

Chapel Talk
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Last Saturday, my three boys and I did some spring-cleaning in our house. It started out as a ploy to create neat rooms after breakfast (and therefore a way to shame Mr. Jenkins into cleaning his room), but it quickly evolved into a major reconstruction of their living quarters. Joshua emptied four bureau drawers filled with T-shirts, and admitted he only needed 20 of his 70 shirts. Carter acquired a few hand-me-downs; the Good Will received six bags of clothes. Numerous objects from under beds, behind doors, or deep in the closet were tossed: we must have filled and refilled the garbage can five times.

I, too, participated in this exercise. In a sunroom off my bedroom, there are two closets stuffed haphazardly. In one are projects and drawings and spelling tests and math sheets from Christopher's and Joshua's and now Carter's academic career. It would take a week for me to organize it, but so much is there for them to remember and delight in. The other closet holds bank statements, Christmas wrapping paper, boxes of family photos; and then up on the top shelf, partially hidden behind a broken lamp, was a card board file box that my mother presented to me around the time I became a father. This box is the printed history of me. Here are letters written to me when I was born, from people I never met, from great-great uncles who matter-of-factly told me that "of course" I would go to Princeton; there are newspaper photos of me performing community service and copies of poems I wrote for my elementary school's literary journal; the bulk of the box contains every school report from nursery school through 12th grade. Instead of doing my share of house cleaning, I plunked down on the floor and browsed through my early life, re-encountering teachers and classmates and the smells and fabric of times almost forgotten.

In fourth grade, I had Mrs. Westcott. At my elementary school, the middle school began with fourth grade, so I remember feeling like I was finally in the big leagues. I graduated from my old P.F. Fliers to Jack Purcell sneakers; we had full days of school now; there was significant homework; we ate lunch with the older kids; and, for the first time, we received grades. There in

that ancient box, I read my grades and reports for fourth grade, typed on crinkled onion paper, and signed neatly by “Sara C. Westcott.” Here are a few excerpts, dated January 18, 1967:

For Will the one big academic trouble-spot— spelling —is showing slow but steady improvement ... Will seems to have accepted the fact that it's going to take persistent effort on his part. On his own he is “building” a list of words that he's sure of, and he clearly takes delight in being asked to spell a hard word from his list... Will is more at ease during handwriting lessons and is doing a better job. His stories (while they still deal with mountains!) are appreciably longer. Hopefully this same good attitude can be counted on to help bring him out of a recent slump in math. Will has a good foundation in the basic arithmetic facts but seems fearful of new work and hesitant to ask for needed assistance.

My grades that first marking period, with “1” as above average, “2” as average, and “3” as below average, were all “2” except for spelling, which was a 3+.

But what I remember about 4th grade and Mrs. Westcott was the milkshake bet. As she noted in her report, I was a miserable speller. As she also wrote, I loved to write about mountains at every opportunity; I found a way to mold each written assignment to something about mountains or mountain climbing, which was my passion then. Therefore, in the winter of that 4th grade year, Mrs. Westcott threw down the gauntlet: if I could compose an assignment whose subject was not mountains and that contained no spelling errors, she would treat me to a milkshake after school. I immediately accepted; however, my memory is that it took a long time for me to accomplish this task, partly because I really could not spell, and also because I refused to write about anything but my beloved mountains.

What the milkshake was actually about, I could later understand, was confidence, imagination and expectation. I obviously had little of any of them, but Mrs. Westcott let me hope I could actually accomplish this feat, no matter how many times I failed. My next memory of that year is her smile, understated yet proud, as she returned my successful composition, with a small handwritten certificate entitling me to one milkshake. What sticks in my mind about the milkshake, which we enjoyed at the local Baskin & Robbins, was not the milkshake itself but the ride in her car. Perhaps this was the first time I'd ever seen a teacher away from school; I probably never imagined her or any of my other teachers capable of eating ice cream or driving a car or existing in the non-school world. Mrs. Westcott was the first teacher who affirmed me amid my ever-growing

list of shortcomings. Her belief in my ability to accomplish something I felt was impossible gave me the confidence to move beyond my comfort zone. Sitting in the front row of her classroom, I had that seminal experience which so many students have: I wanted to do this paper right for her, for Mrs. Westcott. And later, sitting in the front seat of her car on the way to the ice-cream parlor, I felt that initial connection with a teacher, an adult. I'd done something new, unthinkable, impossible; I'd seen a horizon previously hidden to me; and it transpired because Mrs. Westcott believed in me, more than I believed in myself.

While my boys languished in their rooms on Saturday morning, I continued to flip through my file, rediscovering teachers like Mr. Morgan and Miss Hill, my first French teacher Mme. Liotard, and my 7th grade math teacher Mr. Beane, a towering red faced man with a bellowing voice, who tried desperately to find something redeeming to say about my sad efforts in math. His ingenious comment was: "If for nothing else, Will is to be congratulated on the manner in which he has faced up to an occasional ignorance in math and then has done something constructive about it." I saw the letter from my orthodontist, Dr. Hogan, explaining how long it would take to "regulate" my teeth. I found my first SSAT scores, 94% Quantitative, 57% Verbal. For my 9th grade year, 1971 – 1972, my school decided to do away with grades, and concentrated on candid written assessments. As I read these reports Saturday morning, "candid" seemed to be an understatement for what the teachers wrote about my performance:

Biology: I do not believe that Will may enter science as a career...test results have been poorer than earlier in the year...in any traditional terms, Will's achievement in biology has not been spectacular, or at times, even satisfactory.

Geometry: Although he has clearly passed the course, Will's record for the year is disappointing. Will has the ability to do better but unfortunately does not spend the time or energy necessary for him to do a thorough job. His grasp of geometric proofs has just been adequate.

French: Will is prone to careless errors. He should slow down and recheck his work. He still has difficulty with the Imperfect and Conditional -Future in sub-ordinate clauses.

And here is English: I do admit to some frustration over Will's written expression. In his zeal to write maturely and profoundly, he loses control of sentence structure, uses inaccurate diction, and makes numerous careless mistakes, especially misspellings. I have talked at length with Will about this problem, and I am sure he understands the challenge he faces.

There didn't seem to be much to recommend me to a fine boarding school, nor hint that I might be able, three years later, to fulfill that great-great uncle's prophecy that "of course you will go to Princeton." What saved me in 9th grade was British history with Mr. Burnes, a quiet elder statesman who for as long as I knew him—and he died just last year— always seemed 65 years old. Mr. Burnes was the first intellectual teacher I had—not that he was the first intellectual who taught me, but rather he was the first teacher who was able to engage me intellectually. Mr. Burnes lived history: with his white frock of hair and deep-lined face, he resembled a wise Elizabethan counselor to the Queen—or maybe he was the wizened fool with that twinkle in his eye and his deadpan comic delivery. In either case, he made me love history. That winter and spring, I took on an extra project for Mr. Burnes. Indeed, I remember taking on this research for him, not for me or for a grade. I asked Mr. Burnes if I could write a novel about the religious controversies in England in the late 1500s, the start of the Protestant Reformation. I researched everything about Elizabethan life: clothes, food, customs, family, education, religion, towns, commerce, furniture, rituals, architecture, class structure. My bibliography was five pages, and I wrote over 200 note cards. However, the story line was awful: a Romeo and Juliet conflict where the young boy is Catholic, his girlfriend Protestant. And I filled the dialogue with "Thou" and "hast not ye" and "canst thee cometh" and other pathetic attempts at Shakespearean speech. My final product was over 100 handwritten pages—my first, and only, novel. Mr. Burnes sent me a long letter during the summer, which I still have, telling me not only that I still needed to correct my mechanics and spelling, but also that in his nearly forty years of teaching, he'd never seen anyone know as much about Elizabethan history as I had.

What Mr. Burnes did for me, and for countless generations of students, was get me to care about something. Mr. Burnes cared deeply about people: he marched for civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr., and in his long retirement, he became a mediator in the legal system, getting people to sit down together and resolve their problems in order to avoid going to court or jail. He was as good a human being as I've ever known.

I have one final teacher to share with you today, a teacher whose impact has similarly stretched far beyond the classroom. The legendary teachers any of us have been lucky to experience

never merely instructed us in their subject: they taught us, showed us, and lived for us lives that revealed the quintessence of our humanity. One of those giants for me, as she has been for many of you, is Mrs. Mein.

My earliest memory of Mrs. Mein is late May 1980. It was my first faculty—senior softball game, and Mrs. Mein was the pitcher for the faculty. She did not soft-toss to those huge seniors: she whipped the ball in as you see at professional softball games on ESPN; and my recollection is that she threw the one and only perfect game against the very ineffectual class of 1980. As each batter was retired, Mrs. Mein just kept flashing that patented grin of hers. “Too bad,” she seemed to say.

A few years ago I sat in on her classes for a week, and saw for myself why she is such a magnificent teacher. She repeatedly called on students—it was impossible to be merely a good listener in her class. Everyone was expected to speak, and speak often. If you didn’t, she called on you, because she wanted to know your insights. Mrs. Mein relished vigorous debate and engagement; her face lit up when a student challenged her interpretations or thinking. At the end of class, I saw Mrs. Mein jot down a few notes on her teaching papers. She explained to me later that she was grading herself—“C-,” “B,” “B+”—so she could make the class sharper, more productive, the next day or the next year.

But in the same way that Mrs. Westcott’s milkshake or Mr. Burnes’ summer letter transformed me, what Mrs. Mein taught me occurred outside the classroom. Mrs. Mein’s lesson was in walking. It happened here in this chapel, where the School and most of Delaware gathered for the funeral of her and Mr. Mein’s only child, Andrew, in December of 1998. Andrew, St. Andrew’s class of 1990, newly married, had been hit by a car while riding his bicycle, and died two weeks after the accident, never regaining consciousness. Mrs. Mein had recently undergone major surgery to replace both arthritic knees. It was difficult for her to walk, and stairs, especially downstairs, were excruciating and slow for her. She used crutches often, and there was no chapel elevator. As she and her family came down those steps to this packed chapel, Andrew’s widow burst into tears. Mrs. Mein instinctively let go of the side railing and put those big, tender arms of hers around Olivia, leading her gently and graciously down the stairs. I will never forget watching

Mrs. Mein stride down those steps, not limping, not teetering, but almost carrying another person with her. She found—maybe she was given—the strength to walk, to lead, to transport, to journey through the worst wilderness of her life.

What these three teachers share is an understanding of what is essential. It isn't their profession, which happens to be education: it is the value and dignity of another's life. It is planting hope and passion into an arid soul. It is infusing laughter where there is bleakness. In a world that, at times, seems alien and isolated, they connect and heal and rejoice. And what they expect of us is nothing less in how we must enliven the communities around us, in simple or grand ways. The testimonials Cora, Scott and Lindsay gave Wednesday night, even as they spoke about their own journeys, bore witness through their courage and honesty and determination to what is most elemental in these brief lives we are all granted: meaning, creation, humility. They were each, in Lindsay's metaphor, hungering for sustaining nourishment. Others of us who find ways to unite and laugh through dodge-ball and dancing and Twister and talent shows and peer tutoring and any of the countless inventions of Time we've experienced this year have equally enhanced this little world. By immersing ourselves in the needs and fears and uncertainties of others, we feed them—and ourselves—a spiritual food that ministers and endures.