

Chapel Talk  
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A month ago, Christopher came home from pre-school bursting with pride and excitement. He wanted to show his mother and me his new accomplishment. Putting his coat on the kitchen floor, standing behind it with his feet just touching the coat's collar, he then bent down, stuck his arms into the sleeves, lifted the coat up and over his head, and finally thrust his fingers through the sleeves. He was beaming with satisfaction at having put his coat on by himself. As his quite proud parents applauded, Christopher announced, "See Nani, see Da, I'm ready to learn! "

What struck me about this moment was that only in its aftermath did Christopher say he was ready to learn. Doing the task is a prelude to actually getting ready to learn it. The learning comes not with getting it right, but with being prepared to learn. Christopher had once again redefined the way I viewed the world.

On the eve of the end of this School year, of the VI Form's graduation, of the other Forms' accession into a higher grade, I, like Christopher, am ready to learn. You would think that we should all say "I'm ready to learn" in September, but I think Christopher has a better angle on education and experience. As we know, commencement by its definition is not an ending but a commencing forth, a beginning. We have to go through the experience before we are ready to understand and embrace it. While we are exhausted in May, we are also filled with excitement and new plans for the summer months. Paradoxically, at the end we are ready to begin.

So at the close of this year, at this final Chapel when all of us will be together, I want to share with you two aspects of this year that I'm now ready to learn about. They are, in hindsight, ironically simple yet profound. The first is something that Christopher taught me, and something I mentioned to you in the fall, which is that questions are more important than answers. The second is that saying "I am wrong" is a more powerful assertion than claiming "I am right." And what I've begun to see is that these two revelations --a question instead of an answer, an admittance of wrong instead of a claim of correctness -- weave together into fuller understanding of humility and

knowledge. Why is humility at the heart of learning? How can a moment of "I was wrong" be stronger than an assertion of "I was right"? How does humility allow us to survive? to grow?

Humility, as Christopher said, is really the ability to learn, the ability to see that there is much more ahead than behind, that the experience is a prelude to real knowledge. Humility is also a recognition of a limitation, that we don't know it all -- yet also in that recognition of our limitations is an acknowledgement of great horizons still to discover. Those horizons don't come into focus, into vision, until we admit how vast they are. Faulkner, in "The Bear," talks about one of his characters, Ike McCaslin, as having the "humility to survive." There is sustenance in humility, because we are now ready to learn, since we are at our most elemental stage. Humility at its root-- "humus"--means "of the land, without protection, pure." Only when Ike gives up his stick, gun, compass; only when he faces the gritty dirt of the land, filled with "humus," does he see the bear, the apotheosis of his humanity.

This School year has been unusual in that many of us have been forced to recognize our physical and character limitations. Part of humility's strength comes at the end of the experience, when you realize what you have. This School community has borne witness to many more physical limitations than I can ever remember it going through. Mr. McLean, Ms. LeBlanc, JP Lopez, Heather Williams, the miscarriage my wife and I experienced last winter; others of us have lost grandparents, have had relatives face surgery. These are difficult constraints to accept, and none of us would wish them on anyone. It's hard to see any "good" coming out of experiences filled with fear, pain, doubt, loss, uncertainty. Yet I also know from listening to these people and others who have been forced into such a battle, that they are all stronger from it - and that we have all been able to learn and gain hope from them through their Chapel talks, their classes, their return to us. Heather wrote in this week's School New Yorker that

Thorns are valuable to alert ourselves to the ever-present reality, and yes, because of thorns we are able to grow. Ultimately, how we react to the aftermath of thorns is our true test as capable, durable human beings. Know that you are okay to fall ever so often, if you rise with the right mechanisms....we are here to live.

These wise words, echoing what we heard Mr. McLean and JP tell us, reveal how we are ready to learn only after we have been confronted with this boundary.

Earlier this month in Princeton, I was at a three-day conference on alcohol abuse. About a hundred people of all ages were there: many of them introduced themselves as "My name is Bill and I'm an alcoholic"; "My name is Lisa and I'm an alcoholic." These recovering alcoholics, through admitting their physical condition, even identifying themselves by it, garnered strength to finally live productive lives. The vitality came from recognizing that limitation, and their being prepared to learn, being prepared to react to the thorns.

This is the first way I have seen our School witness humility this year. The second is again something that has become clear only at the end. Earlier this month I sat in on Mrs. Caldwell's energetic IV Form English class, which was nearing the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. In the midst of a heated debate about Elizabeth Bennet, Dominic Seiterle was challenged on one of his statements: after further debates and intensified questioning from Rachel, Andy, Ali and Oliver, Dominic leaned back from the table, threw up his hands and exclaimed "OK, I was wrong!, really wrong, way wrong!" After the class' laughter died down, it struck me how powerful a statement that was by Dominic, even in humor. I also recognized that I had heard such confessions before. I and other members of the Discipline and Honor Committees have heard many people say "I was wrong." Such a claim has not been easy to say: sometimes it came with tears, sometimes with trembling voice; granted they were not jesting moments like Dominic's, but in the end they were equally unifying. These moments of humility were beginnings: I've noticed lately how rare it is in our world to hear someone say "I was wrong." It is as if adults can't find that strength --instead, we adults use words like "not satisfied", "an indiscretion", "the appearance of wrong-doing." We have a president of this country who can't see any wrongs he's done during the past 12 years in office; we have his major Democratic rival who when he played golf at an all white country club, apologized to anyone who was offended by his action. The safety of that statement is that he doesn't admit that he was wrong; all he says is that he is sorry to anyone who was hurt by what he did.

What is important about this Community, what is almost unique to it, is that it continues to allow people to understand how sustaining and nurturing it is to say "I was wrong." This

community does this because it provides an atmosphere where people, adolescents and adults, can all be students nurtured in humility, ready to learn. Last year I was supposed to teach Mr. Rue how to teach in our III Form English class; yet he taught me more about being a teacher, about being a student, about asking the significant question, than I had learned in twelve years at St. Andrew's.

My fear for you students is that you may live in a world where your adult examples deny the reality of human behavior and existence --that we all continue to make mistakes --and that you are made to feel only you and your age group make them. How false that is; how sad that is. Ironically, those students who have been able to say to me, to the Honor and Discipline Committees, to anyone in this community, that "I was wrong", are in many ways stronger than those of us who haven't said it recently enough. These individuals are building the foundation for change, for revision of character. They are exercising the muscles that will help them survive in the non black-and-white, in the grey world in which we live. One student this year told me after he returned from his suspension, that he knew he couldn't "make it here alone"; another said he was "tired of maturing the hard way." Both of them, in their humility, recognized the pain, the discomfort of opening oneself up for change and growth. Both of them are stronger because of that difficult yet empowering recognition.

My father, clearly for me one of the most human of all people because he never ducks from admitting his humanness, his wrongs, his humility, had a story in one of his sermons about a nice person who went to Heaven. St. Peter met him at the gates and asked him "Where are your wounds? ~ Where are you wounds?" Pain is not pretty and neither is humility; but the beauty of the wounds and scars of learning transcend a simple conflict-free existence. As a human race, we must all recognize that we don't stop making mistakes once we become adults, that we don't stop being children or students as we grow older: if we do, we will lose the humility to survive, and we will never be ready to commence. In one of its great legacies to this School, the class of '92 asserted that they too wanted to learn from those younger than they are, through their Big Brother -Big Sister Program. Even as exalted seniors many of them learned how much they had forgotten, how much there was still to see. Those of us who are parents know that humility, as do all of us as teachers.

Zora Neal Huston's magnificent novel, *There Eyes Were Watching God*, encapsulates for me this paradoxical power of humility. In it, the central character Janie begins to recognize in her early 40's what her life means, and how despite all the setbacks she has faced, the mistakes she has made, she is still ready to learn. She gives us this insight through her interpretation of the creation story:

When God had made The Man (and Hurston means all men and women), He made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks, but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud...Like all other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine.

Janie knows her humility, the mud and the shine together. Her strength comes from envisioning herself as a whole person. My hope for all of us as this year commences is that we too are ready to learn; are ready, when it happens, to say "I was wrong"; are prepared to see that learning and living and existing begins with humility; that wounds come with existence; that we really don't know it all; that the world doesn't revolve around us, but with us.

At the end we are ready to begin; as we get older, we should listen more, especially to those younger than we are.

With such humility and really, with such faith, we will understand that it will not be our answers and rightness but our questions and our understanding of our limitations which make us truly shine.