

Chapel Talk
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A week ago I was driving Wyatt Tall into the video store, and I asked him how he thought the spring term was going, and how he felt about the final two months of school. Wyatt said that, strangely, it stunk being a senior: “The III Form is so lucky to have three more years and all this ahead of them. I actually don’t like being a senior right now.” His candor struck me, yet it also reaffirmed many old themes and principles. Wyatt was jealous of what the underformers had before them, jealous ironically of what he already possesses, but wants to experience again. Additionally, Wyatt – and perhaps other seniors – doesn’t want to let go of this known world; and it is arduous to clean out and move on. I know this intimately, as I have lived here for 22 years, half of my life, and practically had to be fired just to take a sabbatical. Before coming to St. Andrew’s, I lived with my family in the same house for the previous 22 years of my life. I, too, find comfort and security in that stability. Leaving and letting go appears to be antithetical to my existence.

Wyatt’s remarks reminded me of another moment earlier that day. My three boys had been away with their mother, and I had seized the chance to do some spring-cleaning in their bedrooms and the playroom. When they are not around, I can fill up trash bag after trash bag with damaged and unused toys, toys meant for toddlers, toys cluttering up an already cluttered room. Happy Meal souvenirs from “The Little Mermaid” era; discarded pieces of Middletown Monopoly; random washers to a magnet set; unidentifiable parts to something; ripped Beanie Babies; cracked crayons; dried-up magic markers without the tops; dried-up magic markers with the tops; headless and armless Lego people; six playing cards; numerous bouncing balls; Matchbox cars without wheels; Power Ranger figures; broken water pistols; three Lincoln Logs; an unglowing frisbee from last year’s Prom. The same is true for cleaning out bureau drawers of clothes too small or ripped beyond repair. After an hour or two of excavation and disposal, I feel as if I’ve cut the weight in my house by 25%, that I’ve opened up a room of new space, that I’ve conquered the chaos and created order. Yet each time the boys return, inevitably Carter or Joshua decides that now is the time to play with that broken plastic Bat Cave he hasn’t looked at in two years, and how could I not know how irreplaceable that treasure was. It is a similar story

with t-shirts and pants that are suitable at best for wiping the oil gauge on my car but in their minds are the only clothes they will wear, ever again. They can't let go of what they've outgrown. It's hard to release what is familiar, what was once so pleasing and comfortable. We are squirrels preparing for the winter.

My children and Wyatt are not alone in this eccentricity. Where I summer in New Hampshire, the town's focal point is the dump, and locals spend hours there – not just dumping off, but picking up and browsing, finding old books or a broken microwave or a window frame or a slightly torn lamp shade or a treadless tire. For what? Who knows – it just might be needed. There's a saying that a true New Hampshire takes back more than he drops off at the dump, and I admit I rarely return empty handed from my weekly excursions. We've practically constructed and furnished a two story tree house from material gathered at the dump. It is hard to relinquish.

As a society and culture, even as we are always cleaning, always throwing away, always carelessly littering, we are also always cherishing, holding onto relics and keepsakes and heirlooms and things which have no value except for the memory or person or feeling they recall and bring back to life, years and years later. The beautiful words from I Corinthians 13 challenge us to give up those "childish ways" when we become older; but clearly letting go of what we have, who we were, what was then, is disturbing. Jay Gatsby believed he could repeat the past; even Mrs. Roach turned to me yesterday morning amid all "The West Wing" filming and asked, "Why can't we get out of the 1950's at this school?" What makes it so torturous to move on, to let go?

An old friend of mine once said, after I'd regaled him with some vague but heroic epic of my former glory or conquest or achievement: "Well, Will, memories are great, but making them is better." His caution for me was what Gatsby refused to hear: "You can't repeat the past" – you can't live on yesterday's manna; we can't be nourished solely by what's been; you can't put new wine into old bottles. *That* was then: *this* is now. We must live today, all those Hallmark clichés tell us. But clearly for us, for Gatsby, for perhaps the seniors right now, it is hard to give up, to see this as the last dance, soon only to be a faded corsage and memory. "Time passes" as Virginia Woolf asserts in *To The Lighthouse*. People leave, move away; friends and family

members die. Am I scared to let go? What am I holding onto so ferociously? What do I fear will happen once I reject that toy, that place, that dear friend? How paradoxical it seems that at that ultimate departure, death, the person who is dying can be so calm, serene, accepting, while we fight against it, grieve deeply, rigidly hold on. Jeff Trabaudo spoke at his mother's service this week about how even on her last day alive, she was more concerned with him than she was about herself. She did not fear that next step.

I believe it's complicated for us to let go because we are leaving all that we know, all that we have learned, all that has assured and affirmed us, all that has defined us, all that has identified us. Tossing away an old fire truck or a pair of worn-through slippers or pajamas or a Star Wars lunchbox – I still haven't forgiven my mother for throwing out my hundreds of baseball cards when I reached 9th grade – to lose such items, to depart from a world such as this one, is to renounce a part of whom we are. We were created and nurtured by these familiar pieces and places. We amputate a part of ourselves with their removal. I know young children who after one night in their "big" bed insist on returning to the comfort and security of their crib. I know high school seniors who can't wait to graduate, yet once "free" and in the long-sought paradise of college, yearn to return to their former, smaller surroundings. So we hold on tightly, not wanting to leave, even as we may assert otherwise.

As I tried to write this talk, I began to think about what I'm scared of, what are the toys I won't release, what am I holding onto like Linus' blanket or Gatsby's dream. Here's one that materialized: I'm scared of growing up, really growing up, seeing and accepting myself as a 44 year old adult. I am now basically the age Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Stegeman were when I arrived here in 1979, when I embarked like Ms. Patterson or Mr. Beckman as a fresh young English teacher out of college. But I don't recognize myself as what I remember Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Stegeman were. Do Ms. Patterson and Mr. Beckman perceive me as I regarded those mentors? They can't possibly, and so I'm not "that person", am I? I can still flirt with youth and team up with Mr. Austin and thrash the girls' and boys' varsity tennis doubles pairings, so I'm not yet that old, am I? I can remember my own father's 40th birthday party, the songs we sang to him, the aura he had – but that's not me in my own children's minds, is it? Have I been hoodwinked by my perpetual lack of facial hair into believing I'm still "back then"? The harder question is

what do I fear about being 44, about being an adult, about no longer being my father's child, taken care of as if I was still dependent, still wombed, still protected in the tantalizing comfort of childhood. I can imagine a few juniors who struggle imagining themselves as seniors, seniors who were first mythologized for them during their III Form year, gods like Bernadette, Jessie, Angela, Nate, Chucky, Suli. How can I possibly become that, the V Form laments; how can those new students next September see me as I revered Edward, Molly, Mark, Annie?

I don't know the answers to my own fears, which is Reason #865 why I'm still in therapy once every two weeks. But I do think I've discovered one nugget in writing this talk. We can't let go of everything: there is a certain magic in the restoration of a forgotten toy, resurrected by my son Joshua before the trash barrels are emptied, or found in a dusty crate or unearthed in the attic years later. This shard of plastic, this tattered shirt, this memory, this sacred chalice reminds, rekindles, reconnects us to whom we still are. Virginia Woolf knew that "Time Passes", but she also had Lily Brisco, the artist-painter, try "to make of the moment something permanent" – that creative tension of holding and letting go, of memories and making them, of staying young and growing up. That force is a difficult, sometimes terrifying balance: Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* fought against remembering, "beat back" the past until what she denied returned to her world as a ravenous ghost. Sethe had to learn how to remember, how to forget, how ultimately she, not her memories or even her false memories, were her "best thing." Your history teachers can cite you example after example of those who because they forgot the past, were doomed to repeat it. The tightrope of living *now* is balancing the past against moving on. The past is what we know: the present, the now, is what we must live.

A final lesson gifted to us from Mrs. Trabaudo: at the funeral, her daughter Michelle spoke about how much she missed her mother, yet remarkably how already she could see her mother's face in her own son's expressions. Isn't that the incarnation we seek? —the magical vision where past and present merge into existence, a presence which celebrates the past yet lets that past nurture, sustain and fortify the present, a present manifested in the gift of new life, new places, new people. *There* we let go and hold on; *there* we dance again. How appropriate that reunions follow so closely upon graduation in the cycle of this School. Retrieve that hallowed trinket and empower it to fuel your future.