

Chapel Talk
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One of the most harrowing moments in literature occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennet reads Darcy's letter to her after she has bitterly rejected his offer of marriage. Initially confident in her view of the world, Elizabeth becomes increasingly defensive, then hesitant, then horrified. The more she peruses the letter, the more she clearly envisions her family and past events. Slowly, excruciatingly, Elizabeth realizes her misperception. Then, deeply ashamed, Elizabeth exclaims outloud, even though she is standing by herself in the woods of Rosings: "How humiliating is this discovery! Til this moment, I never knew myself."

Perhaps this is Elizabeth's first "human" encounter. Everything that she thought was right and absolute has been shattered. Such a revelation can be devastating—to have all that you believed, suddenly now be false. It happened to John Nash as chronicled in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, and also, to those of you who studied or saw *Proof*, to Robert, the father, when Catherine reads back to him his new mathematical proof, which is gibberish. Reality is no longer what it seemed to be, what we based our life and actions and relationships on. We feel betrayed by the world, and that mortifying terror cuts us to the marrow of our souls.

For Elizabeth Bennet, the shock humiliates her, a sensation worse than embarrassment or mockery. I asked my son Christopher the difference between "humiliation" and "embarrassment:" he felt humiliation was "embarrassment times three," which seems accurate to my non-mathematical mind. Elizabeth's situation is compounded because she knows in her humiliation that she inflicted this shame on herself, and thus she only has herself to blame. She, and she alone, missed all the signals, believed vainly in her interpretation, and congratulated herself on her correct intelligence. Elizabeth is not just embarrassed by the behavior of her sisters at the ball, or her mother at dinner: she finds herself scared in the place where she had previously felt most secure—her pride and perception. Darcy had even chided her that her fault was "willfully to misunderstand" everybody.

The power of this scene is that it begins to transform Elizabeth. Paradoxically, that wounded insight heals as she reads and reads Darcy's letter. Remember her words: "How humiliating is this discovery! Til this moment, I never knew myself." Linked immediately to her shame is "discovery" and knowledge, two restorative capacities that can commence the journey forward. Austen won't even let her think this shame through silently, but compels her to confess it audibly, making the audience become her own ears. To have any chance at redemption, she must hear it tangibly, a public reckoning that Rev. Dimmesdale couldn't achieve in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Embarrassment, in contrast to humiliation, appears more innocent; we are victims of someone else's actions. We seem to have less control over the situation: someone yanks down your athletic shorts; you're bumped and the lunch tray crashes down; you're surrounded by senior boys singing "Happy Birthday" to you. But when we are humiliated, I believe we do it to ourselves. We are laid bare, caught—the false robes we've tried to cloak ourselves in are ripped away; and there we are, stage center, in the spotlight, naked for whom we really are. Humiliation carries that public accounting to it, part of its exponential difference in gravity compared to embarrassment.

Each of us can bring back—probably too quickly—an instance of shame, an event of "embarrassment times three." Such recollections cleave to us as sharply as that winning goal or that first kiss or honors essay. For some, those painful episodes are more consequential than the glorious, fleeting conquests. I have a searing memory of summer YMCA camp in Connecticut; I was four, maybe five. It was toward 3:00 p.m., when camp ended and my mother would arrive in our blue, battered '59 Chevy station wagon, license plate "AY9989," to take me home. During camp we did simple arts and crafts, ran among the trees at Kwanis Park, played in the sand, ate lunches—I always had peanut butter and grape jelly on Wonder Bread, cut in four triangles, wrapped in tinfoil, with potato chips, and probably grape juice in my leaky, uninsulated, pretend army canteen; juice boxes were thirty years away. What I remember about this otherwise normal day was sprinting through the trees toward the parking lot, dashing frantically in my PF Flyer sneakers because I'm miles away from a bathroom, and I'm racing to beat the impending, terrifying flow. I'm also scared because this fear has manifested itself on earlier occasions, and I can't take another public exposure. I'm dashing over roots and through the dappled sunshine on the ground, seeing in the distance the camp director, Mr. Rose, talking with my mother. I'm trying to control

my body; I'm trying to will my little feet and legs to go faster; I don't want to be "bad" or a "little boy" or "caught." It's hot and I'm panting and nothing horrible can happen on a beautiful day, can it? and I don't seem to be getting closer and they are both becoming blurry—and then I peed, the warm water darkening my khaki shorts as the blood blushed my face into heated, hated shame. Still I keep running, now bent over like an inverted capital "L", trying to cover my deed with my stooped torso. It must have been an odd sight watching me emerge from the shadows, hunched like a darting army soldier across the empty parking lot into the waiting arms of my mother. The last picture I have is wrapping myself in the folds of her calf-length sundress, trying to cloak away the mortification of my wet, sinful shorts as she patted my blue Lacoste shirt, saying it was all going to be OK.

While I know as a parent that children learning how to control their bladders is a complex physical and mental process, such scientific knowledge does little for what remains a palpable nightmare. No medical analysis can abate the memory of that little boy rushing across the battlefield, desperately hoping for a miracle, mortally wounded and betrayed by his own body. I'm not sure there's any self-knowledge that comes from this incident, except a strange affinity for what Elizabeth Bennet suffered, and how monumental and defining such incidents can be for a child.

Why would I want to speak about humiliation six hours before Prom Weekend dances in? It's certainly not to recount my prom experiences, which are pathetic more than humiliating. All I thankfully remember about my high school prom was going out to dinner at a very tacky, glittery, mirror-filled restaurant called Lantana's just off Rt. 128 in Braintree, Massachusetts, decked out in my dark polyester suit which itched the whole meal, and saying absolutely nothing to my date. Mercifully, there are no pictures to testify to the evening.

It seems that humiliation has the potential to create knowledge, even if the transformation is painful, devastating, frightening; recall how "discovery" and knowledge offer themselves to Elizabeth Bennet. The root of "humiliation" is "humus," which means, "of the land, striped away." "Humility" and "humanity" are siblings to "humiliation", sharing that feature of the elemental, the essential, the unadorned. When we've been humiliated we see ourselves as we really are, because

all that's left is our naked, quintessential self. What we are offered by Life at such a juncture is a chance, a gift to begin again. Our humiliation becomes our humanity.

Naturally, we fear being humiliated, and we are therefore hesitant to take a risk, because we don't want to experience that shame of exposure if we put ourselves in a place we shouldn't be in. We don't like to have the ground move under us; we are alarmed when the scenery shifts before our eyes. I think we find ourselves humiliated when we don't know where we are, who we are, what we can do, what we can't do. The great American statesman Adlai Stevenson, who twice lost to Dwight Eisenhower in the presidential elections, claimed that while it was important to have "the courage of our convictions"—to stand up and act on what we believe—he also asserted we must honor "the convictions of our doubts"—to know and embrace our limitations, our uncertainties, our questions, rather than tumbling blindly into pit holes and traps. Understanding yourself that well affords you insight and genuine clothing that truly identifies you.

At the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the second of the four books by J.K. Rowling, Harry has a conversation with Professor Dumbledore. Despite his heroism in the Chamber, Harry doubts his capabilities and worth, skeptical whether the Sorting Hat should have placed him in Slytherin rather than in Gryffindor. He's clearly confused about who he is, which house he belongs to, which robes—of evil, of good—he will wear. When Dumbledore challenges Harry why the Sorting Hat placed him in Gryffindor, Harry replies dejectedly:

"It only put me in Gryffindor because I asked not to go in Slytherin."
"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more... "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

What we decide to do, Dumbledore contends, expresses who we are beyond whether in that pursuit we excel or fall. But we need to know ourselves to have that possibility; we need to acknowledge and assert our worth, our value, our elemental selves. In my mind, it's the rite where humiliation becomes resolve, becomes courage, becomes resilience.

What that means here at St. Andrew's is that for those V Formers who ran for co-president and lost, the choice you made to run is in itself redeeming, and its benefits will last longer than the brief term you sought. The same is true for all the juniors applying to be a residential leader. The musicians I witnessed this week with Mr. Geiersbach performed and collaborated, performed and faltered, performed and created—but they kept on performing, experimenting, improvising. And for many of us, this great dance allows us the freedom to dress up knowingly in borrowed attire (although I hope none of you will encounter a polyester suit tomorrow night), perhaps take a risk with another person, maybe even chuckle and appreciate Tennyson's creed that "It is better to have loved and lost,/Than never to have loved at all."

Because we are human, we will continue to be humiliated. The lone antidote to being spared humiliation is to live in isolation, exiled and unconnected to people and communities. Such an option seems worse, to elude the pain by avoiding the experience. So we must stumble forward, aware that in our shame is the potential for knowledge and recreation, a choice for a greater discovery, a gift of grace and engagement. Who we are, and the paths we select, proclaim our passions, desires, sinews and fibers more than our failures or successes. It is the performing, what you chose to perform in, even whom we might want to perform with, rather than the outcome of the performance, that trumpets the mettle of our character.