

Chapel Talk
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For most students, last Friday morning's outdoor cleanup of Hurricane Floyd was a fun stint of service and form unity. Sparkling sunshine, fresh air, cardiovascular activity: what a wholesome way to start the day. However, for two students, this organized game of "Pick-Up-Sticks" transformed into a harrowing crisis of identity. Sallie Graves and Tyler Covington innocently strolled over to Amos at 7:30 a.m. to check their email, before planning to join their classmates outside Amos at 7:35 a.m. Yet when they emerged from the building, they saw no one in their form, just a sea of sophomores. Perplexed, they asked each other: "But isn't this where the IV Form was supposed to meet?" Even as they pondered this question, a tinge of embarrassment crept across their eyes. It slowly dawned on Tyler and Sallie that they were in the wrong place. Laughing in humility, Tyler and Sallie, even after two weeks of school, still hadn't fully come to grips with the fact that they were no longer IV Formers.

Their gradual epiphany speaks to the flux of identity we all confront and experience, especially at the start of a school year, even more so in a residential community. Adolescents may believe they have a corner on the "Who am I?" market, but such doubts and explorations are ubiquitous to all generations. The new faculty, especially those who just graduated from college, are trying to realize after at least 17 straight years of being called a student, that they are now the teacher; many faculty have new positions, which create different relationships and questions for them; the VI Form is trying on the senior mantel, experimenting with what will be their story, their legacy; new students are adjusting to a different school, trying to figure out their identity here; Mrs. McTaggart is discovering the joys and unknowns of motherhood; and some families within the school community have been reconfigured. All these examples bear witness to the central point that our search for identity, for "Who am I?" isn't a one-shot deal. In fact, it's a journey that evolves and diverts according to the landscape, events, emotions, relationships. And instead of ever reaching the core, getting to the answer, I believe we

have moments of arrival, of drawing near a temporary understanding, an insight that makes sense of that particular situation, an identity that fits for the time being. Then the plot turns, the wind shifts, the terrain alters, and we repack, keeping some belongings, discarding others, adding fresh essentials. I think there's a marrow, but even in my mangled hiking metaphor, there are surely times when we even replace the backpack. I like the concept of "arriving" or "evolving" because they illustrate the incompleteness yet the growth, the ephemeral yet meaning-filled process, the ultimate futility of possessing yet the ultimate vision of a self understood.

I always thought there would be a big parade awaiting me when I got *there*, when I figured out who I was, what I was. Probably I felt I deserved the marching band and crowds after all that emotional floundering and angst; I also thought I'd be given a grand procession because my friends would be so relieved to have my public turmoil over with. But my sense is that we build up the whirlwinds; we elevate the questions so much that we can't accept the simplicity of the discovery when it occurs. The more we become comfortable with these moments of arriving, with what Virginia Woolf describes as "making of the moment something permanent," the more we ready ourselves for the next challenge. There's almost a serenity in the uncertainty, an assurance as the clouds roll in, an affirmation as we head off into the next episode.

Last spring, my four-year old son Carter and I were throwing a tennis ball to our dog Millie. After endless tosses and returns, Carter looked up and said, "Dad, do you think Millie knows she's a dog?" It's sometimes frightening how much children perceive, how much profound insight they possess even in their questions. Carter's probe about Millie's identity echoed more significantly for me in July, when I attended, along with Ms. Byrd, a week-long institute on cultural diversity. In large groups and small, we explored the complex aspects of multiculturalism at independent schools, examining not only specific groups (Afro-American, Asian American, Native American, Latino American, among others) but also the difficult themes associated with diversifying once all-white and fairly economically homogeneous schools. One of our first exercises was to write down quickly all that followed "I am _____." I scribbled: "a teacher, father,

single parent, friendly, caring, son, brother, friend, liberal, somewhat athletic.” What’s interesting about this list is not so much what I included as what I left out: white, male (although somewhat covered in “father”), heterosexual. Most individuals in those three groups do not think of themselves immediately in those identities, whereas most women, non-whites and non-heterosexuals claim those aspects of their identity immediately.

What I clearly hadn’t acknowledged was so much of what I’d assumed. And assumptions can be dangerous, like walking on thin ice. I hadn’t fathomed my full identity: recognizing especially my “whiteness” was one of the central lessons of this conference—being proud rather than either apologetic or ignorant of my race, and proud in ways obviously different from Aryan, supremacist groups. There was much discussion about what it means to be “white,” and how “white” too is a race, is even a color.

Later in the summer, I read the autobiography of Paul Monette, a former teacher of mine in high school and an award winning poet and novelist who died of AIDS a few years ago. In his too brief life, he was one of the leading voices in this country on the issues of AIDS, gay rights and compassion. In his book *Becoming A Man: Half A Life Story*, Monette writes about growing up gay in the still conservative 60’s, the terror of his closeted life through high school, college and early adulthood. I was moved by the torturous pain of his narrative, the façade he performed for others but mainly to himself, to preserve for so long the lie that was his life, his identity. Monette could almost admit to himself who he was, but because of the cultural regulations in his community, and because of his own insecurities and denials, he could not leave the darkness of his closet. For 276 pages of this 278 page book, Monette lived in uncertainty, in a life that wasn’t real, in a life without love, since he couldn’t love himself for who he was, or even admit to himself who he was. But then on page 276, with simplicity and spirit, Monette lets go of the falseness, and embraces all that he’s struggled against admitting for almost twenty years. In his words, listen to the cost of denial, to the sheer salvation of an honest identity, to the assurance and sustenance of self:

I can't conceive the hidden life anymore, don't think of it as life. When you finally come out, there's a pain that stops, and you know it will never hurt like that again, no matter how much you lose or how bad you die (p.4)...Some how it's all had a purpose, once you're finally real. (p. 278)

Monette's recognition and courageous affirmation of his identity stands as an example to all of us: the "purpose," the value of the journey, only makes sense once we are "finally real." We must tear down the false fronts and escape the denials and then cherish all the contradictory particles that compose our "I." It's then, once we've embraced ourselves, that we can truly embrace those around us.

My final thought about identity occurred here at St. Andrew's a few days ago. In my new job as dean of faculty, I'm trying to spend a week with each teacher, sitting in on classes, and talking with that teacher about his or her career. Last week I spent with Mr. McGiff, who insisted on having me be a student in his Art classes, rather than a mere observer. As any student or teacher who's tried to read my handwriting knows, strange things happen when my pen or pencil meets paper. I freely admit that I've progressed little since stick drawing in second grade; but despite the terror I felt each day about having to draw, having to create, having to be critiqued, having at some level to be judged, I survived. In truth, I did more than survive, thanks to Mr. McGiff's charity and patience. No, there will not be an opening of my sketches in the Art Gallery, but by observing myself in a novel environment, I discovered something about me and the human condition. Mr. McGiff described it accurately in our talk at the end of the week: a drawing is "not a thing but a process of investigation....[All the various exercises and assignments are really] tools to be conscious of ourselves, and that is the most important narrative....[Art] is about the whole person, and that ministry must be protected." I know something happens on those initially blank canvases, because I saw it, saw it lurch and stumble out of me and many of you. I saw students, again in Mr. McGiff's words, "insert [themselves] into the world in an open, honest way" with each movement of the pencil. In reality, these students were not so much talented as they were courageous, not so much

skilled as they were daring pioneers into an unknown, essential territory. Being asked to witness that exploration, not only in my classmates but also in myself, revealed to me the voice within which just asks for that canvas and some quiet time and the courage to express it to be able to be heard. For me, last week was another surprising, vivid moment of arrival. I discovered another part of me I'd forgot was there.

What I think I'm trying to share with you tonight is that understanding yourself is not about the clouds parting or finding *THE* answer or getting to nirvana--all of which I've begged for fruitlessly. Instead, I believe that the first journey is within the self, accepting, even liking that self. We fight so many battles against ourselves, in lies and denials and avoidance. Yet when we can acknowledge the contradictions that we manifest, the turmoil and discord we experience in our feelings about ourselves, our parents, our best friend, significant other, spouse, then those battles ebb away. Life does not become miraculously easier, but there is a slice of tranquility, a grasp, a momentary embrace of the conflicts and complexities. During art classes, Mr. McGiff told us we could not erase anything—our pencils didn't even have erasers—because he wanted us to see how each scratch, each supposed mistake, each revision, was integral to the vision. It is on that canvas which embodies all our scars, markings and assertions; in that paradoxical panorama of our incomplete lives; in the sacred crusade that keeps arriving but not quite reaching: it is there that we are most able to trumpet the sinews of our self.