

Chapel Talk
Will Speers
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One of the more challenging and transforming experiences of my life took place my sophomore year in college. I was involved in my first serious relationship with a girl, and I was really happy. Although separated between Princeton and Boston, we wrote passionate letters, ran up huge phone bills, sent little presents, and then, when together every three weeks or so, we laughed, saw movies, went to cozy bars, sauntered across the campus hand-in-hand. I thought I'd finally made it: I had a great friend who was a girl, and I was in a relationship which satisfied my romantic and physical ideals. Nirvana had arrived.

Then one night on a winter weekend in New Hampshire, as we sat by a crackling fire after a day of skiing, she asked me what I thought about our relationship. I felt my heart skip a beat, but said I liked it a lot. She didn't quite smile back, instead leaning forward by the fire, moving her wine glass to the side, and then pressed the question deeper ... "Where are we going? What's important about us? How are we moving forward?"

What was happening to me by the fire that night was that I was realizing, I was being made to realize, how reluctant I was to try to verbalize ideas that felt too complex and forbidden. I think I understood that there was more to a relationship than smiling endlessly at each other, gazing and giggling together, but I was afraid of trying to talk about it. For something significant to work demands effort, evaluation, dedication, honesty; and that evening in New Hampshire revealed to me how little I was committed to what a truly meaningful relationship requires. "Doing" the relationship, to me, implied the fun, the passion, the togetherness--but I hadn't figured on talking about our feelings beyond "I love you."

Articulating feelings, working at the sinews of a relationship or an issue is a complex, messy, exhausting, even frightening, journey. It can be a process which involves harsh answers and embarrassing realities. In almost 13 years of marriage, and nine years of parenthood, I've been reminded over and over again that meaningful relationships don't plateau, that conflict and

tensions--paradoxically--are an intrinsic and healthy part of marriage, relationships, friendships. I also know, ironically, as easily as I may appear to be speaking tonight about the importance of talking, that it is extremely difficult for me to talk, to express my feelings, to confront the conflicts, to dive deep into the swirling foam of life. Why? I know it's always been so--my parents remind me that I grunted from 8th through 11th grades.

I think there are two reasons, and they may be explanations applicable to many of you. Initially, I think I have always feared conflict -- those rising emotions, the sharp words, the clipped language of contentious debate. My parents had this absurd relationship where they never fought, at least in front of us, except once, and I was so scared that night, after the two minute petty argument, because it was something so foreign to me. Secondly, I think it's hard to debate and explore and confront if we lack the language to have that discussion. When my girlfriend asked me about our relationship, we were speaking two different languages. I didn't have access to the words; I didn't have the verbal equipment to journey with her; I didn't really know the meaning of her words.

Why do we shy away from those conflicts, those questions which inevitably, at least in a significant relationship, lead ironically to greater understanding, joy, communion? At some level we fear what we don't want to hear, what we know is true, what we have secretly denied. It's a lot easier not stirring up all those emotions which seem, thank you, to be resting nicely on the floor of my conscience. To expose those feelings risks pain, perhaps embarrassment, the acceptance of a mistake, guilt, loss.

Conflicts also occur when we are confused, frustrated, when a lot doesn't make sense. I have witnessed this feature with my two older sons, who, as they mature, continue to battle the rituals and rites of passages of pre-adolescence, rituals of being teased, of not being included, of not measuring up to what's cool or accepted. They don't yet have the words to explore those confusions--such questions usually come months later when they've begun to figure out how to talk about what someone said to them or how someone ignored them. Instead, they express frustrations physically by "acting out." Growing up means finding words to express those feelings; and while punching a pillow once in a while is part of our lingering connection to the

child's world of limited words, witness the violence still in our adult world. Do those physical blows symbolize how adults still haven't found the language to explore those emotions, resorting to aggression as a child would? Does the violence we see around us too vividly and too frequently signify the absence of a unifying vocabulary?

Taking the risk to explore those conflicts and confusions and mysterious emotions requires a lot of gumption and trust. The adage "Better left unsaid" stems from that part of human nature which doesn't want to disturb what is dormant, which doesn't want to take that step away from safety. Think about how we are admonished not to bring up politics or religion at the dinner table, because of the effect of conflict, disagreement, passionate debate on our digestive tract. Remember too how hard it is for friends to admit what the friendship means to each other, or how strenuous it can be for a couple to talk about the hardest of topics, sex; or how complicated it can be for parents and children, especially parents and teenagers, to engage beyond the pleasantries. Yet my bruised experience has shown me that when those conversations occur, when we talk about what we fear, when we even help each other find the language, that the struggle and the insight reward the honesty and the risk. In *The Confidential Clerk*, T.S. Eliot has two characters--appropriately two characters speaking together--who discover the essence of this undertaking:

But 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.

It is critical for us as a school and as a community to accept the responsibilities of that community, of our relationships, of the issues we need to face. This weekend we will put aside our books and musical scores and basketball shoes for a few hours, and try to tackle some important questions about whom we are. Again, we may not know the language to use; we may not know the questions to ask; we most surely will stumble and mis-step and upset our neighbor and maybe even ourselves, but we still need to commit ourselves to the process of understanding. Talking about diversity is a delicate subject for us--one of you responded back to

my request for topics by saying: "We should just talk about diversity because at St. Andrew's diversity is a taboo subject." That's quite an indictment, but it's also an honest embrace of an uncomfortable reality. I believe this school thrives on many close friendships, between genders and races and cultures--but do we realize what we have? Do we know what our diversity is? How might we acknowledge, learn about and then celebrate the vibrant diversities within this school, so that we might be multiculturally inclusive? Are there fears within us we don't want to admit, ignorances we are too proud to see, truths we are too scared to embrace?

As we enter into these discussions, there should be trepidation, hesitation within us because of the uncertainty of the voyage. But for those of you who were here last year, recall the one-on-one discussions we had Friday evening of the diversity forum, many of which took place on the floor and in the corners and on the bleachers of the two basketball courts, where students and faculty talked with someone they really didn't know. Conversations which were supposed to last ten to fifteen minutes ran almost an hour. We were thirsty for the time to share, to meet someone new, to discover and redeem the eclectic energy of this school. My hope is the same for this weekend, because the discussion is not imposed but important; it is not oppressive but an opportunity. Most of the topics are ones you have requested to discuss.

Remember too that we are as resilient as the cables of this community, over 320 people strong. Even as we are pulled and tugged and tested over this weekend, the process of this pilgrimage can only strengthen our community--if we remain a community: a home, a family of individuals who accept and celebrate our individualism in spite of and together with our disagreements. It has been my experience that even if I fumble at first, simply attempting to discuss difficult issues goes a long way toward repairing misunderstanding. Even acknowledging the abyss can make a bridge.

Over vacation I heard on NPR a professional storyteller from North Carolina recount about a little boy who came up to her at the end of her three day visit to his elementary school in one of the poorer areas of that state. She quickly noticed his bare feet, his dirty clothes and skin, but also saw his smile. "Here," he said, "I have a present for you," and he gave her a shiny pebble. "Where did you find this?" she asked wonderingly. "I searched for it in the gorge," he

replied, a treacherous trip she knew was at least a three mile hike. "You didn't have to go all the way down there to get that stone for me," she said. "Oh yes," the boy replied back, "because getting the stone was part of the gift." My hope for St. Andrew's this weekend is that this gathering will not only be what we say--the pebble--but also how far we are willing to travel to find that pebble. The journeying--as it was for the giver and the receiver--is a far more meaningful gift than the actual present. Perhaps for us too, what we will be thinking about on Monday will be more important than what we offered on Saturday.

Let me close with a passage from bell hook's recent book, *Killing Rage*, because it addresses both our challenge and our opportunity, our struggle and its redemptive labor:

The time to go forward is still upon us...Our separation now is merely escape--a sanctuary for hiding and forgetting. The time to remember is now....All our words are needed. To move past the pain, to feel the power of change, transformation, revolution, we have to speak now--acknowledge our pain now, claim each other and our voices now. (p.6)