

Chapel Talk
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Suddenly, terror gripped my stomach; the inner lining of my mouth drained dry; I could already taste the raspberry yogurt and muffin breakfast erupting back up my throat. Staring out at the wall of unknown faces, with color vanishing from my cheeks, I slowly forced an ounce of caffeine between my parched lips, swallowed, prayed it would go down and stay down, and prepared to start class.

Thus officially began my sabbatical at Holderness School far north in New Hampshire, a state where the first blizzards sweep through in October, and where Pat Buchanan enjoys too many friends. As I sat in that first period senior English class just 53 weeks ago today, doubt, fear, uncertainty, all the furies of my conscience, stormed the supposed sanctity of my confidence. Why was I here? Who were these people? How did I fit in? Would I fit in? Who was I to them? They didn't know me, know how feeble my attempts at humor were, know what vast administrative powers I had at a distant boarding school in Delaware. As they chatted and laughed among themselves, clearly celebrating my isolation, oblivious to my despair and loneliness, I wondered how I would ever know them, know their names, much less teach them. Silently in my plagued soul, I longed to be back at St. Andrew's where I was known, where it was safe and secure.

I did get through that first class without vomiting, and even, surprisingly, ended up thoroughly enjoying my year at Holderness. But what froze me that morning, chilled me into sweat of doubt and almost sent me back here, turned out to be one of the central insights of this sabbatical. After 17 years on the shores of Noxontown Pond, years of excitement and challenges, years of a context, of creating a niche, of gradually establishing a sense of who I was, how I fit in, how I was a part of something, how my wife and kids were a part of something larger--how, in sum, we belonged: after 17 years of such belonging, Mr. O'Brien fired me for a year with pay, telling me to leave because

the school needed an Infirmary. In truth, he told me to leave because I needed to. With only five colleagues who'd taught here longer than I had, I needed a break and a change.

So, we escaped to our summer paradise in the hills of New Hampshire. Instead of leaving vacation at the end of August, we would be able to stay all year. Land of brilliant fall foliage, great winter skiing, grandparents across the field to baby-sit, hours for the wife and me to sit romantically by the field stone fireplace and listen to the wood crackle and blaze. No problem.

Well, the terror of that first class woke me up to the reality of my year away. I didn't know how to adapt to someplace new. I'd forgotten what it was like to be in an unknown place, forgotten what I'd felt like my first day at boarding school in 1972, even forgotten my early days here, when, fresh out of college, I found myself at a school where I didn't really know anyone. My salvation that first year was having a roommate, a roommate almost as confused and lost as I was. We were both especially terrified of that immense dining room where everyone had lots of friends to sit with except us; and so it was that Mr. Roach and I swore a solemn oath never to go down to a meal without the other.

A college professor of mine once remarked that "life is one great big unreadiness." Being forced to leave my St. Andrew's womb and be foisted out upon an unknown landscape was harder and scarier than I expected it to be. Surrendering the control I thought I had had here pointed out my myopic dependence on these familiar buildings and woods. I clearly wasn't ready for life's unreadiness. At Holderness I was suddenly vulnerable, vulnerable in the same way most of you new students have felt over the last three weeks.

Perhaps my vulnerability was greater. You see, I'd lived with a pretty consistent core of faculty since the end of the '70's. I was proud of my faculty peers, even as we aged. I'd played on Team McDuff, championship team after championship team; Mr.

Austin and I basically coached the St. Andrew's women's doubles team to their state championship two years ago by sparring against them in every practice; most of the time Rob Wiley, John Craighill, David Bass just stood stunned as my shot whizzed by them on the soccer field. But what a shock it was to go to a new school. At the opening faculty meeting at Holderness, I stared, gaping at the immense size of the football coach's calves and biceps. Each faculty member there, male and female, looked like an Olympic athlete--many were all-American in something: hockey, skiing, lacrosse. I soon found out that most went off at 6 a.m. every Thursday for an "easy" run, say, 8 miles. And each was a walking Patagonia and Nike commercial, whose mere clothing and gear seemed to say: "Just do it, you lazy bum." I came home to my wife that day, completely psyched out, swearing I'd never wear shorts again, and headed right off to EMS to find some impressive footwear.

Dealing with a new environment challenges our sense of security. I know I was more alert and sensitive to such inane physical comparisons because I was in a new place, a place where I had no foundation, a place where I had to fend for myself. How do we create a foundation out of nothing? How can we trust an inner voice when we feel so alone? Hamlet comes to understand that "There's a divinity which shapes our end, rough-hew them how we will." I think he means that despite our decisions and insecurities and stumbles, within us is that direction, that divinity, that power beyond which gives shape to our lives. Hamlet doesn't argue for a predetermined life where we have no voice or input; instead, he realizes that he can't fully control everything that happens to him, but that recognizing the intangible spirits, the divinity, at least endows clarity against the chaos. So he trusts the "special providence" even "in the fall of a sparrow."

It seems that last year my family found itself relying on that trust more than we had previously--in large part because we had less known safety to fall back upon. Let me illustrate my point: at the end of the winter term, Holderness stops classes for two weeks, and each grade experiences a different type of living classroom--art projects, exhibitions, building homes for the poor. The junior class, in groups of 8, takes off to the

mountains for 10 days of winter hiking, including a three night solo for each student. Even though I'd spent many days and nights of my life hiking and knew that the trail was more important than the summit, that the journey was more rewarding than the accomplishment, during what Holderness called Outback I was forced to walk those clichés, to trudge through dense or slippery snow with a heavy pack, an itchy scalp, cold toes and a sore bottom to arrive at a wooded peak suffocated by clouds. Beyond my own fear and misery, I had to expand my trust to others: I had no choice except to live by a student's compass reading--a frightening act of faith. I had to contribute to the momentum of all of us heading in one direction together. Indeed, during Outback, I learned that getting to a place didn't matter at all. What counted was a sense of where we were, a flexible idea about what we were headed toward, and an enjoyment of the process. Janie Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* went on an Outback experience of her own, and her conclusion was "You got tuh go there tuh know there."

Learning how to live when you don't have control over most of the situation becomes a significant challenge. On quite a few occasions, my family found ourselves surrendering to elements beyond our control, notably the weather and the wildlife. So much of what our society preaches today is that we control each situation, that fear is meaningless, that absolute control is the expected norm. Our weather last year underscored how puny we are as humans in the face of Nature. With the largest accumulation of snow since the Civil War, New Hampshire felt more like northern Canada than an idyllic tourist retreat. Winds ripped doors off hinges--our front storm door was torn off four times. A lightning bolt burned out our electrical sockets in half of the house; we constantly lost power and phone lines. Temperatures began the day at minus 10 degrees most of December and February; during that 10-day hike with Holderness students, it snowed for six straight days, dropping almost two feet of fresh snow on our campsites and wood supply. Some days during the winter, when the wind-chill plummeted to minus 40 degrees, we just stayed indoors, rather than risk immediate frostbite. We learned that our car was useless on snow and ice, handling more like a "Zamboni." We also discovered what happens to roads in New Hampshire when the mercury changes, a phenomenon called "frost heaves," driven home (so to speak) to us with an expensive front-end alignment and a new set of tires.

Seeing such an awesome assault on the landscape, from October through April, made me come to appreciate the wonder, the miracle of spring even more, because I felt that I and the state had truly earned the rebirth, a feeling I'd never had before. We even learned the new phrase "ice-out," which is when the last sheet of ice melts off the lake; and, just like every other New Hampshire native, we celebrated the arrival of ice-out in late April. Springtime in the mid-Atlantic is gorgeous, as we will all witness in six months, but we don't pay as dear a price for it as do our neighbors to the north.

Additionally, my family learned to surrender to the wildlife around us. Yes, we saw lots of deer and raccoons, even moose, on our pasture in the early morning or late afternoon, quietly grazing in the field below our house, sometimes coming within 50 yards of our gaze. But we also came to recognize the price for such isolation in the woods: one evening in the spring, as I came downstairs with most of the children asleep, I could see through the window one of our bird feeders swinging. And then I saw the claws--big shining claws amid all that black fur. How nice, a bear. Then I remembered that the feeder hung about eight feet above the ground: this was no cub outside, but a hungry adult, trying to fill a hibernated stomach. Peter McLean might have loved this moment; I, however, stood frozen, awed by the sight of those claws. I never saw the rest of the body. I didn't have to.

Many mornings in the fall and spring we found signs of bears around our house--ripped screens, claw marks on other feeders, even an outdoor lightpost nearly torn down. Animals are big--even deer are big: people die in New Hampshire from car collisions with moose. We learned to walk outside respectful of our place, aware of our limitations, sensitive to our neighbors. Hearing a coyote howl in the silent winter air was haunting; its voice seemed to echo our own vulnerability.

This trust, this trust in faith, this surrender to forces beyond our immediate control, was tested most severely and most painfully at the end of our sabbatical. During this year away my wife had rethought her own career, a career put on hold over the past few

years by three rambunctious boys. Her frequent trips to doctors' offices and emergency rooms, along with a strong left brain, inspired her to begin the long path toward practicing medicine. Accepted into a pre-med program at Bryn Mawr College, she was set to take chemistry and calculus this fall as a student. The boys had already anointed her, "Doctor Donna."

Then our oldest, Christopher, became sick in August. First it was a stomach bug, then stomach pains, then later excruciating abdominal spasms. He couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, lost weight. Three late night trips to the emergency room informed us only that he wasn't having an appendicitis. After two weeks of bewilderment and fear, our doctor called to say he wanted to see Donna and me alone. We feared the worst, of course. His first question was about what else was going on in our lives that Christopher might subconsciously be reacting to-and as I looked over at Donna, I could tell at that moment she'd already decided to defer her own medical career to bandage Christopher's intangible wounds. She heard Christopher calling in a voice I couldn't. Her decision originated at the pure gut level, primitive in its most nurturing essence, a decision without logical foundation. It may not have even been the right decision, it may not have even been the root of the problem, but she knew it was the only direction possible.

What do these jumbled tales of opening day twitters, wild bears and irrational spouses have to do with all of us? At the close of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a book which stunned me this past summer for the first time, the narrator states:

Perhaps to lose a sense of where you are implies the danger of losing a sense of who you are.

In each of these moments during our year away, we didn't really know where we were, which for a while caused us not to know who we were, who we were in relationship to an unknown context of schools, home, environment, future. We didn't really know what to do, how to respond; nor had all our graduate degrees and jobs and promotions and family inheritance really prepared us for any of these confrontations.

Throughout this year, all of us will face many such moments, where we will have to decide how to act, not based upon our SSAT or SAT scores or our athletic or musical talents, but instead upon what we feel in the marrow of our bones. 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." With such courage, even in surrendering to powers and fates beyond us, we celebrate our most elemental capacities to be human, to be connected with the passion and the vision of our souls.