

Chapel Talk
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Two weeks ago many of us attended a panel of St. Andrew's alums from the last six decades of the School's history. There were doctors, teachers, surgeons, scientists, community activists, government workers, mathematicians, entrepreneurs. One graduate was currently unemployed; another was a former professional baseball player now working for the FBI. Some had held one job; many had been employed in different fields.

As each alum spoke from the stage in Engelhard, I noticed something happening. Instead of stating name, college degree and job title, the alums narrated a story, a three to five minute chapel talk about their lives and journeys since St. Andrew's. They reflected on their mistakes and failures; two admitted getting thrown out of college; a few mentioned military service in Vietnam and Iraq. One alum from the early 1960s confessed his was "a life of glorious contradictions." A former advisee from 1994 announced that "I'm doing exactly what I want to do, and it's totally unanticipated." As we listened in the audience, I felt that some of these alums were making sense of their lives for the first time, articulating in novel ways the path their life had taken.

The second aspect that struck me was how closely they listened to each other. As they went around the semi-circle on stage, the alums were visibly paying attention to each other – not politely or casually, but keenly, generously, hoping to hear an anecdote that might illuminate this complex world. Afterwards, when students spoke with the panelists about their careers, alums also conversed with each other about their lives. That night, there was a lot of listening and reflecting, by those in the audience, by those on stage.

Listening is harder than *hearing*. When we hear, it's relatively passive: we catch a noise – a door opening – and that sound informs us who made it – my corridor parent – and what that sound might mean – it's time to click out of the DVD and get back to homework. Listening, however, necessitates action and connection: it requires a "conscious effort to

hear”; it’s as if listening is “advanced” hearing. When we listen, we are engaged with what someone is telling us – we understand their words, actively empathizing with their story or voice. Listening means the sound, the words, the music penetrates inside us. Science created a hearing aid that increases our hearing; but there’s no artificial machine available to make us stronger listeners: that skill must be practiced intentionally and consistently.

I’ve been trying to listen more carefully this year. In visiting classes and talking to teachers, I’ve listened to them speak about the challenges they face in the classroom, the joys they celebrate, the aspects of their teaching they are trying to improve. In these conversations, it was palpable how excited they were having someone listen to them talk about their questions and doubts, their ideas and plans, their hopes and adjustments. They already sensed the solutions to most of their questions; in me, they sought an active, present listener to affirm their ideas.

In my own classes this spring I’ve attempted to listen more to my students, as tired as we are at the end of a school year. I’ve been taught a lot about “Goodbye, Columbus” by each of my English 3 students in tutorials as they write their Junior Exhibition paper; my senior tutorial on *Anna Karenina* has explored different aspects of this massive novel; my III Form class has uncovered fresh interpretations to *Ragtime*, *O Pioneers!* and *Death of a Salesman*. Teaching is about preparing the material, knowing it fully, then witnessing how 12-15 other people will not give me back “my answers,” but how they will discern their meanings and possibilities. If I fail to listen, I don’t learn; I miss what Hamlet or Heathcliff or Alexandra or Anna might reveal to them.

Listening allows you to share someone else’s discovery or belief, their gift of language and understanding. During my 30 years at St. Andrew’s, I quickly realized that what the students said was more profound than what I knew – so I’ve kept their papers and journals, and jotted down their interpretations in my texts. Matt Herndon, Mr. Austin’s classmate, raised the possibility that Hamlet’s search for his father brought him to a religious, godly Father and a sense of “Let be” in Act V; Erin Burnett, class of ’94, wrote

a paper about *Wuthering Heights* I still use in my classes; I just found a note in my copy of *Anna Karenina* attributed to Ashley Gosnell, Arthur's sister. Listening is how teachers learn.

Occasionally, students articulate their thinking strangely. Inside my blue teaching notebooks I've copied dozens of surprising statements that don't quite fall in the category of wisdom, but still merit recognition because they contain an element of truth expressed in a moment of exasperation, excitement or intense unthinking. For example, when I taught the current seniors in III Form, Lee Whitney noticed the title of a classmate's paper, "Death and Life." He looked up and asked, "Isn't 'Death and Life' a little dyslexic?" Last year Dan Primiani, in trying to explain Hamlet's behavior in Act III, told the class, "We now see parts of Hamlet's character that could be considered udder lunacy." A year ago Claudia Heath, analyzing the narrative style of *Ragtime*, said, "All the random sentences seem random." This fall, in the second week of classes, Mason Leonard, as we critiqued his first journal, bravely admitted, "I have trouble connecting what's in my head to words." This winter, Bobby Moffit, unconsciously exhibiting his knowledge of literary terms and his familiarity with gangster rap, pointed out a clear example, in *O Pioneers!*, of what he called "junksta-position."

I've also listened more this year to my family and my children. I have a new family, with evolving needs, chemistries, conflicts, relationships, routines and jokes. I have children who are growing older, making more decisions that are their choices. I have to listen to what they tell me rather than instruct them what to do; it's harder now accepting that they need to be the ones deciding, since it is their life, not my concept of their life. In many instances, their choices turned out rewarding and right, just as I hadn't planned.

There are other ways I've learned to listen to my children over the years. After Christopher was born, a great friend and teacher here, Hoover Sutton, urged me to buy a journal book to record all the silly and brilliant phrases Christopher and his future brothers would coin as they discovered and experimented with language. There are about

30 pages bursting with these magical, poetical gems. I keep re-listening to them. For instance, one of my sons, aged 4, confided to me one spring morning:

“Dad, it smells really good outside. It smells like one of those days I like.”

Later that fall, during a surprise snow storm, this same child turned to his grandmother with a big smile on his face, pointed to the falling white flakes, and exclaimed, “Look! God’s eating popcorn!”

One night after I read him stories, just before he fell asleep, this alert and wondering boy looked up at me, his small head cushioned on the pillow, his soft baby blanket wrapped securely in his arms for the long journey to morning, and asked me with deep sincerity and conviction:

“Dad, do you remember before I was born up in Heaven and I leaned over and kissed you?”

Finally, when this Joshua was very young, he told my brother’s wife, with glee in his eye, to “put that flower in your hair to give Uncle Tom ‘the signal.’” “What signal?” she asked quizzically. With a huge, celebrating smile rippling over his face, Josh replied, “The love signal!” Even at a young age, he sensed what was happening between people in love. He was listening with his eyes as much as with his ears.

We never know when life will reveal itself, but listening prepares us. Last week I visited with Mr. Geiersbach, observing a chamber music class preparing a Schubert piece for Arts Weekend. But my surprise was that this class wasn’t a rehearsal: instead of Mr. Geiersbach conducting, I listened to Taylor, Grace, Beth, Will and Robert wrestle with the music. They were trying to figure out the parts and the mood, the rhythm and the movement. These were not notes to be played but rather a score to be understood. I listened carefully as they talked through passages, analyzing and listening to each other in order to play the piece together. I thought I was going to *hear* them play; instead, I *listened* to them generate the music.

If I don't listen, you're not heard, you don't count, you're not valued. So then you yell, shout, scream – in anger, in confusion, in exile. However, listening and speaking become collaborative rituals that bridge isolation and terror. My most cherished friends haven't been those with answers; they've been those who listened to me, who held my words and fears. My worst moments as a teacher, friend, father, husband, brother, son, are when I don't listen to another's voice, or look, or hovering presence. Many world problems stem from countries and leaders not listening, not paying attention to shouts or warning signs.

We live in an age where it's hard to listen, because there is so much sound, because the days move quickly, and because we isolate ourselves in our own worlds. Wellness Day was a gift as we remembered how to listen constructively. Arts Weekend teemed with moments of transforming listening – AJ, Tania, Spencer and Rachel on stage; Alexa, Courtney and Trevor playing; Laura and Sam singing; we listened to Sophia dance and listened to the vibrant photographs and paintings in the gallery.

Years ago, a friend of mine was asked which of the five senses he wouldn't want to lose: he surprised me by choosing his hearing, because he felt that listening connected him to people. Still being able to hear would paradoxically allow him to “see,” “smell,” “taste,” and “feel” more purely. Ultimately, listening lets us celebrate each member of our school, family, community, world. Listening becomes a metaphor for how we perceive, embrace, breathe. It is a resilient communion of words, spirits, souls, shared emotions and dreams. By listening we filter the roaring chaos around us into definable, coherent sounds. Listening makes of the moment a permanence that affirms us, empowering us to touch voices of those no longer with us, but whose expressions and quips we remember because we first listened. This week, this month, this summer, this life, may we all unite with the words and visions, the fears and hopes, the creativity and imagination, of those circling around us.