, maybe even less appreciated. All of us go up those stairs at the back of this Chapel into a world where politicians, Democrat and Republican alike, fight over theatrical appearance, while no one tackles issues that become more terrifying each moment. It is a world where you and I do not seem to matter, where the number of nuclear warheads counts more than the number of unemployed workers, more than the number of hungry and homeless people, more

than our soaring national debt. Certainly we are a country that has not lived up to those precepts upon which it was founded. To cite one strikingly macabre example, we have a Supreme Court that is impatient with lawyers who try to keep their clients from the electric chair; we have prison wardens and state attorneys and hooded executioners who retire after such capital punishments to the warden's office for a party—the last occurrence happened Friday; six have taken place over the last twelve months. We have people in this country—and this conviction is peculiar only to America among Western, NATO countries—who insist they have the right to decide who lives, and who dies. What a reflection of our society is this manner of justice? How much empathy is there in a judiciary that sanctions capital punishment? Who is so mighty, so "privileged," that he or she can judge who lives, who doesn't? Orwell's 1984 is here before its time. In *The Once and Future King*, the erudite Merlyn counsels young Arthur, an Arthur who thought he liked wars and battles, that "There is no excuse for war. The destiny of Man is to unite, not to divide. Wrongs have to be redressed by reason, not by force." Murder is wrong, but for us to answer it with state murder is a barometer of how little we as a country listen to our own condemnations of the Soviet Union. We criticize them for their cold, communistic treatment of the individual, yet we search for more "humane" ways to put our undesirables to death. There is no humane way to kill murder is not humane, no matter how you cloak its ugly deed.

What does a country now epitomized by executions and rattling of nuclear warheads have to do with St. Andrew's? You live in a community where people try to listen, try to forgive. Your presence and being is integral to the rich tapestry of people at St. Andrew's. The individual matters; think for a moment of how that is true through the likes of Jim Butcher: J.B. heard us, we heard and felt him. Yet our days at St. Andrew's are ephemeral, and they become more transitory if we stop wondering, stop asking; if we stop living the lessons this community teaches us about who we are and who we can be. Maya Angelou told us that "The trouble for the thief is not how to steal the chief's bugle, but where to blow it." Our challenge is to take the uniqueness of this School, and somehow retain it, put it to use when we go to Pappy's, to college, to that larger world outside. Virginia Woolf, the great British novelist, wanted "to make of the moment something permanent." To carry that moment, that meaning, into a world filled with chaos was her antidote against confusion and alienation. To have this School signify anything to you, we must deal with that senseless world, not with senselessness, but with empathy, understanding, sensitivity; with a

desire to learn from it, not to waste its priceless opportunity. The passage that Rhonda and Laurie read from *A Raisin in the Sun* reveals the nature and essence of that approach:

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well, then, you ain't through learning -because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so. When you start measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.

Let me close with a suggestion of how we can learn something about ourselves, those around us, our world, our purpose. Today, February 1, is the first day of Black History Month. I would challenge all of us, faculty and students, young and old, Black and White, male and female, to discover something fresh, enriching, inspiring, something vibrant about Black History, Black experience, Black vision. This School has confronted itself with some of these issues already, and the most significant experiences have been done together, not in isolation—isolation, that damning theme of the 20th century, that placard of February gripping. For those of you involved, think of “Master Harold”...and the Boys, of the Chapel celebration here for Martin Luther King, Jr., of Maya Angelou. These are but initial steps: St. Andrew's can still be labeled a "white school," and it is our unique opportunity, treasury and responsibility to make it into a world where we all want to glean as much out of each other as we can; learn as much as we can from our books, yes, but also from and of one another; so that when we depart from this School, we recognize the supreme dignity of the human being, no matter who he or she is, and will not allow that other, larger world to destroy through bureaucracy, through indifference, through deafness, through sanctioned murder that individuality. During this season of doldrums, depression, annoying cliques and frazzled routines, let us force ourselves to discover who is next door on corridor, who is next to us at dinner, who is silently across from us in class, who is that faculty member who always says "hello," who is the unknown staff member who constantly smiles, who is even in us. Because at T. S. Eliot believed,

Perhaps what we call change...
Is understanding better what one really is.
And the reason why that comes about, perhaps...
Is, beginning to understand another person.

We are all nourished by that brush, that scrape with another soul; we forfeit too much sustenance and effervescence if we don't seize at the chance this School, its people, offers. It is that duty, discovery and hope, that bridge-building across the barriers between human souls which lead Alice Walker to exclaim: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." It should pain us if we walk by the color purple in this School and fail to touch it, catch it, hold it, grow with it. Until we do, we exist without the benefit and salvation of another human being. When we do fathom the color purple, we give to ourselves a richness and an education and a revelation that suddenly bestows meaning and direction to our lives.