

Chapel Talk
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This talk begins with a story:

Joshua: “See, there’s this man in his house, and he hears a knock on his front door. He opens the door, looks up, looks to the side, doesn’t see anybody. Then he looks down, and there’s a snail on his doorstep. So, he picks the snail up, and tosses him into the garden, and goes back to his living room.

Then, *two* years later, he hears a knock on the door, opens it, and there on the mat is the same snail. And the snail looks up at him and says: ‘So, what was *that* for?’”

Joshua’s tale about time, about the perception of time, about how a certain length of time can be radically different for people depending on any number of factors, has had me thinking a lot about how we mark time, and how time marks us.

Last June I briefly returned to my hometown in Connecticut, where my family lived from 1956 until 1992. I hadn’t been back for quite a few years, and as I walked through the deserted hallways of my elementary school, I was struck by how small everything seemed, how much it had shrunk in the nearly 30 years since my school days. Yet my memories of that school, so vivid and immediate, were awkwardly juxtaposed to all the years gone by. The clear pictures in my head, of homemade Boston Crème Pie served in the dining room, of my PF Fliers sprinting down the hallways to second grade and Mrs. Whitney, of theatrical and musical performances in the auditorium, of the creaking wooden stairs leading to the library – all these images were skewed by present day reality and change, a schism which made me feel strangely out of place in my memories, that they almost couldn’t have happened. How could that auditorium have held as many people as we thought it did during those Christmas pageants? Wasn’t the dining room a lot bigger? How can hallways and staircases shrink? Perhaps you too have had such eerie experiences, returning to a place of your childhood, a kindergarten classroom, a room at your grandparents’ house, and finding it remarkably familiar yet strangely foreign.

Just before I left the campus, I wandered out to the athletic fields where I had played soccer and baseball. The soccer field looked tiny, especially how thin it was from side to side. The goal where I'd missed a penalty kick which would have won the game for my 9th grade team was still standing there, haunting me again with my lost moment of glory. As I walked onto the baseball diamond, I was struck by how miniscule the infield was, how short the distance was between the bases, especially how close the pitcher's mound was to home plate. For once in my life, I felt like a giant strolling across the land, Gulliver in the Land of Lilliputians. Standing just behind the backstop, I was suddenly transported back 35 years, to a father-son baseball game there during the annual spring fair; and there in the batter's box, his immense fingers wrapped around the puny 28-ounce bat, was Jackie Robinson, whose son, as a member of the 9th grade team, was wearing the scratchy wool uniform I would don six years later, uniforms we thought in those days gave us Olympian power and prestige. Jackie Robinson saw three pitches from that terrified yet thrilled 14-year old pitcher, and all of us there that Saturday afternoon swore the ball he smacked cleared the trees a quarter mile away. No one ever found that ball. Some acquaintances say it never happened, but I can still see that feeble, proud pitcher rip his head back as he watched the ball rocket into the sky.

How we experience time and how we mark time change as we grow older. This weekend many alums will return to campus, and most will reminisce about their days here. Many of the recent graduates, especially those from last year's senior class, will be amazed at how fast time has moved since they were last here. To them, to many of this year's senior class, those first days of freshman year, the first square dance and Frosty Run, the first games against Tower Hill, will seem like yesterday. And in 15 or 20 years hence, a blink of an eye will bring us back to today. Quicker than you can believe possible, you will be returning to St. Andrew's for your 5th or 10th or 30th reunion; you will sit at tables on the front lawn and recount corridor antics and weekends and epic athletic contests. There will be changes, and there will be constants: Mr. Colburn will still be the senior faculty member, Ms. Patterson will have kept alive the Williams legacy and succeeded Mr. Roach as head of school; and Richard Hutton will be chair of the

history department, head football coach, and be living in Pell which will be a boys' dormitory. My guess is that time will bear out some semblance of this fantasy more than we might think.

St. Andrew's, like other communities, experiences a strange ebb and flow of time: all of us only share in being here, in this place; we exist here briefly, ephemerally, and then we are gone. This transitory nature is true for the faculty and staff, for headmasters and trustees; and sooner than you can imagine you will be one of those alums reappearing in three days. Names like Akil, Clay, Nicole, Morgan, Leslie and LeMar, people we lived with, laughed with, and took almost for granted: these people are now coming back as graduates, on the other side. And so suddenly, paradoxically not fast enough yet too quickly, the Tonys and Clementines and Tylers and Elizabeths and Philips and Mintas will be returning; and the process will cycle through again and again.

As an institution, St. Andrew's wrestles with these tensions of time, and perhaps the oddest of all is the aspect of birthdays. This school, and primarily the students through my 22 years here, take birthdays seriously: corridor parties, xeroxed posters crammed with silly expressions and embarrassing poses, lunch announcements with every friend and team and organization listed, happy "unbirthday" events for those with birthdays during vacations, and once a month we pray in chapel for those who just had birthdays, and we will do so tonight at the conclusion of this service. For those of us whose birthday falls during the school year, we feel a mixture of fear and anticipation: we don't want to be singled out, humiliated, embarrassed, yet we do want to be noticed, affirmed, embraced.

Birthdays are peculiar benchmarks of time. The older you get, the quicker they seem to occur, which isn't exactly comforting. People my age start to forget how old we are, and we start to dread another passing year, awaiting the inevitable quips of "over the hill" as we, to quote King Lear, "unburdened crawl toward death." Yet for children, birthdays don't happen fast enough. Their sense of time is so refreshing and honest, since they have experienced so little of it. "Old" to Chi-Chi or Aiden or Elsa or Phoebe

is seven or eight, basically twice their age. The same is true for most of you, where 30, twice your age, is ancient. I once asked my youngest son Carter, who was four at the time, how old I was. He replied: “You’re stupid! That’s how old you are.”

Your birthday is the first date you know, and it makes no sense to a young child that it takes so long for it to happen again. Children plan their next birthday party 364 days in advance. Whether you get invited to someone’s party is a barometer of friendship; and do you remember the ultimate taunt a child could threaten: “You can’t come to my birthday party!” Children believe they have such power and control over this day, a day many parents nowadays loath since it is an event fraught with pendulum emotions, a complete breakdown in long-taught lessons of sharing and selflessness, and, ultimately, a piñata which just won’t break. A quick survey at my lunch table last week elicited birthday party memories of great joy *and* great pain. Especially for children, who have only one concept of time, which is “Now!” birthdays can be a matter of life and death.

What I find healthy about St. Andrew's is that we attempt to keep the spirit of birthdays alive. We won’t be able to have parties and games and presents as we did when we were younger, but we do make the day special, silly, significant. At our best, we bestow this affirmation every day, because sooner than we realize, our time here will be over, we move on, and there will only be memories. Therefore, how we honor these rituals reveals the marrow of this community – how we “do” and “be” a community through chapel and family style meals and late nights on corridor; through tears at the senior slide show and commencement; through idiocy at the Carol Shout and Polar Bear jumps and the first headmaster’s free day; through comfort in the aftermath of defeat, pain, loss; through embraces at the end of a season or a dramatic production. All these rites are witnessed, elevated, sometimes mythologized here because we are so small and intense a home, because we all live here, and because we all work so hard and care so much. I don’t think we would have it any other way. If we cared less would time move faster, and not be as painful in its passing? Perhaps, but it’s not a choice I want to make.

Where do time and birthdays and St. Andrew's meet? Here's my moment where all three coalesce: it's May 1981, May 6th in fact, Wednesday evening at family style dinner before chapel. I'm finishing up my second year at St. Andrew's, Mr. Austin and Mr. Chang are wiry IV Formers, Ms. Matouk, Ms. McTaggart and Mrs. Chilton do not yet attend St. Andrew's, and it is Mr. Roach's 23rd birthday. In those days, the young faculty teased and poked fun at each other in skits and limericks, and now it was our turn to pay back Mr. Roach for how he had humiliated us in previous birthday announcements. Like students of today, we raced around during the meal to come up with a humorous quip, and he saw us scheming and plotting. So nervous was he that before desert, Mr. Roach actually left the dining room, bolted up to his apartment on Sherwood and locked the door. We'd lost our victim; what could we do now? Invention is the mother of necessity, and so during announcements, another young faculty member and I told the student body that, yes, today was Mr. Roach's birthday, but no one had said anything to him, no one had wished him a good day; and thus, overcome with grief at being forgotten by students and colleagues and his family in Buffalo and his fiancé in Massachusetts, Mr. Roach had shuffled off to his solitary apartment to spend his birthday alone, Eyore-like, maybe a Stouffer's pizza in the oven, perhaps a bowl of ice cream with freezer burn on it to remind him of his isolation and natal day. Here, we confessed to the assembled crowd in the dining room, was a crisis, a cruel wrong which had to be rectified. How could we reach out to this poor, dejected, exiled wretch of a human being on his birthday? How could we quickly create a human birthday card from all of us? Well, we told the students that after chapel, they should dash upstairs to his apartment – I still had a key to the door from when Mr. Roach and I had both lived there – and we should jam the whole school inside his living room, boys and girls, faculty as well, and sing him happy birthday. Little did he know what awaited him after chapel, and I will always remember his stunned face as student after student paraded past him into his apartment; never has a receiving line felt so long. There must have been nearly 200 people crammed in that apartment, and I recall that study hall that night was pretty much a washout.

While the young faculty certainly felt we “got” Mr. Roach that infamous evening, I think we also perceived, in part through Mr. Roach’s astonished smile when his door burst open and all those students rushed in, that something essential was taking place, maybe even an experience that might be good, might last, might heal -- never to be repeated, never to be forgotten.

The passage Kim read from Ecclesiastes recognizes the design of time in our lives – that there is

a time to be born, and a time to die...
a time to weep, and a time to laugh...
a time to love, and a time to hate...
a time of war, and a time of peace.

Our mission in these brief days allotted to us is to create miracles on these open canvases, murals that confront and acknowledge those beauties and injustices and ambiguities and uncertainties. How we age, how we sanctify the amassing years, how we consecrate our connections to each other, asserts more about us as people than do any of the tangible toys or things we covet. Such an acceptance of the inevitable passing of time still allows us to light and preserve the present in song and story and embrace, even as we blow the candles out.