

Chapel Talk
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I had wanted to talk tonight about heroes and mentors--why we have them, what they provide us, who mine are--but that speech wasn't close enough to me. What I mean is that I don't think I believed in that subject as much as I found myself the victim of another topic. Last Friday evening I was sitting at my desk, about to write down my heroes and figure out why they mattered to me. In front of me lay *To Have. To Hold*, the textbook for our childbirth classes which began last week. Easily distracted from Willie Mays, Tom Seaver, Abraham Lincoln, Bobbie Kennedy and other luminaries, I started to do our homework for the second class held last night. I got through most of the assignment, until I came to the section on what clothes you should bring to the hospital for your child to wear home. For your child...For my child! Reality suddenly struck me: in about six weeks, I will bring home a child, dressed in baby clothes no bigger than hand towels. How do you find those clothes? How do they go on? What's an appropriate departure outfit for a new born?

Instantly, heroes was a lost subject; so was the other work I'd planned to do that night. My pulse increased exponentially, my voice and hands trembled, and then diarrhea erased ARA's supper. I've had shocks of the awesome reality which is about to happen to Donna's and my life, but they've usually been romantic dreams of "cute smiles," "adorable goo-goos and drewls," "soft cheeks," "quiet sleeping"--in short, the Ivory Snow baby! Now, there was the magnitude that this rib-bruise was going to come home, and it needed clothes too. The shock, the change, the transition was overwhelming; it was unknown, terrifying, awaited, feared, exciting; and I rushed off to the bathroom to recover.

It's curious how when confronted with emotional challenges, our bodies react almost as quickly as our minds and souls. Something there is about a transition that paradoxically upsets and enlivens us, knocks us around and begins us afresh; change asks us to examine our values, agendas, priorities. The more I pondered my own mysterious crossroad, the more I saw similar transitions in many people around me: a sister has just been married; a brother was recently ordained and installed as a minister in Baltimore; a brother-in-law had his second child, a whole new juggling act; another brother-in-law was married and bought his first house; and my mother-in-law has just been diagnosed with cancer, an omen of the greatest, most feared transition, death. At school, the seniors are about to graduate; V formers are growing aware, with the VI formers' impending departure, of their own new positions and duties. IV formers, while impatient to leave the humid heights of the third floor, or the dark rooms of East Hall, may also have begun to fear the work load and the start of the college process those bigger rooms, on Baum, Sherwood, and across the gully, entail. Even ninth graders, excited about surviving Messers Austin and Chang, may slightly tremble at all the new students coming into their form next year, or at the prospect of five majors, advanced courses, competition for varsity teams. Change is both exciting and unknown, impatiently waited for and then hesitated at when it arrives; as a college professor once counseled me, "it is at once the hardest way, and the only way possible."

Why is it that transitions cause so much emotional distress? What is it about their nature that produces anxiety, tears, extremes of joy and of sadness? Initially, by its mere definition, transition is the movement from one stage to another. We are all creatures of habit, and while we become antsy about monotony, we can also get nervous about innovation. As humans, we like to control all events around us; we don't like shocks, we don't enjoy getting blindsided by life. My parents have a pact that if either one knows of a major surprise for the other--for example a party or an award--then he or she calmly lets the other know about it to soften the shock, even though it's a wonderful shock. Movement requires commitment, and that heightened energy gets the heart pumping, the pulse going, sometimes even the digestive track flowing. Just think how many visits to the bathroom you make before an exam, a big game, an artistic performance, a college or job interview.

Secondly, transitions create conflict because of the movement into the unknown: we go from environments we know to those we don't. We've almost become satiated in our mental and physical locations, and arousing dormant minds and perceptions can be as difficult as getting out of a comfortable bed; there doesn't appear to be any good reason to leave what is so warm, reassuring and safe. Why exit the womb when you have no idea of what awaits you? And yet, we have all taken that first journey down the birth canal; we have all cut one umbilical cord and established another. One of us now elbowing wildly will soon travel away from mom's security into what he or she could never guess exists.

You seniors are about to graduate, to commence, to go beyond St Andrew's: you will soon sever yourselves from what you have known, loved, fought against, thrived in. You will head off to another womb, another campus, another nurturing environment, where you will continue to grow, kick, tug, love; and soon, sooner than you can imagine those four years taking, you will again be pushed out into another world. The process doesn't end with St. Andrew's, nor does it get any easier. You may have already discovered conflicting emotions within you as May 26th approaches. Some of you tell me one day that you can't wait to leave, then another day that you will miss St. Andrew's terribly; as any of the great literary figures you've read here have been, you are torn between two opposing forces whose dilemma can't painlessly be resolved. You find yourself gnawing at "petty" rules, chaffing at confinement; but you are also chaffing against the unknown, at the loss of what you've invented during your one to five years here; at the loss of friendships in this environment, of teachers who may have sparked your mind or soul, inspired you creatively, athletically, spiritually; at the loss of something that now has to end, that can never be the same, can never be recreated, has served its purpose, and sends you off into an alien, larger, uncertain world with at least the capabilities, we hope, to confront all that you don't know.

You have created a place for yourselves here, you've come to know yourselves in this environment: now, while college is eagerly anticipated, its mystery causes trepidation and nervousness. Is it any wonder that graduation is an event teeming with screams of ecstasy, sighs of relief, tears of joy and sobs of sadness? Is it any wonder that many of you will call the dorms Thursday night at your graduation party to keep in touch, how many of you will return next fall for Alumni Day, the Winter Musical, and even Graduation?--especially those of you who wrestled and pushed so much while you were here. There is another paradox: again and again, those of you who created healthy and natural adolescent rebellion; those of you who this spring profess the greatest urge to

get out of here, are also the ones who keep returning to this campus to restore yourselves. Perhaps you are the ones who live and experience this transitional conflict most intensely.

The third aspect of transitions I find so intriguing is that not only are they virtually unavoidable, they are also necessary. An essential process for us to grow is to confront the new, to adapt to fresh environments. Think how much all of us have been altered since our initial transition to St. Andrew's, how we think, act, feel, even dress differently because of this place. Yet there is another stage awaiting each of us--a new job title, a new form, college, a new home, a different place of employment. We need that stimulation to grow, to evaluate, to re-evaluate. One of the mentors I was going to talk about was my aunt, who experienced a major confrontation in her own life. She wrote:

My values are still in the process of changing as a result of meeting cancer and mortality head on--so much seems so trivial and gets me impatient...The only things that seem even more valuable than before are time, energies, beauty, and loving, silly, creative relationships.

Certainly her forced transition engendered deeper vision and understanding. That journey only occurred because of "meeting cancer and mortality head on." Such a revelation can happen to us without the terror which cancer brings: but in either situation, accepting the change animates the mind and soul. To resist change, to stay mentally in one place forever, to never take on a challenge only stagnates--remember, "Denial is gangrene." However, to be always under construction provides innumerable chances for rejuvenation. The poet Wallace Stevens said that "Death is the mother of Beauty," meaning that change is the mother, is the nurturing force of beauty, of life, of new values and perceptions.

No one ever said such transitions were easy: to return to my original metaphor--although to Donna it is anything but a metaphor!--birth is no easy labor, graduation is no simple step, new responsibilities no calm change. I doubt many seniors found being a prefect or proctor, being a captain, being a senior was all that easy. We tug at the new, but in that tension, fresh ideas and individualities get molded. I have no concept of how I will be as a father--the name and its duties still stun me--I have no idea what it will be like to be Director of Admissions instead of a teacher next year. It will be a year of change that causes a loss of security but then slowly creates a security of its own. Next summer, I'll be terrified about returning to the classroom and to coaching; in a few years I'll be terrified about my child's own transitions--the first day at school' first athletic contest or recital first overnight at someone else's house, first time to camp, first date, first job, then graduation, marriage, children. Donna and I want all those rites of passage for our children, yet it will be a loss of our security with them, as it is now for your parents with you. "It is at once the hardest way, and the only way possible."

As much as we want change, we also fear it because it is so unsettling; yet we really wouldn't have life any other way. Only through transitions do we move and grow, do we invent and discover ourselves and those around us. The most absurd advice Donna received about getting through the pain of childbirth came from a nurse who said, "When it's over, dearie, you will meet your baby"! On the one hand, that's corny and hollow consolation; on the other hand, it encapsulates the nature of change: there will be that child, there will be that new place and challenge; once you

receive your diploma, the work doesn't end--it only transits to the next assignment. And there is no simple antidote for change--I certainly haven't found any except keeping bathrooms nearby--but faith in your adaptability, faith in the perspective that this is but one of many challenges you will encounter, and faith in humanity because others have survived these adventures is far better than what any drug could obliterate or help you avoid. Someone once remarked that "When we walk to the edge of all the light we have and take that step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe that one of two things will happen--There will be something solid for us to stand on, Or, we will be taught how to fly." Such is the faith I have for this approaching birth, and it is the faith I have for us as we fly into unknowns and into darknesses, searching for illumination.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Starks, who relentlessly seeks the new to understand herself fully, realizes that "Love is like the sea. It is a moving thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from the shore it meets, and it's different with every shore." Janie understands that paradox of changing continuity, of growing identity: she has a faith that love will sustain and shape her. I have a faith that all of us, as we discover more about the necessity of change, will understand better not only the pains but also the joys and creativity inherent in transition. With that faith, as the Archangel Michael told Adam as Adam left his own Garden of Eden, we will not be loath to leave this paradise, but will possess a paradise within us, "happier far."