

Chapel Talk
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Earlier this winter, Mr. Benjamin and I were talking at our table during family style lunch. Despite the fact that I'm smarter, stronger, have a quicker move to the basket, and have had more conversations with Gwyneth Paltrow than he has, we've found during the year that we have much in common. He mentioned to our table that he'd just seen the movie "Seabiscuit." But then, almost as if he was guilty of some crime, he looked around at all of us, hoping perhaps to find an ally, hoping really to find out he wasn't wrong – I could see in his eyes, before he spoke to this spellbound audience, that it was like that moment in a class where you want to share your insight or answer but you are nervous because you are about to expose yourself. You are willing to risk but you are scared of the potentially dangerous consequences. Mr. Benjamin, still unsure how the table was viewing him, took the chance. He said – although it was more like a confessional – "At the end of the movie, I cried." He explained the final scene of the movie, the last race, the Santa Anita Handicap, the race Red Pollard had lost earlier in the movie. Seabiscuit, recovering from a bad leg injury, starts out strongly, but quickly falls behind. She just can't do it. Her historic victory over War Admiral, the race that gripped the country, is a memory as distant as the lead horses. The camera pans to his owner, Charles Howard, who dejectedly drops his head. Next we see the trainer, Tom Smith, and he too knows Seabiscuit's glory days are over. But then George Woolf, the other jockey who rode Seabiscuit to victory against War Admiral when Red was injured, he sees Seabiscuit fading back. So he slows his own horse, and soon Seabiscuit is not alone; and for those of you who remember the book and the movie, all Seabiscuit needs is to look in the eyes of the horse next to him – and he's off to victory. "Well," concluded Mr. Benjamin, "I just wept like a baby at this scene. Tears all over my face, man. Just like a baby."

Little did he know what a kindred spirit he'd found in me. During the first part of spring break, when most of my family was sick, I took out the library's DVD copy of *Pride and Prejudice* – it was the one day Ms. McGrath didn't have it – and while beset

with sinus infections, head colds and the flu, Christopher and I watched Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy and Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet romance across our newly purchased 46 inch, wide-screen TV. It made us feel much better about ourselves to laugh at Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet and Lydia and the Bingley sisters, now almost life-size before us. But then comes the scene at Pemberly where Elizabeth jumps up to help Darcy's sister, fragile Georgiana, recover at the piano, after Caroline Bingley made that sarcastic reference to Mr. Wickham. As she stands behind Georgiana, helping her with the music, Elizabeth' eyes slowly rise from the music sheet, to the piano, finally to Darcy, seated elegantly across the room. The music crescendos, the faces of the two lovers glow, and their eyes connect and hold – and there I am, wrapped in my fleece bathrobe and wool socks, weeping on the window seat, tears streaking unchecked down my face. All poor Christopher can do is toss me the Kleenex and roll his eyes, grateful that this is a private family moment.

Perhaps his time will come. You see, there are exceptional weeping genes in my family. It was a common occurrence growing up in our family to witness my father weep – not cry as in wail but cry as in get teary. He had the healthiest lachrymal ducts in the northern hemisphere: daily one of my siblings would inevitably announce, “Daddy's crying again!” He was a founding member of “Weepers Anonymous.” He cried reading Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address at the dinner table; he wept telling us kiddoes our mother had just been chosen as the first woman trustee of Princeton; he cried watching us win and lose at sports, especially sports he didn't completely understand; he became teary giving us special presents; he wept when we graduated and got married and had children; he wept – as I did – during the opening song in the Broadway production of *The Lion King*, when the elephant sauntered down the aisle; and he weeps remembering moments when he wept. Alas, Christopher, chances are your tears will also overflow.

All of us have cried: crying is part of the human experience and vocabulary. As children, we cried when we fell or were hungry or had a nightmare or ear infection; we cried when the babysitter arrived and mom and dad left; we cried when our parents abandoned us that first day of kindergarten – I've also known children who cried when

they had to leave kindergarten. Children cry and laugh a lot. Laughing so hard your cry is exhilarating and cathartic: to loose yourself so freely in hilarity that you cry (and sometimes pee), perhaps over Mary Pell's laughter, or Natalie's laugh, or watching Damon and Elijah play squash, or for those of you here two years ago, guffawing over Sarah Moser's hysterical portrayal of Beverly Carton in the spring play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*: these are laughs that make your stomach hurt. At Ms. Cottone's surprise birthday party earlier this week, Ms. Matouk was laughing so uncontrollably at our table she had unstoppable tears rolling down her face.

As we become older we cry when we are emotionally hurt, or scared, or confused or uncertain. We cry when we do poorly on a test; when we don't make the team; when a relationship ends; when a relationship won't start; when we don't get into the college we earnestly believe we must get into; when we don't win the election; when our parents or teachers don't understand us. We cry when we feel we don't have control over our lives. Do girls cry more than boys? Perhaps. I don't know if that's societal or biological or cultural. But boys cry, sometimes more intensely because it's an experience not as normal for them as it may be for girls. Male athletes seem to cry just as easily as female athletes, especially in defeat. To be elected to political office these days, male candidates must demonstrate they can cry, while paradoxically women are seen as weak if they do cry. Maybe it's just our British, stiff-upper-lip inheritance, because most European and Russian men have always wept freely. I remember seeing two boys weeping outside the chapel last fall after a funeral service for someone they'd never met. One of my earliest memories of crying without being physically hurt happened when I was about 8 years old, in 1965, up in our small summer town in New Hampshire. My grandparents had decided to rebury their daughter, Betsy, who had died in 1937 when she was a child, from her grave in Maryland to our new family plot in New Hampshire. I'd obviously never known this woman, but when it came time at the recommital service that summer afternoon to help fill in her grave with dirt, I started crying. I remember first not being able to speak, then not being able to really see because of the tears. I cried hard, almost as if hurt: why? Was I connecting to a life no older than my own? Was I reacting to the tears

of the adults around me? Was I scared about this foreign life inside such a small white casket, disappearing into a dirt hole at my feet?

Crying when we are physically hurt is different. The shock of pain, the torn skin, the bruised muscle, in my family the broken bone – these easily cause tears. I actually discovered that there are three types of tears: there are “basal” tears, where the tear duct naturally lubricates the eye, up to 5-10 ounces a day – which is a lot of water – and that water drains out through a duct in the lower eyelid. There are also “reflex” tears, where the eye waters to protect itself against irritants smoke or dust or cold wind or harmful bacteria. And then there are those emotional tears. Humans are the only animals who cry emotional tears. I found out through various web sites that emotional tears actually are composed differently than “basal” or “reflex” tears: emotional tears have 15-20% more chemicals in them; it’s as if the body is removing these excess toxins which aren’t good for the body. Some doctors think that’s why people feel “good” after a cry: we’ve cleansed ourselves, we’ve relieved stress within us, we’ve purged our body of some of the built-up chemicals which have created this overload situation – whether of pain or grief or stress or even laughter. It’s more than our body can handle, but miraculously, it’s our body taking care of us by crying.

My question here is why is crying associated with such a wide variety of emotions? When we smile, it’s pretty clear we’re happy; when our teeth clench and our jaw sets and our eyes narrow, those are unmistakable signs of anger. However, tears accompany laughter and grief, unbounded happiness and pain, surprise and chaos, relief and uncertainty.

But there is also a language within tears, because we usually are without a spoken voice when we cry. The tears speak for us, conveying what we can’t, what we don’t quite know or may not yet recognize. Last week Joshua was home with a 48 hour cold, and he felt miserable. I was saying goodnight to him, trying to help him relax and fall asleep. Gazing down at him, with only a distant hall light illuminating the side of his face on the pillow, I saw this small tear well up in his eye, and then slowly slide down his cheek.

Was he scared? Was he tired? Was he in pain? To me, it didn't matter – I heard a voice in that tear, and I knew he wanted me in that dark room with him until he was asleep. Those of you not parents will discover how crippling the tears of a child can be on you. You ache to see them in such anguish.

What is it about this language of tears? As infants, we learn this vocabulary before we know words or sentences. As adults, we really haven't forgotten that language, even if there isn't an SAT II test for crying – a test my father would have easily scored 800 on. Even if our culture values the spoken word more than the language of tears, we still are fluent in it, even when we've forgotten parts of it. How do you know a baby is fine after a fall or bump on the head? If the baby cries, that usually means he's all right because he has acknowledged the pain and coped with it by crying out loud. It's when the baby doesn't cry that you worry. Through crying, there is an acknowledgement, an embracing, a releasing, and an acceptance. We can do the same with emotional pain, and we are healthier for letting those tears flow. My wise son Joshua, almost matter-of-factly, told me that "If you try to hold in the crying, it's like staying on a wild horse: it hurts more to hold it in. You can't neglect what you feel." We do hurt ourselves holding those tears in, because paradoxically, we usually see better after we cry. Literally, we've cleared out the eye, washed it, flushed away what was clouding our vision; symbolically, we have cleansed ourselves, and we see the situation and identify the emotions much more clearly. "Yesterday's tear has become today's rain" (Thich Nat Hanh).

So maybe that's why there are abundant tears at the senior slide show and at commencement. Yes, there is laughter and jubilation, a rightful celebration for such hard-earned accomplishments. But those culminating rituals are also distinctly characterized here at St. Andrew's with tears – tears for friendships and love, for memories, for innumerable shared experiences and hurdles; tears for what is about to end, tears for the unknown, for the long anticipated yet tremendously different next steps; tears for all that can't be said, but still is conveyed. We cry because we feel and know. One of the distant hallmarks of this senior class is that many of them really don't want to graduate; knowing May 30th will come nevertheless has created volatile emotions and tears since last

October. Simon and Garfunkel put it this way: “If I never loved, I never would have cried.” We cry that last weekend in May because so much has happened, and so much is changing for all of us, teachers and parents included. The language of tear-streaked faces and quivering, wobbly, lower lips is the only way we know how to hold fast to that connection, even in the encroaching absence. Those tears pouring down our faces are indeed moving emotions. We’ve given those feelings an energy, a force – that’s why we talk about our emotions being “moved,” a situation being very “moving.” We’ve endowed these feelings with animation: our emotions are in motion.

Perhaps what we sense about tears is that, ironically, they are the advent of the healing process, *not* the start of pain. Maybe the healing process has to begin with seeing the pain in the eye, and crying, and then letting go. Tears are shed and then dried and evaporate into the air – a metaphor for how we can let go the pain the way the teardrops transform themselves. There is so much for us to cry about: an end of a senior year, new adventures, elections won and lost, grades high and low. There is, however, always a danger of self-indulgence and self-pity in our own dramas. Yet our world is also crying, in cities where fear and terror explode upon school buses and buildings and commuter trains. It’s crying in North Korea this morning in the aftermath of a train crash, which may have killed hundreds of people. It’s crying for the pictures released today of flag-draped caskets returning to America. It’s crying in homes where there is abuse and neglect, where children are without hope, where the aged die alone and forgotten. We need to find ways to comfort those weeping around this sad, broken world of ours. Those tears are calling to us across oceans and cultures and ethnicities and classes and ages; they are also crying to us across the street and across the hallway.

And too, these tears may be crying out to us, a coded communication from childhood or the past that we must find time and space to heed and to uncover. Tears are memory: they help us remember, they let us cable to distant emotions and loved ones, in both pain and mirth. They sooth a burning face, they cleanse a wound, they assuage a thirsty, parched soul. As we prepare to dance the night away, and as we prepare to celebrate this class with tears and joy and excitement, let us also remember that tears

signal a start – “Time to plant tears,” wrote Elizabeth Bishop. Tears herald journeys into new realms, sustaining us with a clearer vision and a deeper bond to ourselves and those we love. They grant us nourishment, quenching and baptizing us in the crystal, cascading, ever-creating waters from within us.