

Chapel Remarks
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My son Christopher has a T-shirt that advertises in rugged, bold lettering the logo, “No Fear.” This company wants to connect with people who push the envelop, go bungee jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, mountain bike through the Himalayas, roller blade down the Jersey Turnpike—or at least have the consumers convince those around them that they are such fearless, cool adventurers. “I laugh in the face of death,” the T-shirt announces.

A new brand of television has us confront and seemingly surmount our fears in bizarre yet contrived ways. Millions of viewers tune in on Tuesday nights to watch “Fear Factor,” where contestants go through a series of trials surely created by sadistic producers. In one episode, participants had to stay in a tub filled with harmless small snakes for at least three minutes; another challenge was to leap eight feet between two 18-wheel trucks as they sped down a deserted highway at 40 mph. This show, a distorted off-shoot of the successful “Survivor” dramas, allows all the rest of us, from the safety of our Lazy-Boy chairs, to squirm and sweat and shudder, vicariously imagining how we might cope with such an unnerving confrontation.

Our world has preached against fear for centuries, and the current advertisers of “No Fear” are only the latest admonishers. Jesus told us to “Fear not, for I am with you always.” The absence of fear for the Greeks was hubris, which almost always led to disaster—witness the lives of Oedipus, or King Lear, or Jay Gatsby, or maybe for a while, Elizabeth Bennet. President Roosevelt counseled us that “The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.” President Bush stated a week ago that our present world is in a conflict between “fear and freedom.”

The dictionary defines fear as “a painful feeling of impending danger, evil, or trouble.” Fear can paralyze us, freeze us in the face of danger or choice. That paralysis may actually be the body’s way of saying, “perhaps the safest choice here is no choice.” Therefore, fear is what happens *before*, not necessarily *during*, an incident. Fear, to me, has a lot to do with control: the less control I have over a situation, the more fearful I am. That is why I am so scared to fly, because I have so little control. In a car, at least I can steer, swerve or brake. The fear I

experience before opening my mouth in the dentist's chair is more remorse for all those chocolate chip cookies I had the choice not to eat than fear of the drill.

Fear, of course, has ferociously swept over us as a school, a country and a world the past two weeks, putting to shame mere skits of fear for the horror of New York City and Washington and southwest Pennsylvania. We have changed from fear of flying to fear of living. I found myself jumping anxiously last week on the front lawn as the shadow of a turkey buzzard ran across the ground. What "up there" might next be coming down here? Like all of you, I have feared—felt that pain within—for family, friends, the assumed safety of existence I thought I'd had before September 11th. And even in the face of the grotesque and horrific wrong we have suffered, I fear what is to come, the uncertainty of whatever forms it takes, the worry of its consequences and continuance. Managing this fear over the last two weeks has exhausted me, as it has many of you. Despite fleeting bursts of speed and a lucky bounce of the soccer ball which allowed me to score two goals for the faculty in their scrimmage against the boys' varsity team last week, I am tired, tired in the marrow of my bones the way I usually am in February.

I have to admit that during the summer, as I thought about topics for chapel talks, I kept returning to this idea of fear. But fear post—September 11th is such a different concept for me, as it may be for you. Fear is now an emotion I'm going to have to live with, perhaps permanently. Before Tuesday morning, it was a dread feeling that happened only when I got ready to fly, or before a date, or as I prepared to do my taxes. However, I am embarrassed at how petty these moments are now. None of them seems to matter after the attacks. The reality of our New World makes what happens on "Fear Factor" an insulting mockery of the hard reality of September 11th. In that aftermath, fear is now here: it is in our daily lives, the unknown of "what next will happen?" It is, as President Bush remarked to the nation, the other side of freedom.

What I've tried to wrestle with these last two weeks is how am I going to live with fear for the rest of my life. How am I going to channel it, how am I going to work with it, how am I going, symbolically and literally, to get back onto that plane? I'm caught between refusing to give those terrorists any victory—I don't want to change my lifestyle—and yet I want to be prudent, cautious, safe. After all, I can't forget I have three children to care and provide for. I

need to figure out, since there is so much of it, how fear can fuel my existence. Can I recycle it, this pulsating, fomenting pile of paralysis? Can I sing, and really believe my words when I do sing, “We are not afraid, we are not afraid, we are not afraid, today”? The Psalmist says that “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” How can fear lead to such supreme knowledge and grace? What can fear give me, bless me with, offer me, help me construct?

Certainly, as have many of you, I have been moved and awed by how those who directly experienced these attacks responded to them. The vast amount of evil on September 11th was met by matchless stores of compassion, action, heroism and sacrifice. The real patriotism has been our help and care—the overabundance of money and food and clothing and supplies and blood donated, the remarkable ways in which we have come together. I doubt there has been a time in our history when we have been so united, when our daily actions have demonstrated our resolve and faith. The religious unity, where once there was such division between Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Catholics, as well as a fresh vigor to racial and cultural unity, has given us an honest glimpse of a real “Peaceable Kingdom.” There is, for now, a genuine desire to work with and honor our important differences. This is a patriotism that importantly isn’t talking about how to get back at “them”: it is a patriotism that affirms our bonds to people and our way of life which before September 11th we had only given lip-service to or had casually taken for granted.

There are stories great and small, known and unknown, of people who took fear by the throat and stuffed it back: the firefighters, police officers, rescue workers; those who helped guide people down those long stairwells, or colleagues who carried out injured strangers at the Pentagon or in the Towers. And, of course, the passengers who resolved to fight back on the United plane which crashed in southwestern Pennsylvania. The wife of one of those passengers, Lisa Bemer, recounted on TV last week how she knew her husband Todd would have charged, would not have flinched, would have embraced the energy of that fear, converting it into action. With proud tears in her eyes, she asserted her husband and the others who responded, “they took the action they needed to take, regardless of the results. And that’s what character is.” When I heard Lisa say that, I finally understood what Hamlet means when he says, “The readiness is all.”

Our character can't be forged continually and constantly on such elevated actions. Life, I've learned painfully, gradually, slowly, is lived daily, lived doing the little things, lived in simple interactions and gestures with friends and family and strangers. Mr. Hutchinson spoke in our Friday service about how in his grief he was so comforted just looking out at familiar faces. He knew he wasn't alone. The Greeks, as the III Formers have seen, had it right by treating each stranger with genuine hospitality, in part because strangers sometimes were disguised gods, and the Greeks didn't want to offend anyone. We are heroes here in our own work, by how we have supported each other—how adults consoled students, and other adults; how students uplifted peers and adults; how we have given, how we have come and stayed together; how we have been bold to laugh and play and thus carry on the spirit of those who died. Robert Jordan, Class of '86, has been remembered by his classmates as the person who truly knew how to smile, how to hug his friends in exuberant laughter, how to cradle the joy of people and life, how to celebrate the spontaneity and thrill of "right now."

A second way we have lived with fear and grappled it into a sustaining rather than a crippling force is by giving it voice. Some of you may have seen clips or read about how Dan Rather of the "CBS Evening News" broke down in tears three times on David Letterman's show as he recounted what it was like to visit the site and see the devastation and the relentless work of the firefighters. Saying our fear, even in trembling, choked-up voices, can release it, can help the confrontation, can transform it. Many of those last phone calls from the planes or the Trade Towers were calm, purposeful, resolved. I have been struck by how many people have allowed themselves to be interviewed—perhaps as a cathartic act of communion, a verbal embrace, one which is certainly painful; but there is so much to try to express, to hear in the voice, in our own voices, especially since so many others have been silenced.

For me, another aspect of voice has been music. Leonard Bernstein, the great conductor of the New York Philharmonic, declared "our response to violence will be to make music more intensely, more beautifully and more devotedly than before." In the face of violence, music can make a pattern out of the chaos; it can make discordant notes work in concord; it can offer a resonating harmony to the grieving cry. Tchaikovsky's "Pathetique" Symphony, Brahms'

“German Requiem,” Samuel Barber’s “Adagio,” Bachabel’s “Canon,” and Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony”: the majesty of these pieces confronts the pain directly, but through the passion they also give it dimension, a structure, a response. These classical works sound outloud the depth and valor of our own inner turmoil, our anguish and hollow groans; yet in the music that tension is built then released, heightened then answered, sounded then affirmed. Samuel Beckett, author of that bleak but still ultimately affirming play *Waiting for Godot*, wrote that “Art is the expression of nothing to express, no way to express it, and still there is the obligation to express.” The voice in music, the voice of the Psalms, the voice of tears: this lament manifests our sorrow and fear into form, then into understanding, then into wisdom, then into a faith and grace which helps us play the next note, and move slowly on, measure by measure.

The last insight I’ve had about fear over the last two weeks is the vitality of connections. Anthony Lane, writing in last week’s *New Yorker*, states that while thousands of people died, they also “died together, and therefore something lived” (September 24, 2001, p. 80). Those trapped on a plane or in the Towers immediately reached out to loved ones; strangers were united throughout the day as the only chance for survival. So many of us called family and friends who lived far from the disaster sites, just to be joined. All I wanted that Tuesday afternoon was to be with my children; and like many of you, I too called my parents. At some level, I think we were all homesick, starving for the safety of home, a security we had seen violated on the TV screens. But I also felt safe here among many known faces and people. All these “cable-strong” bonds suddenly resonated, and as a community we merged together at chapel services, classes, meals, dorms, events. We have *all* helped each other. Students may never realize how much the adults relied on their mere presence as a liniment to get through the day. One person mentioned to me last week that her view of the Headmaster had grown to “Tad as dad.” That service and leadership, that vital connection among all of us as people, not as titles or ages or professions but as people, will sustain and feed us in the most rewarding and blessed life. Maybe in our world here, we can’t be a hero like a firefighter or police officer, but we can tend to each other, we can remember how to laugh, how to discover and how to listen. Maybe in serving others here and at home, we can channel that deep pain of fear into a world that is not quite as isolated, not quite as out-of-control, not quite as uncertain.

The sad part of all this energy and good will is that we could have had it all before September 11th. However, our collective challenge is to give voice and frame to these emotions, especially the fear, and in the various new buildings and expressions which will follow, recognize the honesty of those powerful feelings. Maybe we now know what is most essential in our lives; and even as we use classes and breakfast sign-in and room clean-up and family-style meals to undergird the daily foundation of our lives, we also tenaciously embrace what matters most: parents, siblings, family, friends, and our constant bridging with them. A great friend of mine shared with me a new vision of Heaven and Hell. In Hell, people sit at long supper tables, with huge wooden forks and spoons strapped to their forearms. They eternally starve because they can't bring the food to their mouths. In Heaven, the same picture exists, but no one starves because in Heaven they feed each other. To survive, to exist, to flourish, we must make this earth heaven-like. Especially now, we will only live by serving others.

We can't run away from fear or the events of this world. Yet we have already responded to this attack upon our way of life with instantaneous charity, love, fortitude; we have countered violence with compassion and measured talk. We are human. We will stumble. We will act out our fears in anger and racism, sadly now in prejudice against anyone who looks as if he or she might be from the Middle East. But if we listen, if we listen to each other and to ourselves, even if we listen to our fears, we will hear the music that will conquer this rage and chaos with majesty, wholeness, expression and communion. Because we fear, we can act, we can create, we can embrace. And then we can proclaim: "What will survive of us is love" (Philip Larkin, *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, p. 80).