October 8, 2019

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the best opening of school imaginable. Positive spirits abound! You are responsible for that confidence and optimism.

Welcoming you back to a communal work day, albeit half a day, is no routine matter any longer for me as my time with you wanes. To honor the coinages, emanating largely from Wes and Kate, let’s call my comments a Cavortation or perhaps a Cavitation or a Cavimonial.

In these last collective gatherings with you, I want to devote a few minutes to our institutional “why” as I see it. I began my career in 1968 teaching senior English to 166 seniors. Without the heuristic of nostalgia, I can honestly affirm that I loved every minute of my experience at Joplin Memorial High School. These cheeky, lithe, lissome, and teeming youthful figures inhabiting the cavern of memory are now approaching seventy. My first group of students are contemporaries of the guests we host on campus on Friday-Grandparents Day. An arresting thought.

I have concluded that there are two constituents that account for a good school: passionate teachers who believe that what they do is indispensable and a culture that unabashedly believes in Truth. Such schools are trend proof but acutely aware of external influences. They teach fundamentals, they build character, they endlessly encourage and in most cases give students and teachers multiple chances to succeed, and recognize that intelligence comes in many packages. Such schools obsessively cohere: they unswervingly live out their core values at each grade level and in each subject area, and each learning space consistently embraces these values. Independent schools ought to cohere more than other genres because they are inventions promulgated by ideas and privileged to chart and direct their own destinies. However, they are heir to two maladies: an inveterate romance with the practices de jour and highly touted and jealously protected teacher autonomy, a trait that mediates instructional effectiveness but can hamper coherence.

I believe in core knowledge, cultural literacy, habits that temper our minds, bodies, and souls, and the disciplines of goodness. I believe that all teachers first and foremost instill virtue. I believe that there is no substitute for hard work. I believe in a level playing field.

I do not believe that constructing our own knowledge--the philosophy of constructivism that schools of education for decades have espoused--is equivalent to knowing truth. Truth is not a cultural construct or popular ideology. To be sure, good schools expose students to a varied palette of tastes and preferences. Seeing things through different lenses and sampling contending theories enlighten us. A liberal education sharpens our minds and chastens our hearts by exposing us to diverse people, perspectives, and propositions. We traverse many thoroughfares in the pursuit of truth. We need to internalize knowledge and experience from many precincts to approach the hallowed altar of wisdom.
I have been reading George Will’s latest book, *The Conservative Sensibility*. It is daunting and profound. I linger on every page. I want to share a riveting passage:

“Today, it is conventional wisdom that there is no knowledge, only opinion about moral questions and that this is so because human beings have no nature other than their capacity to acquire culture. They supposedly acquire it much as soft wax passively acquires the marks of whatever substance passes upon us.”

In Will’s view, the conservative sensibility acknowledges truths enshrined in Nature and honors verities in human Nature, which persist from era to era, place to place, and culture to culture.

As a school in which faith matters, we dedicate ourselves to the sacred mission of enabling our students to know themselves by approaching an understanding of the laws and rights of Nature--God’s handiwork, a rich curriculum that our Maker has bestowed upon us, that includes the study of humankind, its devices and products, and the environment in which it lives.

This enterprise that we are privileged to be in--educating young people--helps to justify our lives. Like Vergil guiding Dante, we lead children on a journey that they will later adopt for themselves. The thirteen-year expedition that we conduct here leaves touchstones on which students will rely throughout their lives. Our students use the models that we provide in every space--the chapel, classroom, stage, and playing field--to conduct their unique personal passage to Truth. We instill in them a zeal to know ultimate principles through empirical and acquired knowledge. We embark on this shared endeavor with unwavering confidence that the colleagues who inherit our charges will conduct their segment of this journey with honesty and love. Our venerable endeavor is a collective rite. We each have a share in this venture of educating our students.

The beauty of what we do at this school is that the whole of us--everyone in this room--nurture the whole of every child--his or her mind, body, heart, and soul. Although each of you contributes to the outcome, over time the whole far exceeds the sum of our contributions. The whole endures and is passed on to other communities and generations. You shape lives; never forget how influential you are in the lives of your students. You leave permanent legacies.

The Strategic Plan coordinates our individual service to students into an orchestral and harmonious composition. We perform from the same comprehensive text. This collaboration leverages our solo performances to produce a memorable collective masterpiece. Metaphors abound to appreciate the shared enterprise of the Plan: it’s our institutional roadmap, our operating manual, our playbook, our covenant, our declaration that we are never satisfied, that the bar is never too high.

The document unites us around initiatives to improve what we do for students. As we as individuals come to terms with our personal roles in moving the ambitions of the Plan forward, it makes sense to return to the genesis of the Plan.

This manual for prosperity emerged out of a generative question: What does it mean to be an exemplary Episcopal, college preparatory, P-12, coeducational, independent day school?

Our response to the unitary question in 2017 was the Strategic Plan, a dynamic plan that adapts to changes in outlooks and circumstances. With the last two years in the rear view mirror (Coach Swinney reminds us that the windshield is much wider than the rear view mirror because looking ahead is more valuable than looking back), we see opportunities to refine and enrich the Plan, step it up to serve our students more effectively.
As we engage with Angela this morning in thinking about the progress now and during this year in living the Plan, let’s disaggregate the generative question, each of us, and ask ourselves, to envision each qualifier as its best self. Imagine our school as

- The Exemplary Episcopal school—in contrast to a secular or a parochial school
- The Exemplary college prep school, where every student, not a special track, is prepared for the challenges and opportunities of a college experience
- The Exemplary P-12 school where we have the privilege of moderating thirteen years of development and admit 5-year olds who are implicitly assured spots as seniors in their graduating class as opposed to a 7-12 or 9-12 school that admits students with a substantial school record. Our P-12 advantage is building on a foundation of habits formed early in life
- The Exemplary coed school, where we have a commitment to understanding differences in learning styles and developmental patterns and ensuring gender equity
- Exemplary independent school—where we have the precious latitude to plot our own course, assume accountability for our decisions, and address local priorities in contrast to the constraints faced by non-public schools, charter schools, public schools
- Exemplary day school: In our independent school world, day schools present a significant set of conditions that set us apart from boarding schools—we are integral in the immediate community rather than sequestered like boarding communities

Our independence underwrites our success and happiness. Our independence permits us to celebrate our Episcopal identity and innovate programs to ensure that social and emotional readiness accompanies academic preparation. We are off to a great start, sustain the spirit, feel the joy, and love one another.

Enjoy this day!